They talked of his plans until it was late, and from that time they were more often together than before, each growing daily more proud of the other, though perhaps Orsino had better reasons for his pride than Corona could have found, for the love of mother for son is more comprehensive and not less blind than the passion of woman for man.

CHAPTER XIV.

The short Roman season was advancing rapidly to its premature fall, which is on Ash Wednesday, after which it struggles to hold up its head against the overwhelming odds of a severely observed Lent, to revive only spasmodically after Easter and to die a natural death on the first warm day. In that year, too, the fatal day fell on the fifteenth of February, and progressive spirits talked of the possibility of fixing the movable Feasts and Fasts of the Church in a more convenient part of the calendar. Easter might be made to fall in June, for instance, and society need not be informed of its inevitable and impending return to dust and ashes until it had enjoyed a good three months, or even four, of what an eminent American defines as "brass, sass, lies and sin."

Rome was very gay that year, to compensate for the shortness of its playtime. Everything was successful, and every one was rich. People talked of millions less soberly than they had talked of thousands a few years earlier, and with less respect than they mentioned hundreds twelve months later. Like the vanity-struck frog, the franc blew itself up to the bursting point, in the hope of being taken for the louis, and momentarily succeeded, even beyond its own expectations. No one walked, though horse-flesh was enormously dear and a good coachman's wages amounted to just twice the salary of a government clerk. Men who, six months earlier, had

climbed ladders with loads of brick or mortar, were now transformed into flourishing sub-contractors, and drove about in smart pony-carts, looking the picture of Italian prosperity, rejoicing in the most flashy of ties and smoking the blackest and longest of long black cigars. During twenty hours out of the twenty-four the gates of the city roared with traffic. From all parts of the country labourers poured in, bundle in hand and tools on shoulder to join in the enormous work and earn their share of the pay that was distributed so liberally. A certain man who believed in himself stood up and said that Rome was becoming one of the greatest of cities, and he smacked his lips and said that he had done it, and that the Triple Alliance was a goose which would lay many golden eggs. The believing bulls roared everything away before them, opposition, objections, financial experience, and the vanquished bears hibernated in secret places, sucking their paws and wondering what, in the name of Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, would happen next. Distinguished men wrote pamphlets in the most distinguished language to prove that wealth was a baby capable of being hatched artificially and brought up by hand. Every unmarried swain who could find a bride, married her forthwith; those who could not followed the advice of an illustrious poet and, being over-anxious to take wives, took those of others. Everybody was decorated. It positively rained decorations and hailed grand crosses and enough commanders' ribbons were reeled out to have hanged half the population. The periodical attempt to revive the defunct carnival in the Corso was made, and the yet unburied corpse of ancient gaiety was taken out and painted, and gorgeously arrayed, and propped up in its seat to be a posthumous terror to its enemies, like the dead Cid. Society danced frantically and did all those things which it ought not to have done—and added a few more, unconsciously imitating Pico della Mirandola.

Even those comparatively few families who, like the Saracinesca, had scornfully declined to dabble in the

whirlpool of affairs, did not by any means refuse to dance to the music of success which filled the city with such enchanting strains. The Princess Befana rose from her deathbed with more than usual vivacity and went to the length of opening her palace on two evenings in two successive weeks, to the intense delight of her gay and youthful heirs, who earnestly hoped that the excitement might kill her at last, and kill her beyond resurrection this time. But they were disappointed. She still dies periodically in winter and blooms out again in spring with the poppies, affording a perpetual and edifying illustration of the changes of the year, or, as some say, of the doctrine of immortality. On one of those memorable occasions she walked through a quadrille with the aged Prince Saracinesca, whereupon Sant' Ilario slipped his arm round Corona's waist and waltzed with her down the whole length of the ballroom and back again amidst the applause of his contemporaries and their children. If Orsino had had a wife he would have followed their example. As it was, he looked rather gloomily in the direction of a silent and high-born damsel with whom he was condemned to dance the cotillon at a later hour.

So all went gaily on until Ash Wednesday extinguished the social flame, suddenly and beyond relighting. And still Orsino did not meet Maria Consuelo, and still he hesitated to make another attempt to find her at home. He began to wonder whether he should ever see her again, and as the days went by he almost wished that Donna Tullia would send him a card for her lenten evenings, at which Maria Consuelo regularly assisted as he learned from the papers. After that first invitation to dinner, he had expected that Del Ferice's wife would make an attempt to draw him into her circle; and, indeed, she would probably have done so had she followed her own instinct instead of submitting to the higher policy dictated by her husband. Orsino waited in vain, not knowing whether to be annoyed at the lack of consideration bestowed upon him, or to admire the tact which assumed that he would never wish to enter the Del Ferice circle.

It is presumably clear that Orsino was not in love with Madame d'Aranjuez, and he himself appreciated the fact with a sense of disappointment. He was amazed at his own coldness and at the indifference with which he had submitted to what amounted to a most abrupt dismissal. He even went so far as to believe that Maria Consuelo had repulsed him designedly in the hope of kindling a more sincere passion. In that case she had been egregiously mistaken, he thought. He felt a curiosity to see her again before she left Rome, but it was nothing more than that. A new and absorbing interest had taken possession of him which at first left little room in his nature for anything else. His days were spent in the laborious study of figures and plans, broken only by occasional short but amusing conversations with Andrea Contini. His evenings were generally passed among a set of people who did not know Maria Consuelo except by sight and who had long ceased to ask him questions about her. Of late, too, he had missed his daily visits to her less and less, until he hardly regretted them at all, nor so much as thought of the possibility of renewing them. He laughed at the idea that his mother should have taken the place of a woman whom he had begun to love, and yet he was conscious that it was so, though he asked himself how long such a condition of things could last. Corona was far too wise to discuss his affairs with his father. He was too like herself for her to misunderstand him, and if she regarded the whole matter as perfectly harmless and as a legitimate subject for general conversation, she yet understood perfectly that having been once rebuffed by Sant' Ilario, Orsino must wish to be fully successful in his attempt before mentioning it again to the latter. And she felt so strongly in sympathy with her son that his work gradually acquired an intense interest for her, and she would have sacrifiecd

much rather than see it fail. She did not on that account blame Giovanni for his discouraging view when Orsino had consulted him. Giovanni was the passion of her life and was not fallible in his impulses, though his judgment might sometimes be at fault in technical matters for which he cared nothing. But her love for her son was as great and sincere in its own way, and her pride in him was such as to make his success a condition of her future happiness.

One of the greatest novelists of this age begins one of his greatest novels with the remark that "all happy families resemble each other, but that every unhappy family is unhappy in its own especial way." Generalities are dangerous in proportion as they are witty or striking, or both, and it may be asked whether the great Tolstoi has not fallen a victim to his own extraordinary power of striking and witty generalisations. Does the greatest of all his generalisations, the wide disclaimer of his early opinions expressed in the postscript subsequently attached by him to his *Kreutzer Sonata*, include also the words I have quoted, and which were set up, so to say, as the theme of his *Anna Karjenina?* One may almost hope so. I am no critic, but those words somehow seem to me to mean that only unhappiness can be interesting. It is not pleasant to think of the consequences to which the acceptance of such a statement might lead.

There are no statistics to tell us whether the majority of living men and women are to be considered as happy or unhappy. But it does seem true that whereas a single circumstance can cause very great and lasting unhappiness, felicity is always dependent upon more than one condition and often upon so many as to make the explanation of it a highly difficult and complicated matter.

Corona had assuredly little reason to complain of her lot during the past twenty years, but unruffled and perfect as it had seemed to her she began to see that there were sources of sorrow and satisfaction before her which

had not yet poured their bitter or sweet streams into the stately river of her mature life. The new interest which Orsino had created for her became more and more absorbing, and she watched it and tended it, and longed to see it grow to greater proportions. The situation was strange in one way at least. Orsino was working and his mother was helping him to work in the hope of a financial success which neither of them wanted or cared for. Possibly the certainty that failure could entail no serious consequences made the game a more amusing if a less exciting one to play.

"If I lose," said Orsino to her, "I can only lose the few thousands I invested. If I win, I will give you a string of pearls as a keepsake."

"If you lose, dear boy," answered Corona, "it must be because you had not enough to begin with. I will give you as much as you need, and we will try again."

They laughed happily together. Whatever chanced, things must turn out well. Orsino worked very hard, and Corona was very rich in her own right and could afford to help to any extent she thought necessary. She could, indeed, have taken the part of the bank and advanced him all the money he needed, but it seemed useless to interfere with the existing arrangements.

In Lent the house had reached an important point in its existence. Andrea Contini had completed the Gothic roof and the turret which appeared to him in the first vision of his dream, but to which the defunct baker had made objections on the score of expense. The masons were almost all gone and another set of workmen were busy with finer tools moulding cornices and laying on the snow-white stucco. Within, the joiners and carpenters kept up a ceaseless hammering.

One day Andrea Contini walked into the office after a tour of inspection, with a whole cigar, unlighted and intact, between his teeth. Orsino was well aware from this circumstance that something unusually fortunate had happened or was about to happen, and he rose from

his books, as soon as he recognised the fair-weather signal.

"We can sell the house whenever we like," said the architect, his bright brown eyes sparkling with satisfaction.

"Already!" exclaimed Orsino who, though equally delighted at the prospect of such speedy success, regretted in his heart the damp walls and the constant stir of work which he had learned to like so well.

"Already—yes. One needs luck like ours! The count has sent a man up in a cab to say that an acquaintance of his will come and look at the building today between twelve and one with a view to buying. The sooner we look out for some fresh undertaking, the better. What do you say, Don Orsino?"

"It is all your doing, Contini. Without you I should still be standing outside and watching the mattings flapping in the wind, as I did on that never-to-be-forgotten first day."

"I conceive that a house cannot be built without an architect," answered Contini, laughing, "and it has always been plain to me that there can be no architects without houses to build. But as for any especial credit to me, I refute the charge indignantly. I except the matter of the turret, which is evidently what has attracted the buyer. I always thought it would. You would never have thought of a turret, would you, Don Orsino?"

"Certainly not, nor of many other things," answered Orsino, laughing. "But I am sorry to leave the place. I have grown into liking it."

"What can one do? It is the way of the world—'lieto ricordo d'un amor che fù,'" sang Contini in the thin but expressive falsetto which seems to be the natural inheritance of men who play upon stringed instruments. He broke off in the middle of a bar and laughed, out of sheer delight at his own good fortune.

In due time the purchaser came, saw and actually

bought. He was a problematic personage with a disquieting nose, who spoke few words but examined everything with an air of superior comprehension. He looked keenly at Orsino but seemed to have no idea who he was and put all his questions to Contini.

After agreeing to the purchase he inquired whether Andrea Contini and Company had any other houses of the same description building and if so where they were situated, adding that he liked the firm's way of doing things. He stipulated for one or two slight improvements, made an appointment for a meeting with the notaries on the following day and went off with a rather unceremonious nod to the partners. The name he left was that of a well-known capitalist from the south, and Contini was inclined to think he had seen him before, but was not certain.

Within a week the business was concluded, the buyer took over the mortgage as Orsino and Contini had done and paid the difference in cash into the bank, which deducted the amounts due on notes of hand before handing the remainder to the two young men. The buyer also kept back a small part of the purchase money to be paid on taking possession, when the house was to be entirely finished. Andrea Contini and Company had realised a considerable sum of money.

"The question is, what to do next," said Orsino thoughtfully.

"We had better look about us for something promising," said his partner. "A corner lot in this same quarter. Corner houses are more interesting to build and people like them to live in because they can see two or three ways at once. Besides, a corner is always a good place for a turret. Let us take a walk—smoking and strolling, we shall find something."

"A year ago, no doubt," answered Orsino, who was becoming worldly wise. "A year ago that would have been well enough. But listen to me. That house opposite to ours has been finished some time, yet nobody has bought it. What is the reason?"

"It faces north and not south, as ours does, and it has not a Gothic roof."

"My dear Contini, I do not mean to say that the Gothic roof has not helped us very much, but it cannot have helped us alone. How about those two houses together at the end of the next block. Balconies, travertine columns, superior doors and windows, spaces for hydraulic lifts and all the rest of it. Yet no one buys. Dry, too, and almost ready to live in, and all the joinery of pitch pine. There is a reason for their ill luck."

"What do you think it is?" asked Contini, opening his eyes.

"The land on which they are built was not in the hands of Del Ferice's bank, and the money that built them was not advanced by Del Ferice's bank, and Del Ferice's bank has no interest in selling the houses themselves. Therefore they are not sold."

"But surely there are other banks in Rome, and private individuals——"

"No, I do not believe that there are," said Orsino with conviction. "My cousin of San Giacinto thinks that the selling days are over, and I fancy he is right, except about Del Ferice, who is cleverer than any of us. We had better not deceive ourselves, Contini. Del Ferice sold our house for us, and unless we keep with him we shall not sell another so easily. His bank has a lot of half-finished houses on its hands secured by mortgages which are worthless until the houses are habitable. Del Ferice wants us to finish those houses for him, in order to recover their value. If we do it, we shall make a profit. If we attempt anything on our own account we shall fail. Am I right or not?"

"What can I say? At all events you are on the safe side. But why has not the count given all this work to some old established firm of his acquaintance?"

"Because he cannot trust any one as he can trust us, and he knows it."

"Of course I owe the count a great deal for his kindness in introducing me to you. He knew all about me before the baker died, and afterwards I waited for him outside the Chambers one evening and asked him if he could find anything for me to do, but he did not give me much encouragement. I saw you speak to him and get into his carriage—was it not you?"

"Yes—it was I," answered Orsino, remembering the tall man in an overcoat who had disappeared in the dusk on the evening when he himself had first sought Del Ferice. "Yes, and you see we are both under a sort of obligation to him which is another reason for taking his advice."

"Obligations are humiliating!" exclaimed Contini impatiently. "We have succeeded in increasing our capital—your capital, Don Orsino—let us strike out for ourselves."

"I think my reasons are good," said Orsino quietly. "And as for obligations, let us remember that we are men of business."

It appears from this that the low-born Andrea Contini and the high and mighty Don Orsino Saracinesca were not very far from exchanging places so far as prejudice was concerned. Contini noticed the fact and smiled.

"After all," he said, "if you can accept the situation, I ought to accept it, too."

"It is a matter of business," said Orsino, returning to his argument. "There is no such thing as obligation where money is borrowed on good security and a large interest is regularly paid."

It was clear that Orsino was developing commercial instincts. His grandfather would have died of rage on the spot if he could have listened to the young fellow's cool utterances. But Contini was not pleased and would not abandon his position so easily.

"It is very well for you, Don Orsino," he said, vainly attempting to light his cigar. "You do not need the money as I do. You take it from Del Ferice because it amuses you to do so, not because you are obliged to

accept it. That is the difference. The count knows it too, and knows that he is not conferring a favour but receiving one. You do him an honour in borrowing his money. He lays me under an obligation in lending it."

"We must get money somewhere," answered Orsino with indifference. "If not from Del Ferice, then from some other bank. And as for obligations, as you call them, he is not the bank himself, and the bank does not lend its money in order to amuse me or to humiliate you, my friend. But if you insist, I shall say that the convenience is not on one side only. If Del Ferice supports us it is because we serve his interests. If he has done us a good turn, it is a reason why we should do him one, and build his houses rather than those of other people. You talk about my conferring a favour upon him. Where will he find another Andrea Contini and Company to make worthless property valuable for him? In that sense you and I are earning his gratitude, by the simple process of being scrupulously honest. I do not feel in the least humiliated, I assure you."

"I cannot help it," replied Contini, biting his cigar savagely. "I have a heart, and it beats with good blood. Do you know that there is blood of Cola di Rienzo in my veins?"

"No. You never told me," answered Orsino, one of whose forefathers had been concerned in the murder of the tribune, a fact to which he thought it best not to refer at the present moment.

"And the blood of Cola di Rienzo burns under the shame of an obligation!" cried Contini, with a heat hardly warranted by the circumstances. "It is humiliating, it is base, to submit to be the tool of a Del Ferice—we all know who and what Del Ferice was, and how he came by his title of count, and how he got his fortune—a spy, an intriguer! In a good cause? Perhaps. I was not born then, nor you either, Signor Principe, and we do not know what the world was like, when it was quite another world. That is not a reason for serving a spy!"

"Calm yourself, my friend. We are not in Del Ferice's service."

"Better to die than that! Better to kill him at once and go to the galleys for a few years! Better to play the fiddle, or pick rags, or beg in the streets than that, Signor Principe. One must respect oneself. You see it yourself. One must be a man, and feel as a man. One must feel those things here, Signor Principe, here in the heart!"

Contini struck his breast with his clenched fist and bit the end of his cigar quite through in his anger. Then he suddenly seized his hat and rushed out of the room.

Orsino was less surprised at the outburst than might have been expected, and did not attach any great weight to his partner's dramatic rage. But he lit a cigarette and carefully thought over the situation, trying to find out whether there were really any ground for Contini's first remarks. He was perfectly well aware that as Orsino Saracinesca he would cut his own throat with enthusiasm rather than borrow a louis of Ugo Del Ferice. But as Andrea Contini and Company he was another person, and so Del Ferice was not Count Del Ferice, nor the Onorevole Del Ferice, but simply a director in a bank with which he had business. If the interests of Andrea Contini and Company were identical with those of the bank, there was no reason whatever for interrupting relations both amicable and profitable, merely because one member of the firm claimed to be descended from Cola di Rienzo, a defunct personage in whom Orsino felt no interest whatever. Andrea Contini, considering his social relations, might be on terms of friendship with his hatter, for instance, or might have personal reasons for disliking him. In neither case could the buying of a hat from that individual be looked upon as an obligation conferred or received by either party. This was quite clear, and Orsino was satisfied.

"Business is business," he said to himself, "and people who introduce personal considerations into a financial transaction will get the worst of the bargain."

Andrea Contini was apparently of the same opinion, for when he entered the room again at the end of an hour his excitement had quite disappeared.

"If we take another contract from the count," he said, "is there any reason why we should not take a larger one, if it is to be had? We could manage three or four buildings now that you have become such a good book-keeper."

"I am quite of your opinion," Orsino answered, deciding at once to make no reference to what had gone before.

"The only question is, whether we have capital enough for a margin."

"Leave that to me."

Orsino determined to consult his mother, in whose judgment he felt a confidence which he could not explain but which was not misplaced. The fact was simple enough. Corona understood him thoroughly, though her comprehension of his business was more than limited, and she did nothing in reality but encourage his own sober opinion when it happened to be at variance with some enthusiastic inclination which momentarily deluded him. That quiet pushing of a man's own better reason against his half considered but often headstrong impulses, is after all one of the best and most loving services which a wise woman can render to a man whom she loves, be he husband, son or brother. Many women have no other secret, and indeed there are few more valuable ones, if well used and well kept. But let not graceless man discover that it is used upon him. He will resent being led by his own reason far more than being made the senseless slave of a foolish woman's wildest caprice. To select the best of himself for his own use is to trample upon his free will. To send him barefoot to Jericho in search of a dried flower is to appeal to his heart. Man is a reasoning animal.

Corona, as was to be expected, was triumphant in Orsino's first success, and spent as much time in talking over the past and the future with him as she could command during his own hours of liberty. He needed no urging to continue in the same course, but he enjoyed her happiness and delighted in her encouragement.

"Contini wishes to take a large contract," he said to her, after the interview last described. "I agree with him, in a way. We could certainly manage a larger business."

"No doubt," Corona answered thoughtfully, for she saw that there was some objection to the scheme in his own mind.

"I have learned a great deal," he continued, "and we have much more capital than we had. Besides, I suppose you would lend me a few thousands if we needed them, would you not, mother?"

"Certainly, my dear. You shall not be hampered by want of money."

"And then, it is possible that we might make something like a fortune in a short time. It would be a great satisfaction. But then, too——" He stopped.

"What then?" asked Corona, smiling.

"Things may turn out differently. Though I have been successful this time, I am much more inclined to believe that San Giacinto was right than I was before I began. All this movement does not rest on a solid basis."

A financier of thirty years' standing could not have made the statement more impressively, and Orsino was conscious that he was assuming an elderly tone. He laughed the next moment.

"That is a stock phrase, mother," he continued. "But it means something. Everything is not what it should be. If the demand were as great as people say it is, there would not be half a dozen houses—better houses than ours—unsold in our street. That is why I am afraid of a big contract. I might lose all my money and some of yours."

"It would not be of much consequence if you did," answered Corona. "But of course you will be guided

by your own judgment, which is much better than mine. One must risk something, of course, but there is no use in going into danger."

"Nevertheless, I should enjoy a big venture immensely."

"There is no reason why you should not try one, when the moment comes, my dear. I suppose that a few months will decide whether there is to be a crisis or not. In the meantime you might take something moderate, neither so small as the last, nor so large as you would like. You will get more experience, risk less and be better prepared for a crash if it comes, or to take advantage of anything favourable if business grows safer."

Orsino was silent for a moment.

"You are very wise, mother," he said. "I will take your advice."

Corona had indeed acted as wisely as she could. The only flaw in her reasoning was her assertion that a few months would decide the fate of Roman affairs. If it were possible to predict a crisis even within a few months, speculation would be a less precarious business than it is.

Orsino and his mother might have talked longer and perhaps to better purpose, but they were interrupted by the entrance of a servant, bearing a note. Corona instinctively put out her hand to receive it.

"For Don Orsino," said the man, stopping before him.

Orsino took the letter, looked at it and turned it over.

"I think it is from Madame d'Aranjuez," he remarked, without emotion. "May I read it?"

"There is no answer, Eccellenza," said the servant, whose curiosity was satisfied.

"Read it, of course," said Corona, looking at him.

She was surprised that Madame d'Aranjuez should write to him, but she was still more astonished to see the indifference with which he opened the missive. She had imagined that he was more or less in love with Maria Consuelo.

"I fancy it is the other way," she thought. "The woman wants to marry him. I might have suspected it."

Orsino read the note, and tossed it into the fire without volunteering any information.

"I will take your advice, mother," he said, continuing the former conversation, as though nothing had happened.

But the subject seemed to be exhausted, and before long Orsino made an excuse to his mother and went out.

CHAPTER XV.

There was nothing in the note burnt by Orsino which he might not have shown to his mother, since he had already told her the name of the writer. It contained the simple statement that Maria Consuelo was about to leave Rome, and expressed the hope that she might see Orsino before her departure as she had a small request to make of him, in the nature of a commission. She hoped he would forgive her for putting him to so much inconvenience.

Though he betrayed no emotion in reading the few lines, he was in reality annoyed by them, and he wished that he might be prevented from obeying the summons. Maria Consuelo had virtually dropped the acquaintance, and had refused repeatedly and in a marked way to receive him. And now, at the last moment, when she needed something of him, she chose to recall him by a direct invitation. There was nothing to be done but to yield, and it was characteristic of Orsino that, having submitted to necessity, he did not put off the inevitable moment, but went to her at once.

The days were longer now than they had been during the time when he had visited her every day, and the lamp was not yet on the table when Orsino entered the