

the result was the same,—the tendency of powerful families to maintain internecine traditional feuds was stamped out, or rather was absorbed in the maintenance of the perpetual feud between the great principles of Tory and Whig—of the party for the absolute monarch, and the party for the freedom of the people.

Be the causes what they may, the Roman nobility has many characteristics peculiar to it and to no other aristocracy. It is cosmopolitan by its foreign marriages, renewed in every generation; it is patriarchal and feudal by its own unbroken traditions of family life; and it is only essentially Roman by its speech and social customs. It has undergone great vicissitudes during twenty years; but most of these features remain in spite of new and larger parties, new and bitter political hatreds, new ideas of domestic life, and new fashions in dress and cookery.

In considering an account of the life of Giovanni Saracinesca from the time when, in 1865, he was thirty years of age, down to the present day, it is therefore just that he should be judged with a knowledge of some of these peculiarities of his class. He is not a Roman of the people like Giovanni Cardegna, the great tenor, and few of his ideas have any connection with those of the singer; but he has, in common with him, that singular simplicity of character which he derives from his Roman descent upon the male side, and in which will be found the key to many of his actions both good and bad—a simplicity which loves peace, but cannot always refrain from sudden violence, which loves and hates strongly and to some purpose.

CHAPTER II.

The hour was six o'clock, and the rooms of the Embassy were as full as they were likely to be that day. There would doubtless have been more people had the weather

been fine; but it was raining heavily, and below, in the vast court that formed the centre of the palace, the lamps of fifty carriages gleamed through the water and the darkness, and the coachmen, of all dimensions and characters, sat beneath their huge umbrellas and growled to each other, envying the lot of the footmen who were congregated in the ante-chamber up-stairs around the great bronze braziers. But in the reception-rooms there was much light and warmth; there were bright fires and softly shaded lamps; velvet-footed servants stealing softly among the guests, with immense burdens of tea and cake; men of more or less celebrity chatting about politics in corners; women of more or less beauty gossiping over their tea, or flirting, or wishing they had somebody to flirt with; people of many nations and ideas, with a goodly leaven of Romans. They all seemed endeavouring to get away from the men and women of their own nationality, in order to amuse themselves with the difficulties of conversation in languages not their own. Whether they amused themselves or not is of small importance; but as they were all willing to find themselves together twice a-day for the five months of the Roman season—from the first improvised dance before Christmas, to the last set ball in the warm April weather after Easter—it may be argued that they did not dislike each other's society. In case the afternoon should seem dull, his Excellency had engaged the services of Signor Strilone, the singer. From time to time he struck a few chords upon the grand piano, and gave forth a song of his own composition in loud and passionate tones, varied with very sudden effects of extreme pianissimo, which occasionally surprised some one who was trying to make his conversation heard above the music.

There was a little knot of people standing about the door of the great drawing-room. Some of them were watching their opportunity to slip away unperceived; others had just arrived, and were making a survey of the scene to ascertain the exact position of their Excellencies,

and of the persons they most desired to avoid, before coming forward. Suddenly, just as Signor Strillone had reached a high note and was preparing to bellow upon it before letting his voice die away to a pathetic falsetto, the crowd at the door parted a little. A lady entered the room alone, and stood out before the rest, pausing till the singer should have passed the climax of his song, before she proceeded upon her way. She was a very striking woman; every one knew who she was, every one looked towards her, and the little murmur that went round the room was due to her entrance rather than to Signor Strillone's high note.

The Duchessa d'Astrardente stood still, and quietly looked about her. A minister, two secretaries, and three or four princes sprang towards her, each with a chair in hand; but she declined each offer, nodding to one, thanking another by name, and exchanging a few words with a third. She would not sit down; she had not yet spoken to the ambassador.

Two men followed her closely as she crossed the room when the song was finished. One was a fair man of five-and-thirty, rather stout, and elaborately dressed. He trod softly and carried his hat behind him, while he leaned a little forward in his walk. There was something unpleasant about his face, caused perhaps by his pale complexion and almost colourless moustache; his blue eyes were small and near together, and had a watery, undecided look; his thin fair hair was parted in the middle over his low forehead; there was a scornful look about his mouth, though half concealed by the moustache; and his chin retreated rather abruptly from his lower lip. On the other hand, he was dressed with extreme care, and his manner showed no small confidence in himself as he pushed forwards, keeping as close as he could to the Duchessa. He had the air of being thoroughly at home in his surroundings.

Ugo del Ferice was indeed rarely disconcerted, and his self-reliance was most probably one chief cause of his success. He was a man who performed the daily miracle of

creating everything for himself out of nothing. His father had barely been considered a member of the lower nobility, although he always called himself "dei conti del Ferice"—of the family of the counts of his name; but where or when the Conti del Ferice had lived, was a question he never was able to answer satisfactorily. He had made a little money, and had squandered most of it before he died, leaving the small remainder to his only son, who had spent every scudo of it in the first year. But to make up for the exiguity of his financial resources, Ugo had from his youth obtained social success. He had begun life by boldly calling himself "Il conte del Ferice." No one had ever thought it worth while to dispute him the title; and as he had hitherto not succeeded in conferring it upon any dowered damsel, the question of his countship was left unchallenged. He had made many acquaintances in the college where he had been educated; for his father had paid for his schooling in the Collegio dei Nobili, and that in itself was a passport—for as the lad grew to the young man, he zealously cultivated the society of his old school-fellows, and by wisely avoiding all other company, acquired a right to be considered one of themselves. He was very civil and obliging in his youth, and had in that way acquired a certain reputation for being indispensable, which had stood him in good stead. No one asked whether he had paid his tailor's bill; or whether upon certain conditions, his tailor supplied him with raiment gratis. He was always elaborately dressed, he was always ready to take a hand at cards, and he was always invited to every party in the season. He had cultivated with success the science of amusing, and people asked him to dinner in the winter, and to their country houses in the summer. He had been seen in Paris, and was often seen at Monte Carlo; but his real home and hunting-ground was Rome, where he knew every one and every one knew him. He had made one or two fruitless attempts to marry young women of American extraction and large fortune; he had not suc-

ceeded in satisfying the paternal mind in regard to guarantees, and had consequently been worsted in his endeavours. Last summer, however, it appeared that he had been favoured with an increase of fortune. He gave out that an old uncle of his, who had settled in the south of Italy, had died, leaving him a modest competence; and while assuming a narrow band of *crêpe* upon his hat, he had adopted also a somewhat more luxurious mode of living. Instead of going about on foot or in cabs, he kept a very small coupé, with a very small horse and a diminutive coachman: the whole turn-out was very quiet in appearance, but very serviceable withal. Ugo sometimes wore too much jewellery; but his bad taste, if so it could be called, did not extend to the modest equipage. People accepted the story of the deceased uncle, and congratulated Ugo, whose pale face assumed on such occasions a somewhat deprecating smile. "A few scudi," he would answer—"a very small competence; but what would you have? I need so little—it is enough for me." Nevertheless people who knew him well warned him that he was growing stout.

The other man who followed the Duchessa d'Astrardente across the drawing-room was of a different type. Don Giovanni Saracinesca was neither very tall nor remarkably handsome, though in the matter of his beauty opinion varied greatly. He was very dark—almost as dark for a man as the Duchessa was for a woman. He was strongly built, but very lean, and his features stood out in bold and sharp relief from the setting of his short black hair and pointed beard. His nose was perhaps a little large for his face, and the unusual brilliancy of his eyes gave him an expression of restless energy; there was something noble in the shaping of his high square forehead and in the turn of his sinewy throat. His hands were broad and brown, but nervous and well knit, with straight long fingers and squarely cut nails. Many women said Don Giovanni was the handsomest man in Rome; others said he was too dark or too thin, and that his face was hard and his

features ugly. There was a great difference of opinion in regard to his appearance. Don Giovanni was not married, but there were few marriageable women in Rome who would not have been overjoyed to become his wife. But hitherto he had hesitated—or, to speak more accurately, he had not hesitated at all in his celibacy. His conduct in refusing to marry had elicited much criticism, little of which had reached his ears. He cared not much for what his friends said to him, and not at all for the opinion of the world at large, in consequence of which state of mind people often said he was selfish—a view taken extensively by elderly princesses with unmarried daughters, and even by Don Giovanni's father and only near relation, the old Prince Saracinesca, who earnestly desired to see his name perpetuated. Indeed Giovanni would have made a good husband, for he was honest and constant by nature, courteous by disposition, and considerate by habit and experience. His reputation for wildness rested rather upon his taste for dangerous amusements than upon such scandalous adventures as made up the lives of many of his contemporaries. But to all matrimonial proposals he answered that he was barely thirty years of age, that he had plenty of time before him, that he had not yet seen the woman whom he would be willing to marry, and that he intended to please himself.

The Duchessa d'Astrardente made her speech to her hostess and passed on, still followed by the two men; but they now approached her, one on each side, and endeavoured to engage her attention. Apparently she intended to be impartial, for she sat down in the middle one of three chairs, and motioned to her two companions to seat themselves also, which they immediately did, whereby they became for the moment the two most important men in the room.

Corona d'Astrardente was a very dark woman. In all the Southern land there were no eyes so black as hers, no cheeks of such a warm dark-olive tint, no tresses of

such raven hue. But if she was not fair, she was very beautiful; there was a delicacy in her regular features that artists said was matchless; her mouth, not small, but generous and nobly cut, showed perhaps more strength, more even determination, than most men like to see in women's faces; but in the exquisitely moulded nostrils there lurked much sensitiveness and the expression of much courage; and the level brow and straight-cut nose were in their clearness as an earnest of the noble thoughts that were within, and that so often spoke from the depths of her splendid eyes. She was not a scornful beauty, though her face could express scorn well enough. Where another woman would have shown disdain, she needed but to look grave, and her silence did the rest. She wielded magnificent weapons, and wielded them nobly, as she did all things. She needed all her strength, too, for her position from the first was not easy. She had few troubles, but they were great ones, and she bore them bravely.

One may well ask why Corona del Carmine had married the old man who was her husband—the broken-down and worn-out dandy of sixty, whose career was so well known, and whose doings had been as scandalous as his ancient name was famous in the history of his country. Her marriage was in itself almost a tragedy. It matters little to know how it came about; she accepted Astrardente with his dukedom, his great wealth, and his evil past, on the day when she left the convent where she had been educated; she did it to save her father from ruin, almost from starvation; she was seventeen years of age; she was told that the world was bad, and she resolved to begin her life by a heroic sacrifice; she took the step heroically, and no human being had ever heard her complain. Five years had elapsed since then, and her father—for whom she had given all she had, herself, her beauty, her brave heart, and her hopes of happiness—her old father, whom she so loved, was dead, the last of his race, saving only this beautiful but childless

daughter. What she suffered now—whether she suffered at all—no man knew. There had been a wild burst of enthusiasm when she appeared first in society, a universal cry that it was a sin and a shame. But the cynics who had said she would console herself had been obliged to own their worldly wisdom at fault; the men of all sorts who had lost their hearts to her were ignominiously driven in course of time to find them again elsewhere. Amid all the excitement of the first two years of her life in the world, Corona had moved calmly upon her way, wrapped in the perfect dignity of her character; and the old Duca d'Astrardente had smiled and played with the curled locks of his wonderful wig, and had told every one that his wife was the one woman in the universe who was above suspicion. People had laughed incredulously at first; but as time wore on they held their peace, tacitly acknowledging that the aged fop was right as usual, but swearing in their hearts that it was the shame of shames to see the noblest woman in their midst tied to such a wretched remnant of dissipated humanity as the Duca d'Astrardente. Corona went everywhere, like other people; she received in her own house a vast number of acquaintances; there were a few friends who came and went much as they pleased, and some of them were young; but there was never a breath of scandal breathed about the Duchessa. She was indeed above suspicion.

She sat now between two men who were evidently anxious to please her. The position was not new; she was, as usual, to talk to both, and yet to show no preference for either. And yet she had a preference, and in her heart she knew it was a strong one. It was by no means indifferent to her which of those two men left her side and which remained. She was above suspicion—yes, above the suspicion of any human being besides herself, as she had been for five long years. She knew that had her husband entered the room and passed that way, he would have nodded to Giovanni Saracinesca as carelessly as though Giovanni had been his wife's brother—as care-

lessly as he would have noticed Ugo del Ferice upon her other side. But in her own heart she knew that there was but one face in all Rome she loved to see, but one voice she loved, and dreaded too, for it had the power to make her life seem unreal, till she wondered how long it would last, and whether there would ever be any change. The difference between Giovanni and other men had always been apparent. Others would sit beside her and make conversation, and then occasionally would make speeches she did not care to hear, would talk to her of love—some praising it as the only thing worth living for, some with affected cynicism scoffing at it as the greatest of unrealities, contradicting themselves a moment later in some passionate declaration to herself. When they were foolish, she laughed at them; when they went too far, she quietly rose and left them. Such experiences had grown rare of late, for she had earned the reputation of being cold and unmoved, and that protected her. But Giovanni had never talked like the rest of them. He never mentioned the old, worn subjects that the others harped upon. She would not have found it easy to say what he talked about, for he talked indifferently about many subjects. She was not sure whether he spent more time with her when in society than with other women; she reflected that he was not so brilliant as many men she knew, not so talkative as the majority of men she met; she knew only—and it was the thing she most bitterly reproached herself with—that she preferred his face above all other faces, and his voice beyond all voices. It never entered her head to think that she loved him; it was bad enough in her simple creed that there should be any man whom she would rather see than not, and whom she missed when he did not approach her. She was a very strong and loyal woman, who had sacrificed herself to a man who knew the world very thoroughly, who in the thoroughness of his knowledge was able to see that the world is not all bad, and who, in spite of all his evil deeds, was proud of his wife's loyalty. Astrardente had

made a bargain when he married Corona; but he was a wise man in his generation, and he knew and valued her when he had got her. He knew the precise dangers to which she was exposed, and he was not so cruel as to expose her to them willingly. He had at first watched keenly the effect produced upon her by conversing with men of all sorts in the world, and among others he had noticed Giovanni; but he had come to the conclusion that his wife was equal to any situation in which she might be placed. Moreover, Giovanni was not an *habitué* at the Palazzo Astrardente, and showed none of the usual signs of anxiety to please the Duchessa.

From the time when Corona began to notice her own predilection for Saracinesca, she had been angry with herself for it, and she tried to avoid him; at all events, she gave him no idea that she liked him especially. Her husband, who at first had delivered many lectures on the subject of behaviour in the world, had especially warned her against showing any marked coldness to a man she wished to shun. "Men," said he, "are accustomed to that; they regard it as the first indication that a woman is really interested; when you want to get rid of a man, treat him systematically as you treat everybody, and he will be wounded at your indifference and go away." But Giovanni did not go, and Corona began to wonder whether she ought not to do something to break the interest she felt in him.

At the present moment she wanted a cup of tea. She would have liked to send Ugo del Ferice for it; she did what she thought least pleasant to herself, and she sent Giovanni. The servants who were serving the refreshments had all left the room, and Saracinesca went in pursuit of them. As soon as he was gone Del Ferice spoke. His voice was soft, and had an insinuating tone in it.

"They are saying that Don Giovanni is to be married," he remarked, watching the Duchessa from the corners of his eyes as he indifferently delivered himself of his news.

The Duchessa was too dark a woman to show emotion easily. Perhaps she did not believe the story; her eyes

fixed themselves on some distant object in the room, as though she were intensely interested in something she saw, and she paused before she answered.

"That is news indeed, if it is true. And whom is he going to marry?"

"Donna Tullia Mayer, the widow of the financier. She is immensely rich, and is some kind of cousin of the Saracinesca."

"How strange!" exclaimed Corona. "I was just looking at her. Is not that she over there, with the green feathers?"

"Yes," answered Del Ferice, looking in the direction the Duchessa indicated. "That is she. One may know her at a vast distance by her dress. But it is not all settled yet."

"Then one cannot congratulate Don Giovanni today?" asked the Duchessa, facing her interlocutor rather suddenly.

"No," he answered; "it is perhaps better not to speak to him about it."

"It is as well that you warned me, for I would certainly have spoken."

"I do not imagine that Saracinesca likes to talk of his affairs of the heart," said Del Ferice, with considerable gravity. "But here he comes. I had hoped he would have taken even longer to get that cup of tea."

"It was long enough for you to tell your news," answered Corona quietly, as Don Giovanni came up.

"What is the news?" asked he, as he sat down beside her.

"Only an engagement that is not yet announced," answered the Duchessa. "Del Ferice has the secret; perhaps he will tell you."

Giovanni glanced across her at the fair pale man, whose fat face, however, expressed nothing. Seeing he was not enlightened, Saracinesca civilly turned the subject.

"Are you going to the meet to-morrow, Duchessa?" he asked.

"That depends upon the weather and upon the Duke," she answered. "Are you going to follow?"

"Of course. What a pity it is that you do not ride!"

"It seems such an unnatural thing to see a woman hunting," remarked Del Ferice, who remembered to have heard the Duchessa say something of the kind, and was consequently sure that she would agree with him.

"You do not ride yourself," said Don Giovanni, shortly. "That is the reason you do not approve of it for ladies."

"I am not rich enough to hunt," said Ugo, modestly. "Besides, the other reason is a good one; for when ladies hunt I am deprived of their society."

The Duchessa laughed slightly. She never felt less like laughing in her life, and yet it was necessary to encourage the conversation. Giovanni did not abandon the subject.

"It will be a beautiful meet," he said. "Many people are going out for the first time this year. There is a man here who has brought his horses from England. I forget his name—a rich Englishman."

"I have met him," said Del Ferice, who was proud of knowing everybody. "He is a type—enormously rich—a lord—I cannot pronounce his name—not married either. He will make a sensation in society. He won races in Paris last year, and they say he will enter one of his hunters for the steeplechases here at Easter."

"That is a great inducement to go to the meet, to see this Englishman," said the Duchessa rather wearily, as she leaned back in her chair. Giovanni was silent, but showed no intention of going. Del Ferice, with an equal determination to stay, chattered vivaciously.

"Don Giovanni is quite right," he continued. "Every one is going. There will be two or three drags. Madame Mayer has induced Valdarno to have out his four-in-hand, and to take her and a large party."

The Duchessa did not hear the remainder of Del Ferice's speech, for at the mention of Donna Tullia—now commonly called Madame Mayer—she instinctively turned

and looked at Giovanni. He, too, had caught the name, though he was not listening in the least to Ugo's chatter; and as he met Corona's eyes he moved uneasily, as much as to say he wished the fellow would stop talking. A moment later Del Ferice rose from his seat; he had seen Donna Tullia passing near, and thought the opportunity favourable for obtaining an invitation to join the party on the drag. With a murmured excuse which Corona did not hear, he went in pursuit of his game.

"I thought he was never going," said Giovanni, moodily. He was not in the habit of posing as the rival of any one who happened to be talking to the Duchess. He had never said anything of the kind before, and Corona experienced a new sensation, not altogether unpleasant. She looked at him in some surprise.

"Do you not like Del Ferice?" she inquired, gravely.

"Do you like him yourself?" he asked in reply.

"What a question! Why should I like or dislike any one?" There was perhaps the smallest shade of bitterness in her voice as she asked the question she had so often asked herself. Why should she like Giovanni Saracinesca, for instance?

"I do not know what the world would be like if we had no likes and dislikes," said Giovanni, suddenly. "It would be a poor place; perhaps it is only a poor place at best. I merely wondered whether Del Ferice amused you as he amuses everybody."

"Well then, frankly, he has not amused me to-day," answered Corona, with a smile.

"Then you are glad he is gone?"

"I do not regret it."

"Duchessa," said Giovanni, suddenly changing his position, "I am glad he is gone, because I want to ask you a question. Do I know you well enough to ask you a question?"

"It depends——" Corona felt the blood rise suddenly to her dark forehead. Her hands burned intensely in her gloves. The anticipation of something she had never

heard made her heart beat uncontrollably in her breast.

"It is only about myself," continued Giovanni, in low tones. He had seen the blush, so rare a sight that there was not another man in Rome who had seen it. He had not time to think what it meant. "It is only about myself," he went on. "My father wants me to marry; he insists that I should marry Donna Tullia—Madame Mayer."

"Well?" asked Corona. She shivered; a moment before, she had been oppressed with the heat. Her monosyllabic question was low and indistinct. She wondered whether Giovanni could hear the beatings of her heart, so slow, so loud they almost deafened her.

"Simply this. Do you advise me to marry her?"

"Why do you ask me, of all people?" asked Corona, faintly.

"I would like to have your advice," said Giovanni, twisting his brown hands together and fixing his bright eyes upon her face.

"She is young yet. She is handsome—she is fabulously rich. Why should you not marry her? Would she make you happy?"

"Happy? Happy with her? No indeed. Do you think life would be bearable with such a woman?"

"I do not know. Many men would marry her if they could——"

"Then you think I should?" asked Giovanni. Corona hesitated; she could not understand why she should care, and yet she was conscious that there had been no such struggle in her life since the day she had blindly resolved to sacrifice herself to her father's wishes in accepting Astrardente. Still there could be no doubt what she should say: how could she advise any one to marry without the prospect of the happiness she had never had?

"Will you not give me your counsel?" repeated Saracinesca. He had grown very pale, and spoke with such earnestness that Corona hesitated no longer.

"I would certainly advise you to think no more about it, if you are sure that you cannot be happy with her."

Giovanni drew a long breath, the blood returned to his face, and his hands unlocked themselves.

"I will think no more about it," he said. "Heaven bless you for your advice, Duchessa!"

"Heaven grant I have advised you well!" said Corona, almost inaudibly. "How cold this house is! Will you put down my cup of tea? Let us go near the fire; Strillone is going to sing again."

"I would like him to sing a 'Nunc dimittis, Domine,' for me," murmured Giovanni, whose eyes were filled with a strange light.

Half an hour later Corona d'Astrardente went down the steps of the Embassy wrapped in her furs and preceded by her footman. As she reached the bottom Giovanni Saracinesca came swiftly down and joined her as her carriage drove up out of the dark courtyard. The footman opened the door, but Giovanni put out his hand to help Corona to mount the step. She laid her small gloved fingers upon the sleeve of his overcoat, and as she sprang lightly in she thought his arm trembled.

"Good night, Duchessa; I am very grateful to you," he said.

"Good night; why should you be grateful?" she asked, almost sadly.

Giovanni did not answer, but stood hat in hand as the great carriage rolled out under the arch. Then he buttoned his greatcoat, and went out alone into the dark and muddy streets. The rain had ceased, but everything was wet, and the broad pavements gleamed under the uncertain light of the flickering gas-lamps.

CHAPTER III.

The palace of the Saracinesca is in an ancient quarter of Rome, far removed from the broad white streets of mushroom dwelling-houses and machine-laid macadam; far from the foreigners' region, the varnish of the fashionable shops, the whirl of brilliant equipages, and the scream of the news vendor. The vast irregular buildings are built around three courtyards, and face on all sides upon narrow streets. The first sixteen feet, up to the heavily ironed windows of the lower storey, consist of great blocks of stone, worn at the corners and scored along their length by the battering of ages, by the heavy carts that from time immemorial have found the way too narrow and have ground their iron axles against the massive masonry. Of the three enormous arched gates that give access to the interior from different sides, one is closed by an iron grating, another by huge doors studded with iron bolts, and the third alone is usually open as an entrance. A tall old porter used to stand there in a long livery-coat and a cocked-hat; on holidays he appeared in the traditional garb of the Parisian "Suisse," magnificent in silk stockings and a heavily laced coat of dark green, leaning upon his tall mace—a constant object of wonder to the small boys of the quarter. He trimmed his white beard in imitation of his master's—broad and square—and his words were few and to the point.

No one was ever at home in the Palazzo Saracinesca in those days; there were no ladies in the house; it was a man's establishment, and there was something severely masculine in the air of the gloomy courtyards surrounded by dark archways, where not a single plant or bit of colour relieved the ancient stone. The pavement was clean and well kept, a new flagstone here and there showing that some care was bestowed upon maintaining it in good repair; but for any decoration there was to be found in the courts, the place might have been a fortress, as