

"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

indeed it once was. The owners, father and son, lived in their ancestral home in a sort of solemn magnificence that savoured of feudal times. Giovanni was the only son of five-and-twenty years of wedlock. His mother had been older than his father, and had now been dead some time. She had been a stern dark woman, and had lent no feminine touch of grace to the palace while she lived in it, her melancholic temper rather rejoicing in the sepulchral gloom that hung over the house. The Saracinesca had always been a manly race, preferring strength to beauty, and the reality of power to the amenities of comfort.

Giovanni walked home from the afternoon reception at the Embassy. His temper seemed to crave the bleak wet air of the cold streets, and he did not hurry himself. He intended to dine at home that evening, and he anticipated some kind of disagreement with his father. The two men were too much alike not to be congenial, but too combative by nature to care for eternal peace. On the present occasion it was likely that there would be a struggle, for Giovanni had made up his mind not to marry Madame Mayer, and his father was equally determined that he should marry her at once: both were singularly strong men, singularly tenacious of their opinions.

At precisely seven o'clock father and son entered from different doors the small sitting-room in which they generally met, and they had no sooner entered than dinner was announced. Two words might suffice for the description of old Prince Saracinesca—he was an elder edition of his son. Sixty years of life had not bent his strong frame nor dimmed the brilliancy of his eyes, but his hair and beard were snowy white. He was broader in the shoulder and deeper in the chest than Giovanni, but of the same height, and well proportioned still, with little tendency to stoutness. He was to all appearance precisely what his son would be at his age—keen and vigorous, the stern lines of his face grown deeper, and his very dark eyes and complexion made more noticeable by

the dazzling whiteness of his hair and broad square beard—the same type in a different stage of development.

The dinner was served with a certain old-fashioned magnificence which has grown rare in Rome. There was old plate and old china upon the table, old cut glass of the diamond pattern, and an old butler who moved noiselessly about in the performance of the functions he had exercised in the same room for forty years, and which his father had exercised there before him. Prince Saracinesca and Don Giovanni sat on opposite sides of the round table, now and then exchanging a few words.

"I was caught in the rain this afternoon," remarked the Prince.

"I hope you will not have a cold," replied his son, civilly. "Why do you walk in such weather?"

"And you—why do you walk?" retorted his father. "Are you less likely to take cold than I am? I walk because I have always walked."

"That is an excellent reason. I walk because I do not keep a carriage."

"Why do not you keep one if you wish to?" asked the Prince.

"I will do as you wish. I will buy an equipage tomorrow, lest I should again walk in the rain and catch cold. Where did you see me on foot?"

"In the Orso, half an hour ago. Why do you talk about my wishes in that absurd way?"

"Since you say it is absurd, I will not do so," said Giovanni, quietly.

"You are always contradicting me," said the Prince. "Some wine, Pasquale."

"Contradicting you?" repeated Giovanni. "Nothing could be further from my intentions."

The old Prince slowly sipped a glass of wine before he answered.

"Why do not you set up an establishment for yourself and live like a gentleman?" he asked at length. "You

are rich—why do you go about on foot and dine in cafés?”

“Do I ever dine at a café when you are dining alone?”

“You have got used to living in restaurants in Paris,” retorted his father. “It is a bad habit. What was the use of your mother leaving you a fortune, unless you will live in a proper fashion?”

“I understand you very well,” answered Giovanni, his dark eyes beginning to gleam. “You know all that is a pretence. I am the most home-staying man of your acquaintance. It is a mere pretence. You are going to talk about my marriage again.”

“And has any one a more natural right to insist upon your marriage than I have?” asked the elder man, hotly. “Leave the wine on the table, Pasquale—and the fruit—here. Give Don Giovanni his cheese. I will ring for the coffee—leave us.” The butler and the footman left the room. “Has any one a more natural right, I ask?” repeated the Prince when they were alone.

“No one but myself, I should say,” answered Giovanni, bitterly.

“Yourself—yourself indeed! What have you to say about it? This is a family matter. Would you have Saracinesca sold, to be distributed piecemeal among a herd of dogs of starving relations you never heard of, merely because you are such a vagabond, such a Bohemian, such a break-neck, crazy good-for-nothing, that you will not take the trouble to accept one of all the women who rush into your arms?”

“Your affectionate manner of speaking of your relatives is only surpassed by your good taste in describing the probabilities of my marriage,” remarked Giovanni, scornfully.

“And you say you never contradict me!” exclaimed the Prince, angrily.

“If this is an instance, I can safely say so. Comment is not contradiction.”

“Do you mean to say you have not repeatedly refused to marry?” inquired old Saracinesca.

“That would be untrue. I have refused, I do refuse, and I will refuse, just so long as it pleases me.”

“That is definite, at all events. You will go on refusing until you have broken your silly neck in imitating Englishmen, and then—good night, Saracinesca! The last of the family will have come to a noble end!”

“If the only use of my existence is to become the father of heirs to your titles, I do not care to enjoy them myself.”

“You will not enjoy them till my death, at all events. Did you ever reflect that I might marry again?”

“If you please to do so, do not hesitate on my account. Madame Mayer will accept you as soon as me. Marry by all means, and may you have a numerous progeny; and may they all marry in their turn, the day they are twenty. I wish you joy.”

“You are intolerable, Giovanni. I should think you would have more respect for Donna Tullia——”

“Than to call her Madame Mayer,” interrupted Giovanni.

“Than to suggest that she cares for nothing but a title and a fortune——”

“You showed much respect to her a moment ago, when you suggested that she was ready to rush into my arms.”

“I! I never said such a thing. I said that any woman——”

“Including Madame Mayer, of course,” interrupted Giovanni again.

“Can you not let me speak?” roared the Prince. Giovanni shrugged his shoulders a little, poured out a glass of wine, and helped himself to cheese, but said nothing. Seeing that his son said nothing, old Saracinesca was silent too; he was so angry that he had lost the thread of his ideas. Perhaps Giovanni regretted the quarrelsome tone he had taken, for he presently spoke to his father in a more conciliatory tone.

"Let us be just," he said. "I will listen to you, and I shall be glad if you will listen to me. In the first place, when I think of marriage I represent something to myself by the term——"

"I hope so," growled the old man.

"I look upon marriage as an important step in a man's life. I am not so old as to make my marriage an immediate necessity, nor so young as to be able wholly to disregard it. I do not desire to be hurried; for when I make up my mind, I intend to make a choice which, if it does not ensure happiness, will at least ensure peace. I do not wish to marry Madame Mayer. She is young, handsome, rich——"

"Very," ejaculated the Prince.

"Very. I also am young and rich, if not handsome."

"Certainly not handsome," said his father, who was nursing his wrath, and meanwhile spoke calmly. "You are the image of me."

"I am proud of the likeness," said Giovanni, gravely.

"But to return to Madame Mayer. She is a widow——"

"Is that her fault?" inquired his father irrelevantly, his anger rising again.

"I trust not," said Giovanni, with a smile. "I trust she did not murder old Mayer. Nevertheless she is a widow. That is a strong objection. Have any of my ancestors married widows?"

"You show your ignorance at every turn," said the old Prince, with a scornful laugh. "Leone Saracinesca married the widow of the Elector of Limburger-Stinken-stein in 1581."

"It is probably the German blood in our veins which gives you your taste for argument," remarked Giovanni. "Because three hundred years ago an ancestor married a widow, I am to marry one now. Wait—do not be angry—there are other reasons why I do not care for Madame Mayer. She is too gay for me—too fond of the world."

The Prince burst into a loud ironical laugh. His white

hair and beard bristled about his dark face, and he showed all his teeth, strong and white still.

"That is magnificent!" he cried; "it is superb, splendid, a piece of unpurchasable humour! Giovanni Saracinesca has found a woman who is too gay for him! Heaven be praised! We know his taste at last. We will give him a nun, a miracle of all the virtues, a little girl out of a convent, vowed to a life of sacrifice and self-renunciation. That will please him—he will be a model happy husband."

"I do not understand this extraordinary outburst," answered Giovanni, with cold scorn. "Your mirth is amazing, but I fail to understand its source."

His father ceased laughing, and looked at him curiously, his heavy brows bending with the intensesness of his gaze. Giovanni returned the look, and it seemed as though those two strong angry men were fencing across the table with their fiery glances. The son was the first to speak.

"Do you mean to imply that I am not the kind of man to be allowed to marry a young girl?" he asked, not taking his eyes from his father.

"Look you, boy," returned the Prince, "I will have no more nonsense. I insist upon this match, as I have told you before. It is the most suitable one that I can find for you; and instead of being grateful, you turn upon me and refuse to do your duty. Donna Tullia is twenty-three years of age. She is brilliant, rich. There is nothing against her. She is a distant cousin——"

"One of the flock of vultures you so tenderly referred to," remarked Giovanni.

"Silence!" cried old Saracinesca, striking his heavy hand upon the table so that the glasses shook together. "I will be heard; and what is more, I will be obeyed. Donna Tullia is a relation. The union of two such fortunes will be of immense advantage to your children. There is everything in favour of the match—nothing against it. You shall marry her a month from to-day.

I will give you the title of Sant' Ilario, with the estate outright into the bargain, and the palace in the Corso to live in, if you do not care to live here."

"And if I refuse?" asked Giovanni, choking down his anger.

"If you refuse, you shall leave my house a month from to-day," said the Prince, savagely.

"Whereby I shall be fulfilling your previous commands, in setting up an establishment for myself and living like a gentleman," returned Giovanni, with a bitter laugh. "It is nothing to me—if you turn me out. I am rich, as you justly observed."

"You will have the more leisure to lead the life you like best," retorted the Prince; "to hang about in society, to go where you please, to make love to——" the old man stopped a moment. His son was watching him fiercely, his hand clenched upon the table, his face as white as death.

"To whom?" he asked, with a terrible effort to be calm.

"Do you think I am afraid of you? Do you think your father is less strong or less fierce than you? To whom?" cried the angry old man, his whole pent-up fury bursting out as he rose suddenly to his feet. "To whom but to Corona d'Astrardente—to whom else should you make love?—wasting your youth and life upon a mad passion! All Rome says it—I will say it too!"

"You have said it indeed," answered Giovanni, in a very low voice. He remained seated at the table, not moving a muscle, his face as the face of the dead. "You have said it, and in insulting that lady you have said a thing not worthy for one of our blood to say. God help me to remember that you are my father," he added, trembling suddenly.

"Hold!" said the Prince, who, with all his ambition for his son, and his hasty temper, was an honest gentleman. "I never insulted her—she is above suspicion. It is you who are wasting your life in a hopeless passion for her. See, I speak calmly——"

"What does 'all Rome say'?" asked Giovanni, inter-

rupting him. He was still deadly pale, but his hand was unclenched, and as he spoke he rested his head upon it, looking down at the tablecloth.

"Everybody says that you are in love with the Astrardente, and that her husband is beginning to notice it."

"It is enough, sir," said Giovanni, in low tones. "I will consider this marriage you propose. Give me until the spring to decide."

"That is a long time," remarked the old Prince, resuming his seat and beginning to peel an orange, as though nothing had happened. He was far from being calm, but his son's sudden change of manner had disarmed his anger. He was passionate and impetuous, thoughtless in his language, and tyrannical in his determination; but he loved Giovanni dearly for all that.

"I do not think it long," said Giovanni, thoughtfully. "I give you my word that I will seriously consider the marriage. If it is possible for me to marry Donna Tullia, I will obey you, and I will give you my answer before Easter-day. I cannot do more."

"I sincerely hope you will take my advice," answered Saracinesca, now entirely pacified. "If you cannot make up your mind to the match, I may be able to find something else. There is Bianca Valdarno—she will have a quarter of the estate."

"She is so very ugly," objected Giovanni, quietly. He was still much agitated, but he answered his father mechanically.

"That is true—they are all ugly, those Valdarni. Besides, they are of Tuscan origin. What do you say to the little Rocca girl? She has great *chic*; she was brought up in England. She is pretty enough."

"I am afraid she would be extravagant."

"She could spend her own money then; it will be sufficient."

"It is better to be on the safe side," said Giovanni. Suddenly he changed his position, and again looked at his father. "I am sorry we always quarrel about this

question," he said. "I do not really want to marry, but I wish to oblige you, and I will try. Why do we always come to words over it?"

"I am sure I do not know," said the Prince, with a pleasant smile. "I have such a diabolical temper, I suppose."

"And I have inherited it," answered Don Giovanni, with a laugh that was meant to be cheerful. "But I quite see your point of view. I suppose I ought to settle in life by this time."

"Seriously, I think so, my son. Here is to your future happiness," said the old gentleman, touching his glass with his lips.

"And here is to our future peace," returned Giovanni, also drinking.

"We never really quarrel, Giovanni, do we?" said his father. Every trace of anger had vanished. His strong face beamed with an affectionate smile that was like the sun after a thunderstorm.

"No, indeed," answered his son, cordially. "We cannot afford to quarrel; there are only two of us left."

"That is what I always say," assented the Prince, beginning to eat the orange he had carefully peeled since he had grown calm. "If two men like you and me, my boy, can thoroughly agree, there is nothing we cannot accomplish; whereas if we go against each other——"

"*Justitia non fit, cœlum vero ruet,*" suggested Giovanni, in parody of the proverb.

"I am a little rusty in my Latin, Giovannino," said the old gentleman.

"Heaven is turned upside down, but justice is not done."

"No; one is never just when one is angry. But storms clear the sky, as they say up at Saracinesca."

"By the bye, have you heard whether that question of the timber has been settled yet?" asked Giovanni.

"Of course—I had forgotten. I will tell you all about it," answered his father, cheerfully. So they chatted peacefully for another half-hour; and no one would have

thought, in looking at them, that such fierce passions had been roused, nor that one of them felt as though his death-warrant had been signed. When they separated, Giovanni went to his own rooms, and locked himself in.

He had assumed an air of calmness which was not real before he left his father. In truth he was violently agitated. He was as fiery as his father, but his passions were of greater strength and of longer duration; for his mother had been a Spaniard, and something of the melancholy of her country had entered into his soul, giving depth and durability to the hot Italian character he inherited from his father. Nor did the latter suspect the cause of his son's sudden change of tone in regard to the marriage. It was precisely the difference in temperament which made Giovanni incomprehensible to the old Prince.

Giovanni had realised for more than a year past that he loved Corona d'Astrardente. Contrary to the custom of young men in his position, he determined from the first that he would never let her know it; and herein lay the key to all his actions. He had, as he thought, made a point of behaving to her on all occasions as he behaved to the other women he met in the world, and he believed that he had skilfully concealed his passion from the world and from the woman he loved. He had acted on all occasions with a circumspection which was not natural to him, and for which he undeniably deserved great credit. It had been a year of constant struggles, constant efforts at self-control, constant determination that, if possible, he would overcome his instincts. It was true that, when occasion offered, he had permitted himself the pleasure of talking to Corona d'Astrardente—talking, he well knew, upon the most general subjects, but finding at each interview some new point of sympathy. Never, he could honestly say, had he approached in that time the subject of love, nor even the equally dangerous topic of friendship, the discussion of which leads to so many ruinous experiments. He had never by look or word

sought to interest the dark Duchessa in his doings nor in himself; he had talked of books, of politics, of social questions, but never of himself nor of herself. He had faithfully kept the promise he had made in his heart, that since he was so unfortunate as to love the wife of another—a woman of such nobility that even in Rome no breath had been breathed against her—he would keep his unfortunate passion to himself. Astrardente was old, almost decrepit, in spite of his magnificent wig; Corona was but two-and-twenty years of age. If ever her husband died, Giovanni would present himself before the world as her suitor; meanwhile he would do nothing to injure her self-respect nor to disturb her peace—he hardly flattered himself he could do that, for he loved her truly—and above all, he would do nothing to compromise the unsullied reputation she enjoyed. She might never love him; but he was strong and patient, and would do her the only honour it was in his power to do her, by waiting patiently.

But Giovanni had not considered that he was the most conspicuous man in society; that there were many who watched his movements, in hopes he would come their way; that when he entered a room, many had noticed that, though he never went directly to Corona's side, he always looked first towards her, and never omitted to speak with her in the course of an evening. Keen observers, the jays of society who hover about the eagle's nest, had not failed to observe a look of annoyance on Giovanni's face when he did not succeed in being alone by Corona's side for at least a few minutes; and Del Perice, who was a sort of news-carrier in Rome, had now and then hinted that Giovanni was in love. People had repeated his hints, as he intended they should, with the illuminating wit peculiar to tale-bearers, and the story had gone abroad accordingly. True, there was not a man in Rome bold enough to allude to the matter in Giovanni's presence, even if any one had seen any advantage in so doing; but such things do not remain hidden. His own

father had told him in a fit of anger, and the blow had produced its effect.

Giovanni sat down in a deep easy-chair in his own room, and thought over the situation. His first impulse had been to be furiously angry with his father; but the latter having instantly explained that there was nothing to be said against the Duchessa, Giovanni's anger against the Prince had turned against himself. It was bitter to think that all his self-denial, all his many and prolonged efforts to conceal his love, had been of no avail. He cursed his folly and imprudence, while wondering how it was possible that the story should have got abroad. He did not waver in his determination to hide his inclinations, to destroy the impression he had so unwillingly produced. The first means he found in his way seemed the best. To marry Donna Tullia at once, before the story of his affection for the Duchessa had gathered force, would, he thought, effectually shut the mouths of the gossips. From one point of view it was a noble thought, the determination to sacrifice himself wholly and for ever, rather than permit his name to be mentioned ever so innocently in connection with the woman he loved; to root out utterly his love for her by seriously engaging his faith to another, and keeping that engagement with all the strength of fidelity he knew himself to possess. He would save Corona from annoyance, and her name from the scandal-mongers; and if any one ever dared to mention the story—

Giovanni rose to his feet and mechanically took a fencing-foil from the wall, as he often did for practice. If any one mentioned the story, he thought, he had the means to silence them, quickly and for ever. His eyes flashed suddenly at the idea of action—any action, even fighting, which might be distantly connected with Corona. Then he tossed down the rapier and threw himself into his chair, and sat quite still, staring at the trophies of armour upon the wall opposite.

He could not do it. To wrong one woman for the sake

of shielding another was not in his power. People might laugh at him and call him Quixotic, forsooth, because he would not do like every one else and make a marriage of convenience—of propriety. Propriety! when his heart was breaking within him; when every fibre of his strong frame quivered with the strain of passion; when his aching eyes saw only one face, and his ears echoed the words she had spoken that very afternoon! Propriety indeed! Propriety was good enough for cold-blooded dullards. Donna Tullia had done him no harm that he should marry her for propriety's sake, and make her life miserable for thirty, forty, fifty years. It would be propriety rather for him to go away, to bury himself in the ends of the earth, until he could forget Corona d'Astrardente, her splendid eyes, and her deep sweet voice.

He had pledged his father his word that he would consider the marriage, and he was to give his answer before Easter. That was a long time yet. He would consider it; and if by Eastertide he had forgotten Corona, he would—he laughed aloud in his silent room, and the sound of his voice startled him from his reverie.

Forget? Did such men as he forget? Other men did. What were they made of? They did not love such women, perhaps; that was the reason they forgot. Any one could forget poor Donna Tullia. And yet how was it possible to forget if one loved truly?

Giovanni had never believed himself in love before. He had known one or two women who had attracted him strongly; but he had soon found out that he had no real sympathy with them, that though they amused him they had no charm for him—most of all, that he could not imagine himself tied to any one of them for life without conceiving the situation horrible in the extreme. To his independent nature the idea of such ties was repugnant: he knew himself too courteous to break through the civilities of life with a wife he did not love; but he knew also that in marrying a woman who was indifferent to him, he would be engaging to play a part for life in the most

fearful of all plays—the part of a man who strives to bear bravely the galling of a chain he is too honourable to break.

It was four o'clock in the morning when Giovanni went to bed; and even then he slept little, for his dreams were disturbed. Once he thought he stood upon a green lawn with a sword in his hand, and the blood upon its point, his opponent lying at his feet. Again, he thought he was alone in a vast drawing-room, and a dark woman came and spoke gently to him, saying, "Marry her for my sake." He awoke with a groan. The church clocks were striking eight, and the meet was at eleven, five miles beyond the Porta Pia. Giovanni started up and rang for his servant.

CHAPTER IV.

It was a beautiful day, and half Rome turned out to see the meet, not because it was in any way different from other meets, but because it chanced that society had a fancy to attend it. Society is very like a fever patient in a delirium; it is rarely accountable for its actions; it scarcely ever knows what it is saying; and occasionally, without the least warning or premeditation, it leaps out of bed at an early hour of the morning and rushes frantically in pursuit of its last hallucination. The main difference is, that whereas a man in a fever has a nurse, society has none.

On the present occasion every one had suddenly conceived the idea of going to the meet, and the long road beyond the Porta Pia was dotted for miles with equipages of every description, from the four-in-hand of Princee Valdarno to the humble donkey-cart of the caterer who sells messes of boiled beans, and bread and cheese, and salad to the grooms—an institution not connected in the English mind with hunting. One after another the vehicles rolled out along the road, past Sant' Agnese, down the