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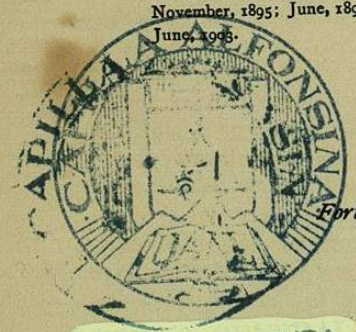
Forty-fifth Thousand



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DON ORSINO.

CHAPTER I.

Don Orsino Saracinesca is of the younger age and lives in the younger Rome, with his father and mother, under the roof of the vast old palace which has sheltered so many hundreds of Saracinesca in peace and war, but which has rarely in the course of the centuries been the home of three generations at once during one and twenty years.

The lover of romance may lie in the sun, caring not for the time of day and content to watch the butterflies that cross his blue sky on the way from one flower to another. But the historian is an entomologist who must be stirring. He must catch the moths, which are his facts, in the net which is his memory, and he must fasten them upon his paper with sharp pins, which are dates.

By far the greater number of old Prince Saracinesca's contemporaries are dead, and more or less justly forgotten. Old Valdarno died long ago in his bed, surrounded by sons and daughters. The famous dandy of other days, the Duke of Astrardente, died at his young wife's feet some three and twenty years before this chapter of family history opens. Then the primeval Prince Montevarchi came to a violent end at the hands of his librarian, leaving his English princess consolable but unconsoled, leaving also his daughter Flavia married to that other Giovanni Saracinesca who still bears the name of Marchese di San Giacinto; while the younger girl, the fair,

brown-eyed Faustina, loved a poor Frenchman, half soldier and all artist. The weak, good-natured Ascanio Bellegra reigns in his father's stead, the timidly extravagant master of all that wealth which the miser's lean and crooked fingers had consigned to a safe keeping. Frangipani too, whose son was to have married Faustina, is gone these many years, and others of the older and graver sort have learned the great secret from the lips of death.

But there have been other and greater deaths, beside which the mortality of a whole society of noblemen sinks into insignificance. An empire is dead and another has arisen in the din of a vast war, begotten in bloodshed, brought forth in strife, baptized with fire. The France we knew is gone, and the French Republic writes "Liberty, Fraternity, Equality" in great red letters above the gate of its habitation, which within is yet hung with mourning. Out of the nest of kings and princes and princelings, and of all manner of rulers great and small, rises the solitary eagle of the new German Empire and hangs on black wings between sky and earth, not striking again, but always ready, a vision of armed peaee, a terror, a problem —perhaps a warning.

Old Rome is dead, too, never to be old Rome again. The last breath has been breathed, the aged eyes are closed for ever, corruption has done its work, and the grand skeleton lies bleaching upon seven hills, half covered with the piecemeal stucco of a modern architectural body. The result is satisfactory to those who have brought it about, if not to the rest of the world. The sepulchre of old Rome is the new capital of united Italy.

The three chief actors are dead also—the man of heart, the man of action and the man of wit, the good, the brave and the cunning, the Pope, the King and the Cardinal—Pius the Ninth, Victor Emmanuel the Second, Giacomo Antonelli. Rome saw them all dead.

In a poor chamber of the Vatican, upon a simple bed, beside which burned two waxen torches in the cold morning light, lay the body of the man whom none had loved and many had feared, clothed in the violet robe of the cardinal-deacon. The keen face was drawn up on one side with a strange look of mingled pity and contempt. The delicate, thin hands were clasped together on the breast. The chilly light fell upon the dead features, the silken robe and the stone floor. A single servant in a shabby livery stood in a corner, smiling foolishly, while the tears stood in his eyes and wet his unshaven cheeks. Perhaps he cared, as servants will, when no one else cares. The door opened almost directly upon a staircase and the noise of the feet of those passing up and down upon the stone steps disturbed the silence in the death chamber. At night the poor body was thrust unhonoured into a common coach and driven out to its resting-place.

In a vast hall, upon an enormous catafalque, full thirty feet above the floor, lay all that was left of the honest king. Thousands of wax candles cast their light up to the dark, shapeless face, and upon the military accoutrements of the uniform in which the huge body was clothed. A great crowd pressed to the railing to gaze their fill and go away. Behind the division tall troopers in cuirasses mounted guard and moved carelessly about. It was all tawdry, but tawdry on a magnificent scale—all unlike the man in whose honour it was done. For he had been simple and brave.

When he was at last borne to his tomb in the Pantheon, a file of imperial and royal princes marched shoulder to shoulder down the street before him, and the black charger he had loved was led after him.

In a dim chapel of St. Peter's lay the Pope, robed in white, the jewelled tiara upon his head, his white face calm and peaceful. Six torches burned beside him; six nobles of the guard stood like statues with drawn swords, three on his right hand and three on his left. That was all. The crowd passed in single file before the great closed gates of the Julian Chapel.

At night he was borne reverently by loving hands to the deep crypt below. But at another time, at night also, the dead man was taken up and driven towards the gate to be buried without the walls. Then a great crowd assembled in the darkness and fell upon the little band and stoned the coffin of him who never harmed any man, and screamed out curses and blasphemies till all the city was astir with riot. That was the last funeral hymn.

Old Rome is gone. The narrow streets are broad thoroughfares, the Jews' quarter is a flat and dusty building lot, the fountain of Ponte Sisto is swept away, one by one the mighty pines of Villa Ludovisi have fallen under axe and saw, and a cheap, thinly inhabited quarter is built upon the site of the enchanted garden. The network of by-ways from the Jesuits' church to the Sant' Angelo bridge is ploughed up and opened by the huge Corso Vittorio Emmanuele. Buildings which strangers used to search for in the shade, guide-book and map in hand, are suddenly brought into the blaze of light that fills broad streets and sweeps across great squares. The vast Cancelleria stands out nobly to the sun, the curved front of the Massimo palace exposes its black colonnade to sight upon the greatest thoroughfare of the new city, the ancient Arco de' Cenci exhibits its squalor in unshadowed sunshine, the Portico of Octavia once more looks upon the river.

He who was born and bred in the Rome of twenty years ago comes back after a long absence to wander as a stranger in streets he never knew, among houses unfamiliar to him, amidst a population whose speech sounds strange in his ears. He roams the city from the Lateran to the Tiber, from the Tiber to the Vatican, finding himself now and then before some building once familiar in another aspect, losing himself perpetually in unprofitable wastes made more monotonous than the sandy desert by the modern builder's art. Where once he lingered in old days to glance at the river, or to

dream of days yet older and long gone, scarce conscious of the beggar at his elbow and hardly seeing the half dozen workmen who laboured at their trades almost in the middle of the public way—where all was once aged and silent and melancholy and full of the elder memories—there, at that very corner, he is hustled and jostled by an eager crowd, thrust to the wall by huge, grinding, creaking carts, threatened with the modern death by the wheel of the modern omnibus, deafened by the yells of the modern newsvendors, robbed, very likely, by the light fingers of the modern inhabitant.

And yet he feels that Rome must be Rome still. He stands aloof and gazes at the sight as upon a play in which Rome herself is the great heroine and actress. He knows the woman and he sees the artist for the first time, not recognising her. She is a dark-eyed, black-haired, thoughtful woman when not upon the stage. How should he know her in the strange disguise, her head decked with Gretchen's fair tresses, her olive cheek daubed with pink and white paint, her stately form clothed in garments that would be gay and girlish but which are only unbecoming? He would gladly go out and wait by the stage door until the performance is over, to see the real woman pass him in the dim light of the street lamps as she enters her carriage and becomes herself again. And so, in the reality, he turns his back upon the crowd and strolls away, not caring whither he goes until, by a mere accident, he finds himself upon the height of Sant' Onofrio, or standing before the great fountains of the Acqua Paola, or perhaps upon the drive which leads through the old Villa Corsini along the crest of the Janiculum. Then, indeed, the scene thus changes, the actress is gone and the woman is before him; the capital of modern Italy sinks like a vision into the earth out of which it was called up, and the capital of the world rises once more, unchanged, unchanging and unchangeable, before the wanderer's eyes. The greater monuments of greater times are there still, majestic and

unmoved, the larger signs of a larger age stand out clear and sharp; the tomb of Hadrian frowns on the yellow stream, the heavy hemisphere of the Pantheon turns its single opening to the sky, the enormous dome of the world's cathedral looks silently down upon the sepulchre of the world's masters.

Then the sun sets and the wanderer goes down again through the chilly evening air to the city below, to find it less modern than he had thought. He has found what he sought and he knows that the real will outlast the false, that the stone will outlive the stucco and that the builder of to-day is but a builder of card-houses beside the architects who made Rome.

So his heart softens a little, or at least grows less resentful, for he has realised how small the change really is as compared with the first effect produced. The great house has fallen into new hands and the latest tenant is furnishing the dwelling to his taste. That is all. He will not tear down the walls, for his hands are too feeble to build them again, even if he were not occupied with other matters and hampered by the disagreeable consciousness of the extravagances he has already committed.

Other things have been accomplished, some of which may perhaps endure, and some of which are good in themselves, while some are indifferent and some distinctly bad. The great experiment of Italian unity is in process of trial and the world is already forming its opinion upon the results. Society, heedless as it necessarily is of contemporary history, could not remain indifferent to the transformation of its accustomed surroundings; and here, before entering upon an account of individual doings, the chronicler may be allowed to say a few words upon a matter little understood by foreigners, even when they have spent several seasons in Rome and have made acquaintance with each other for the purpose of criticising the Romans.

Immediately after the taking of the city in 1870, three

distinct parties declared themselves, to wit, the Clericals or Blacks, the Monarchists or Whites, and the Republicans or Reds. All three had doubtless existed for a considerable time, but the wine of revolution favoured the expression of the truth, and society awoke one morning to find itself divided into camps holding very different opinions.

At first the mass of the greater nobles stood together for the lost temporal power of the Pope, while a great number of the less important families followed two or three great houses in siding with the Royalists. The Republican idea, as was natural, found but few sympathisers in the highest class, and these were, I believe, in all cases young men whose fathers were Blacks or Whites, and most of whom have since thought fit to modify their opinions in one direction or the other. Nevertheless the Red interest was, and still is, tolerably strong and has been destined to play that powerful part in parliamentary life, which generally falls to the lot of a compact third party, where a fourth does not yet exist, or has no political influence, as is the case in Rome.

For there is a fourth body in Rome, which has little political but much social importance. It was not possible that people who had grown up together in the intimacy of a close caste-life, calling each other "thee" and "thou," and forming the hereditary elements of a still feudal organisation, should suddenly break off all acquaintance and be strangers one to another. The brother, a born and convinced clerical, found that his own sister had followed her husband to the court of the new King. The rigid adherent of the old order met his own son in the street, arrayed in the garb of an Italian officer. The two friends who had stood side by side in good and evil case for a score of years saw themselves suddenly divided by the gulf which lies between a Roman cardinal and a Senator of the Italian Kingdom. The breach was sudden and great, but it was bridged for

many by the invention of a fourth proportional. The points of contact between White and Black became Grey, and a social power, politically neutral and constitutionally indifferent, arose as a mediator between the Contents and the Malcontents. There were families that had never loved the old order but which distinctly disliked the new, and who opened their doors to the adherents of both. There is a house which has become Grey out of a sort of superstition inspired by the unfortunate circumstances which oddly coincided with each movement of its members to join the new order. There is another, and one of the greatest, in which a very high hereditary dignity in the one party, still exercised by force of circumstances, effectually forbids the expression of a sincere sympathy with the opposed power. Another there is, whose members are cousins of the one sovereign and personal friends of the other.

A further means of amalgamation has been found in the existence of the double embassies of the great powers. Austria, France and Spain each send an Ambassador to the King of Italy and an Ambassador to the Pope, of like state and importance. Even Protestant Prussia maintains a Minister Plenipotentiary to the Holy See. Russia has her diplomatic agent to the Vatican, and several of the smaller powers keep up two distinct legations. It is naturally neither possible nor intended that these diplomatists should never meet on friendly terms, though they are strictly interdicted from issuing official invitations to each other. Their point of contact is another grey square on the chess-board.

The foreigner, too, is generally a neutral individual, for if his political convictions lean towards the wrong side of the Tiber his social tastes incline to Court balls; or if he is an admirer of Italian institutions, his curiosity may yet lead him to seek a presentation at the Vatican, and his inexplicable though recent love of feudal princedom may take him, card-case in hand, to that great stronghold of Vaticanism which lies due west of the Piazza di Venezia and due north of the Capitol.

During the early years which followed the change, the attitude of society in Rome was that of protest and indignation on the one hand, of enthusiasm and rather brutally expressed triumph on the other. The line was very clearly drawn, for the adherence was of the nature of personal loyalty on both sides. Eight years and a half later the personal feeling disappeared with the almost simultaneous death of Pius IX. and Victor Emmanuel II. From that time the great strife degenerated by degrees into a difference of opinion. It may perhaps be said also that both parties became aware of their common enemy, the social democrat, soon after the disappearance of the popular King whose great individual influence was of more value to the cause of a united monarchy than all the political clubs and organisations in Italy put together. He was a strong man. He only once, I think, yielded to the pressure of a popular excitement, namely, in the matter of seizing Rome when the French troops were withdrawn, thereby violating a ratified Treaty. But his position was a hard one. He regretted the apparent necessity, and to the day of his death he never would sleep under the roof of Pius the Ninth's Palace on the Quirinal, but had his private apartments in an adjoining building. He was brave and generous. Such faults as he had were no burden to the nation and concerned himself alone. The same praise may be worthily bestowed upon his successor, but the personal influence is no longer the same, any more than that of Leo XIII. can be compared with that of Pius IX., though all the world is aware of the present Pope's intellectual superiority and lofty moral principle.

Let us try to be just. The unification of Italy has been the result of a noble conception. The execution of the scheme has not been without faults, and some of these faults have brought about deplorable, even disastrous, consequences, such as to endanger the stability of the new order. The worst of these attendant errors has been the sudden imposition of a most superficial and

vicious culture, under the name of enlightenment and education. The least of the new Government's mistakes has been a squandering of the public money, which, when considered with reference to the country's resources, has perhaps no parallel in the history of nations.

Yet the first idea was large, patriotic, even grand. The men who first steered the ship of the state were honourable, disinterested, devoted—men like Minghetti, who will not soon be forgotten—loyal, conservative monarchists, whose thoughts were free from exaggeration, save that they believed almost too blindly in the power of a constitution to build up a kingdom, and credited their fellows almost too readily with a purpose as pure and blameless as their own. Can more be said for these? I think not. They rest in honourable graves, their doings live in honoured remembrance—would that there had been such another generation to succeed them.

And having said thus much, let us return to the individuals who have played a part in the history of the Saracinesca. They have grown older, some gracefully, some under protest, some most unbecomingly.

In the end of the year 1887 old Leone Saracinesca is still alive, being eighty-two years of age. His massive head has sunk a little between his slightly rounded shoulders, and his white beard is no longer cut short and square, but flows majestically down upon his broad breast. His step is slow, but firm still, and when he looks up suddenly from under his wrinkled lids, the fire is not even yet all gone from his eyes. He is still contradictory by nature, but he has mellowed like rare wine in the long years of prosperity and peace. When the change came in Rome he was in the mountains at Saracinesca, with his daughter-in-law, Corona and her children. His son Giovanni, generally known as Prince of Sant' Ilario, was among the volunteers at the last and sat for half a day upon his horse in the Pincio, listening to the bullets that sang over his head while his men fired stray shots from the parapets of the public garden into

the road below. Giovanni is fifty-two years old, but though his hair is grey at the temples and his figure a trifle sturdier and broader than of old, he is little changed. His son, Orsino, who will soon be of age, overtops him by a head and shoulders, a dark youth, slender still, but strong and active, the chief person in this portion of my chronicle. Orsino has three brothers of ranging ages, of whom the youngest is scarcely twelve years old. Not one girl child has been given to Giovanni and Corona and they almost wish that one of the sturdy little lads had been a daughter. But old Saracinesca laughs and shakes his head and says he will not die till his four grandsons are strong enough to bear him to his grave upon their shoulders.

Corona is still beautiful, still dark, still magnificent, though she has reached the age beyond which no woman ever goes until after death. There are few lines in the noble face and such as are there are not the scars of heart wounds. Her life, too, has been peaceful and undisturbed by great events these many years. There is, indeed, one perpetual anxiety in her existence, for the old prince is an aged man and she loves him dearly. The tough strength must give way some day and there will be a great mourning in the house of Saracinesca, nor will any mourn the dead more sincerely than Corona. And there is a shade of bitterness in the knowledge that her marvellous beauty is waning. Can she be blamed for that? She has been beautiful so long. What woman who has been first for a quarter of a century can give up her place without a sigh? But much has been given to her to soften the years of transition, and she knows that also, when she looks from her husband to her four boys.

Then, too, it seems more easy to grow old when she catches a glimpse from time to time of Donna Tullia Del Ferice, who wears her years ungracefully, and who was once so near to becoming Giovanni Saracinesca's wife. Donna Tullia is fat and fiery of complexion, uneasily

vivacious and unsure of herself. Her disagreeable blue eyes have not softened, nor has the metallic tone of her voice lost its sharpness. Yet she should not be a disappointed woman, for Del Ferice is a power in the land, a member of parliament, a financier and a successful schemer, whose doors are besieged by parasites and his dinner-table by those who wear fine raiment and dwell in kings' palaces. Del Ferice is the central figure in the great building syndicates which in 1887 are at the height of their power. He juggles with millions of money, with miles of real estate, with thousands of workmen. He is director of a bank, president of a political club, chairman of half a dozen companies and a deputy in the chambers. But his face is unnaturally pale, his body is over-corpulent, and he has trouble with his heart. The Del Ferice couple are childless, to their own great satisfaction.

Anastase Gouache, the great painter, is also in Rome. Sixteen years ago he married the love of his life, Faustina Montevarchi, in spite of the strong opposition of her family. But times had changed. A new law existed and the thrice repeated formal request for consent made by Faustina to her mother, freed her from parental authority and brotherly interference. She and her husband passed through some very lean years in the beginning, but fortune has smiled upon them since that. Anastase is very famous. His character has changed little. With the love of the ideal republic in his heart, he shed his blood at Mentana for the great conservative principle, he fired his last shot for the same cause at the Porta Pia on the twentieth of September 1870; a month later he was fighting for France under the gallant Charette—whether for France imperial, regal or republican he never paused to ask; he was wounded in fighting against the Commune, and decorated for painting the portrait of Gambetta, after which he returned to Rome, cursed politics and married the woman he loved, which was, on the whole, the wisest course he could have

followed. He has two children, both girls, aged now respectively fifteen and thirteen. His virtues are many, but they do not include economy. Though his savings are small and he depends upon his brush, he lives in one wing of an historic palace and gives dinners which are famous. He proposes to reform and become a miser when his daughters are married.

"Misery will be the foundation of my second manner, my angel," he says to his wife, when he has done something unusually extravagant.

But Faustina laughs softly and winds her arm about his neck as they look together at the last great picture. Anastase has not grown fat. The gods love him and have promised him eternal youth. He can still buckle round his slim waist the military belt of twenty years ago, and there is scarcely one white thread in his black hair.

San Giacinto, the other Saracinesca, who married Faustina's elder sister Flavia, is in process of making a great fortune, greater perhaps than the one so nearly thrust upon him by old Montevarchi's compact with Meschini the librarian and forger. He had scarcely troubled himself to conceal his opinions before the change of government, being by nature a calm, fearless man, and under the new order he unhesitatingly sided with the Italians, to the great satisfaction of Flavia, who foresaw years of dulness for the mourning party of the Blacks. He had already brought to Rome the two boys who remained to him from his first marriage with Serafina Baldi—the little girl who had been born between the other two children had died in infancy—and the lads had been educated at a military college, and in 1887 are both officers in the Italian cavalry, sturdy and somewhat thick-skulled patriots, but gentlemen nevertheless in spite of the peasant blood. They are tall fellows enough but neither of them has inherited the father's colossal stature, and San Giacinto looks with a very little envy on his young kinsman Orsino who has outgrown his

cousins. This second marriage has brought him issue, a boy and a girl, and the fact that he has now four children to provide for has had much to do with his activity in affairs. He was among the first to see that an enormous fortune was to be made in the first rush for land in the city, and he realised all he possessed, and borrowed to the full extent of his credit to pay the first instalments on the land he bought, risking everything with the calm determination and cool judgment which lay at the root of his strong character. He was immensely successful, but though he had been bold to recklessness at the right moment, he saw the great crash looming in the near future, and when the many were frantic to buy and invest, no matter at what loss, his millions were in part safely deposited in national bonds, and in part as securely invested in solid and profitable buildings of which the rents are little liable to fluctuation. Brought up to know what money means, he is not easily carried away by enthusiastic reports. He knows that when the hour of fortune is at hand no price is too great to pay for ready capital, but he understands that when the great rush for success begins the psychological moment of finance is already passed. When he dies, if such strength as his can yield to death, he will die the richest man in Italy, and he will leave what is rare in Italian finance, a stainless name.

Of one person more I must speak, who has played a part in this family history. The melancholy Spicca still lives his lonely life in the midst of the social world. He affects to be a little old-fashioned in his dress. His tall thin body stoops ominously and his cadaverous face is more grave and ascetic than ever. He is said to have been suffering from a mortal disease these fifteen years, but still he goes everywhere, reads everything and knows every one. He is between sixty and seventy years old, but no one knows his precise age. The foils he once used so well hang untouched and rusty above his fireplace, but his reputation survives the lost strength of his

supple wrist, and there are few in Rome, brave men or hairbrained youths, who would willingly anger him even now. He is still the great duellist of his day; the emaciated fingers might still find their old grip upon a sword hilt, the long, listless arm might perhaps once more shoot out with lightning speed, the dull eye might once again light up at the clash of steel. Peaceable, charitable when none are at hand to see him give, gravely gentle now in manner, Count Spicca is thought dangerous still. But he is indeed very lonely in his old age, and if the truth be told his fortune seems to have suffered sadly of late years, so that he rarely leaves Rome, even in the hot summer, and it is very long since he spent six weeks in Paris or risked a handful of gold at Monte Carlo. Yet his life is not over, and he has still a part to play, for his own sake and for the sake of another, as shall soon appear more clearly.

CHAPTER II.

Orsino Saracinesca's education was almost completed. It had been of the modern kind, for his father had early recognised that it would be a disadvantage to the young man in after life if he did not follow the course of study and pass the examinations required of every Italian subject who wishes to hold office in his own country. Accordingly, though he had not been sent to public schools, Orsino had been regularly entered since his childhood for the public examinations and had passed them all in due order, with great difficulty and indifferent credit. After this preliminary work he had been at an English University for four terms, not with any view to his obtaining a degree after completing the necessary residence, but in order that he might perfect himself in the English language, associate with young men of his