

Ferice's obscure descent was in all probability purely Italian, and he had inherited the common instinct in matters of art which is a part of the Italian birthright. He had recognised Gouache's wonderful talent, and had first brought Donna Tullia to his studio—a matter of little difficulty when she had learned that the young artist had already a reputation. It pleased her to fancy that by telling him to paint her portrait she might pose as his patroness, and hereafter reap the reputation of having influenced his career. For fashion, and the desire to be the representative of fashion, led Donna Tullia hither and thither as a lapdog is led by a string; and there is nothing more in the fashion than to patronise a fashionable portrait-painter.

But after Anastase Gouache had thus delivered himself of his views upon Del Ferice and the faculty of artistic comparison, the conversation languished, and Donna Tullia grew restless. "She had sat enough," she said; and as her expression was not favourable to the portrait, Anastase did not contradict her, but presently suffered her to depart in peace with her devoted adorer at her heels. And when they were gone, Anastase lighted a cigarette, and took a piece of charcoal and sketched a caricature of Donna Tullia in a liberty cap, in a fine theatrical attitude, invoking the aid of Del Ferice, who appeared as the Angel of Death, with the guillotine in the background. Having put the finishing touches to this work of art, Anastase locked his studio and went to breakfast, humming an air from the "Belle Hélène."

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## CHAPTER VIII.

When Corona reached home she went to her own small boudoir, with the intention of remaining there for an hour if she could do so without being disturbed. There was a prospect of this; for on inquiry she ascertained that her

husband was not yet dressed, and his dressing took a very long time. He had a cosmopolitan valet, who alone of living men understood the art of fitting the artificial and the natural Astrardente together. Corona believed this man to be an accomplished scoundrel; but she never had any proof that he was anything worse than a very clever servant, thoroughly unscrupulous where his master's interests or his own were concerned. The old Duca believed in him sincerely and trusted him alone, feeling that since he could never be a hero in his valet's eyes, he might as well take advantage of that misfortune in order to gain a confident.

Corona found three or four letters upon her table, and sat down to read them, letting her fur mantle drop to the floor, and putting her small feet out towards the fire, for the pavement of the church had been cold.

She was destined to pass an eventful day, it seemed. One of the letters was from Giovanni Saracinesca. It was the first time he had ever written to her, and she was greatly surprised on finding his name at the foot of the page. He wrote a strong clear handwriting, entirely without adornment of penmanship, close and regular and straight: there was an air of determination about it which was sympathetic, and a conciseness of expression which startled Corona, as though she had heard the man himself speaking to her.

"I write, dear Duchessa, because I covet your good opinion, and my motive is therefore before all things an interested one. I would not have you think that I had idly asked your advice about a thing so important to me as my marriage, in order to discard your counsel at the first opportunity. There was too much reason in the view you took of the matter to admit of my not giving your opinion all the weight I could, even if I had not already determined upon the very course you advised. Circumstances have occurred, however, which have almost induced me to change my mind. I have had an inter-

view with my father, who has put the matter very plainly before me. I hardly know how to tell you this, but I feel that I owe it to you to explain myself, however much you may despise me for what I am going to say. It is very simple, nevertheless. My father has informed me that by my conduct I have caused my name to be coupled in the mouth of the gossips with that of a person very dear to me, but whom I am unfortunately prevented from marrying. He has convinced me that I owe to this lady, who, I confess, takes no interest whatever in me, the only reparation possible to be made—that of taking a wife, and thus publicly demonstrating that there was never any truth in what has been said. As a marriage will probably be forced upon me some day, it is as well to let things take their course at once, in order that a step so disagreeable to myself may at least distantly profit one whom I love in removing me from the appearance of being a factor in her life. The gossip about me has never reached your ears, but if it should, you will be the better able to understand my position.

“Do not think, therefore, that if I do not follow your advice I am altogether inconsistent, or that I wantonly presumed to consult you without any intention of being guided by you. Forgive me also this letter, which I am impelled to write from somewhat mean motives of vanity, in the hope of not altogether forfeiting your opinion; and especially I beg you to believe that I am at all times the most obedient of your servants,

“GIOVANNI SARACINESCA.”

Of what use was it that she had that morning determined to forget Giovanni, since he had the power of thus bringing himself before her by means of a scrap of paper? Corona's hand closed upon the letter convulsively, and for a moment the room seemed to swim around her.

So there was some one whom he loved, some one for whose fair name he was willing to sacrifice himself even to the extent of marrying against his will. Some one,

too, who not only did not love him, but took no interest whatever in him. Those were his own words, and they must be true, for he never lied. That accounted for his accompanying Donna Tullia to the picnic. He was going to marry her after all. To save the woman he loved so hopelessly from the mere suspicion of being loved by him, he was going to tie himself for life to the first who would marry him. That would never prevent the gossips from saying that he loved this other woman as much as ever. It could do her no great harm, since she took no interest whatever in him. Who could she be, this cold creature, whom even Giovanni could not move to interest? It was absurd—the letter was absurd—the whole thing was absurd! None but a madman would think of pursuing such a course; and why should he think it necessary to confide his plans—his very foolish plans—to her, Corona d'Astrardente,—why? Ah, Giovanni, how different things might have been!

Corona rose angrily from her seat and leaned against the broad chimney-piece, and looked at the clock—it was nearly mid-day. He might marry whom he pleased, and be welcome—what was it to her? He might marry and sacrifice himself if he pleased—what was it to her?

She thought of her own life. She, too, had sacrificed herself; she, too, had tied herself for life to a man she despised in her heart, and she had done it for an object she had thought good. She looked steadily at the clock, for she would not give way, nor bend her head and cry bitter tears again; but the tears were in her eyes, nevertheless.

“Giovanni, you must not do it—you must not do it!” Her lips formed the words without speaking them, and repeated the thought again and again. Her heart beat fast and her cheeks flushed darkly. She spread out the crumpled letter and read it once more. As she read, the most intense curiosity seized her to know who this woman might be whom Giovanni so loved; and with her curiosity there was a new feeling—an utterly hateful and

hating passion—something so strong, that it suddenly dried her tears and sent the blood from her cheeks back to her heart. Her white hand was clenched, and her eyes were on fire. Ah, if she could only find that woman he loved! if she could only see her dead—dead with Giovanni Saracinesca there upon the floor before her! As she thought of it, she stamped her foot upon the thick carpet, and her face grew paler. She did not know what it was that she felt, but it completely overmastered her. Padre Filippo would be pleased, she thought, for she knew how in that moment she hated Giovanni Saracinesca.

With a sudden impulse she again sat down and opened the letter next to her hand. It was a gossiping epistle from a friend in Paris, full of stories of the day, exclamations upon fashion and all kinds of emptiness; she was about to throw it down impatiently and take up the next when her eyes caught Giovanni's name.

"Of course it is not true that Saracinesca is to marry Madame Mayer, . . ." were the words she read. But that was all. There chanced to have been just room for the sentence at the foot of the page, and by the time her friend had turned over the leaf, she had already forgotten what she had written, and was running on with a different idea. It seemed as though Corona were haunted by Giovanni at every turn; but she had not reached the end yet, for one letter still remained. She tore open the envelope, and found that the contents consisted of a few lines penned in a small and irregular hand, without signature. There was an air of disguise about the whole, which was unpleasant; it was written upon a common sort of paper, and had come through the city post. It ran as follows:—

"The Duchessa d'Astrardente reminds us of the fable of the dog in the horse's manger, for she can neither eat herself nor let others eat. She will not accept Don Giovanni Saracinesca's devotion, but she effectually prevents him from fulfilling his engagements to others."

If Corona had been in her ordinary mood, she would very likely have laughed at the anonymous communication. She had formerly received more than one passionate declaration, not signed indeed, but accompanied always by some clue to the identity of the writer, and she had carelessly thrown them into the fire. But there was no such indication here whereby she might discover who it was who had undertaken to criticise her, to cast upon her so unjust an accusation. Moreover, she was very angry and altogether thrown out of her usually calm humour. Her first impulse was to go to her husband, and in the strength of her innocence to show him the letter. Then she laughed bitterly as she thought how the selfish old dandy would scoff at her sensitiveness, and how utterly incapable he would be of discovering the offender or of punishing the offence. Then again her face was grave, and she asked herself whether it was true that she was innocent; whether she were not really to be blamed, if perhaps she had really prevented Giovanni from marrying Donna Tullia.

But if that were true, she must herself be the woman he spoke of in his letter. Any other woman would have suspected as much. Corona went to the window, and for an instant there was a strange light of pleasure in her face. Then she grew very thoughtful, and her whole mood changed. She could not conceive it possible that Giovanni so loved her as to marry for her sake. Besides, no one could ever have breathed a word of him in connection with herself—until this abominable anonymous letter was written.

The thought that she might, after all, be the "person very dear to him," the one who "took no interest whatever in him," had nevertheless crossed her mind, and had given her for one moment a sense of wild and indescribable pleasure. Then she remembered what she had felt before; how angry, how utterly beside herself, she had been at the thought of another woman being loved by him, and she suddenly understood that she was

jealous of her. The very thought revived in her the belief that it was not she herself who was thus influencing the life of Giovanni Saracinesca, but another, and she sat silent and pale.

Of course it was another! What had she done, what word had she spoken, whereby the world might pretend to believe that she controlled this man's actions? "Fulfilling his engagements," the letter said, too. It must have been written by an ignorant person—by some one who had no idea of what was passing, and who wrote at random, hoping to touch a sensitive chord, to do some harm, to inflict some pain, in petty vengeance for a fancied slight. But in her heart, though she crushed down the instinct, she would have believed the anonymous jest well founded, for the sake of believing, too, that Giovanni Saracinesca was ready to lay his life at her feet—although in that belief she would have felt that she was committing a mortal sin.

She went back to her interview that morning with Padre Filippo, and thought over all she had said and all he had answered; how she had been willing to admit the possibility of Giovanni's love, and how sternly the confessor had ruled down the clause, and told her there should never arise such a doubt in her mind; how she had scorned herself for being capable of seeking love where there was none, and how she had sworn that there should be no perhaps in the matter. It seemed very hard to do right, but she would try to see where the right lay. In the first place, she should burn the anonymous letter, and never condescend to think of it; and she should also burn Giovanni's, because it would be an injustice to him to keep it. She looked once more at the unsigned, ill-written page, and, with a little scornful laugh, threw it from where she sat into the fire with its envelope; then she took Giovanni's note, and would have done the same, but her hand trembled, and the crumpled bit of paper fell upon the hearth. She rose from her chair quickly, and took it up again, kneeling

before the fire, like some beautiful dark priestess of old feeding the flames of a sacred altar. She smoothed the paper out once more, and once more read the even characters, and looked long at the signature, and back again to the writing.

"This lady, who, I confess, takes no interest whatever in me. . . ."

"How could he say it!" she exclaimed aloud. "Oh, if I knew who she was!" With an impatient movement she thrust the letter among the coals, and watched the fire curl it and burn it, from white to brown and from brown to black, till it was all gone. Then she rose to her feet and left the room.

Her husband certainly did not guess that the Duchessa d'Astrardente had spent so eventful a morning; and if any one had told him that his wife had been through a dozen stages of emotion, he would have laughed, and would have told his informant that Corona was not of the sort who experience violent passions. That evening they went to the opera together, and the old man was in an unusually cheerful humour. A new coat had just arrived from Paris, and the padding had attained a higher degree of scientific perfection than heretofore. Corona also looked more beautiful than even her husband ever remembered to have seen her; she wore a perfectly simple gown of black satin without the smallest relief of colour, and upon her neck the famous Astrardente necklace of pearls, three strings of even thickness, each jewel exquisitely white and just lighted in its shadow by a delicate pink tinge—such a necklace as an empress might have worn. In the raven masses of her hair there was not the least ornament, nor did any flower enhance the rich blackness of its silken coils. It would be impossible to imagine greater simplicity than Corona showed in her dress, but it would be hard to conceive of any woman who possessed by virtue of severe beauty a more indubitable right to dispense with ornament.

The theatre was crowded. There was a performance

of "Norma," for which several celebrated artists had been engaged—an occurrence so rare in Rome, that the theatre was absolutely full. The Astrardente box was upon the second tier, just where the amphitheatre began to curve. There was room in it for four or five persons to see the stage.

The Duchessa and her husband arrived in the middle of the first act, and remained alone until it was over. Corona was extremely fond of "Norma," and after she was seated never took her eyes from the stage. Astrardente, on the other hand, maintained his character as a man of no illusions, and swept the house with his small opera-glass. The instrument itself was like him, and would have been appropriate for a fine lady of the First Empire; it was of mother-of-pearl, made very small and light, the metal-work upon it heavily gilt and ornamented with turquoises. The old man glanced from time to time at the stage, and then again settled himself to the study of the audience, which interested him far more than the opera.

"Every human being you ever heard of is here," he remarked at the end of the first act. "Really I should think you would find it worth while to look at your magnificent fellow-creatures, my dear."

Corona looked slowly round the house. She had excellent eyes, and never used a glass. She saw the same faces she had seen for five years, the same occasional flash of beauty, the same average number of over-dressed women, the same paint, the same feathers, the same jewels. She saw opposite to her Madame Mayer, with the elderly countess whom she patronised for the sake of deafness, and found convenient as a sort of flying chaperon. The countess could not hear much of the music, but she was fond of the world and liked to be seen, and she could not hear at all what Del Ferice said in an undertone to Madame Mayer. Sufficient to her were the good things of the day; the rest was in no way her business. There was Valdarno in the club-box, with a knot of other men

of his own stamp. There were the Rocca, mother and daughter and son—a boy of eighteen—and a couple of men in the back of the box. Everybody was there, as her husband had said; and as she dropped her glance toward the stalls, she was aware of Giovanni Saracinesca's black eyes looking anxiously up to her. A faint smile crossed her serene face, and almost involuntarily she nodded to him and then looked away. Many men were watching her, and bowed as she glanced at them, and she bent her head to each; but there was no smile for any save Giovanni, and when she looked again to where he had been standing with his back to the stage, he was gone from his place.

"They are the same old things," said Astrardente, "but they are still very amusing. Madame Mayer always seems to get the wrong man into her box. She would give all those diamonds to have Giovanni Saracinesca instead of that newsmonger fellow. If he comes here I will send him across."

"Perhaps she likes Del Ferice," suggested Corona.

"He is a good lapdog—a very good dog," answered her husband. "He cannot bite at all, and his bark is so soft that you would take it for the mewling of a kitten. He fetches and carries admirably."

"Those are good points, but not interesting ones. He is very tiresome with his eternal puns and insipid compliments, and his gossip."

"But he is so very harmless," answered Astrardente, with compassionate scorn. "He is incapable of doing an injury. Donna Tullia is wise in adopting him as her slave. She would not be so safe with Saracinesca, for instance. If you feel the need of an admirer, my dear, take Del Ferice. I have no objection to him."

"Why should I need admirers?" asked Corona, quietly.

"I was merely jesting, my love. Is not your own husband the greatest of your admirers, and your devoted slave into the bargain?" Old Astrardente's face twisted itself into the semblance of a smile, as he leaned towards

his young wife, lowering his cracked voice to a thin whisper. He was genuinely in love with her, and lost no opportunity of telling her so. She smiled a little wearily.

"You are very good to me," she said. She had often wondered how it was that this aged creature, who had never been faithful to any attachment in his life for five months, did really seem to love her just as he had done for five years. It was perhaps the greatest triumph she could have attained, though she never thought of it in that light; but though she could not respect her husband very much, she could not think unkindly of him—for, as she said, he was very good to her. She often reproached herself because he wearied her; she believed that she should have taken more pleasure in his admiration.

"I cannot help being good to you, my angel," he said. "How could I be otherwise? Do I not love you most passionately?"

"Indeed, I think so," Corona answered. As she spoke there was a knock at the door. Her heart leaped wildly, and she turned a little pale.

"The devil seize these visitors!" muttered old Astrardente, annoyed beyond measure at being interrupted when making love to his wife. "I suppose we must let them in?"

"I suppose so," assented the Duchessa, with forced calm. Her husband opened the door, and Giovanni Saracinesca entered, hat in hand.

"Sit down," said Astrardente, rather harshly.

"I trust I am not disturbing you," replied Giovanni, still standing. He was somewhat surprised at the old man's inhospitable tone.

"Oh no; not in the least," said the latter, quickly regaining his composure. "Pray sit down; the act will begin in a moment."

Giovanni established himself upon the chair immediately behind the Duchessa. He had come to talk, and he anticipated that during the second act he would have an excellent opportunity.

"I hear you enjoyed yourselves yesterday," said Corona, turning her head so as to speak more easily.

"Indeed!" Giovanni answered, and a shade of annoyance crossed his face. "And who was your informant, Duchessa?"

"Donna Tullia. I met her this morning. She said you amused them all—kept them laughing the whole day."

"What an extraordinary statement!" exclaimed Giovanni. "It shows how one may unconsciously furnish matter for mirth. I do not recollect having talked much to any one. It was a noisy party enough, however."

"Perhaps Donna Tullia spoke ironically," suggested Corona. "Do you like 'Norma'?"

"Oh yes; one opera is as good as another. There goes the curtain."

The act began, and for some minutes no one in the box spoke. Presently there was a burst of orchestral music. Giovanni leaned forward so that his face was close behind Corona. He could speak without being heard by Astrardente.

"Did you receive my letter?" he asked. Corona made an almost imperceptible inclination of her head, but did not speak.

"Do you understand my position?" he asked again. He could not see her face, and for some seconds she made no sign; at last she moved her head again, but this time to express a negative.

"It is simple enough, it seems to me," said Giovanni, bending his brows.

Corona found that by turning a little she could still look at the stage, and at the same time speak to the man behind her.

"How can I judge?" she said. "You have not told me all. Why do you ask me to judge whether you are right?"

"I could not do it if you thought me wrong," he answered shortly.

The Duchessa suddenly thought of that other woman

for whom the man who asked her advice was willing to sacrifice his life.

"You attach an astonishing degree of importance to my opinion," she said very coldly, and turned her head from him.

"There is no one so well able to give an opinion," said Giovanni, insisting.

Corona was offended. She interpreted the speech to mean that since she had sacrificed her life to the old man on the opposite side of the box, she was able to judge whether Giovanni would do wisely in making a marriage of convenience, for the sake of an end which even to her mind seemed visionary. She turned quickly upon him, and there was an angry gleam in her eyes.

"Pray do not introduce the subject of my life," she said haughtily.

Giovanni was too much astonished to answer her at once. He had indeed not intended the least reference to her marriage.

"You have entirely misunderstood me," he said presently.

"Then you must express yourself more clearly," she replied. She would have felt very guilty to be thus talking to Giovanni, as she would not have talked before her husband, had she not felt that it was upon Giovanni's business, and that the matter discussed in no way concerned herself. As for Saracinesca, he was in a dangerous position, and was rapidly losing his self-control. He was too near to her, his heart was beating too fast, the blood was throbbing in his temples, and he was stung by being misunderstood.

"It is not possible for me to express myself more clearly," he answered. "I am suffering for having told you too little when I dare not tell you all. I make no reference to your marriage when I speak to you of my own. Forgive me; I will not refer to the matter again."

Corona felt again that strange thrill, half of pain, half of pleasure, and the lights of the theatre seemed moving

before her uncertainly, as things look when one falls from a height. Almost unconsciously she spoke, hardly knowing that she turned her head, and that her dark eyes rested upon Giovanni's pale face.

"And yet there must be some reason why you tell me that little, and why you do not tell me more." When she had spoken, she would have given all the world to have taken back her words. It was too late. Giovanni answered in a low thick voice that sounded as though he were choking, his face grew white, and his teeth seemed almost to chatter as though he were cold, but his eyes shone like black stars in the shadow of the box.

"There is every reason. You are the woman I love."

Corona did not move for several seconds, as though not comprehending what he had said. Then she suddenly shivered, and her eyelids drooped as she leaned back in her chair. Her fingers relaxed their tight hold upon her fan, and the thing fell rattling upon the floor of the box.

Old Astrardente, who had taken no notice of the pair, being annoyed at Giovanni's visit, and much interested in the proceedings of Madame Mayer in the box opposite, heard the noise, and stooped with considerable alacrity to pick up the fan which lay at his feet.

"You are not well, my love," he said quickly, as he observed his wife's unusual pallor.

"It is nothing; it will pass," she murmured, with a terrible effort. Then, as though she had not said enough, she added, "There must be a draught here; I have a chill."

Giovanni had sat like a statue, utterly overcome by the sense of his own folly and rashness, as well as by the shock of having so miserably failed to keep the secret he dreaded to reveal. On hearing Corona's voice, he rose suddenly, as from a dream.

"Forgive me," he said hurriedly, "I have just remembered a most important engagement——"

"Do not mention it," said Astrardente, sourly. Giovanni bowed to the Duchessa and left the box. She did not look at him as he went away.

"We had better go home, my angel," said the old man. "You have got a bad chill."

"Oh no, I would rather stay. It is nothing, and the best part of the opera is to come." Corona spoke quietly enough. Her strong nerves had already recovered from the shock she had experienced, and she could command her voice. She did not want to go home; on the contrary, the brilliant lights and the music served for a time to soothe her. If there had been a ball that night she would have gone to it; she would have done anything that would take her thoughts from herself. Her husband looked at her curiously. The suspicion crossed his mind that Don Giovanni had said something which had either frightened or offended her, but on second thoughts the theory seemed absurd. He regarded Saracinesca as little more than a mere acquaintance of his wife's.

"As you please, my love," he answered, drawing his chair a little nearer to hers. "I am glad that fellow is gone. We can talk at our ease now."

"Yes; I am glad he is gone. We can talk now," repeated Corona, mechanically.

"I thought his excuse slightly conventional, to say the least of it," remarked Astrardente. "An important engagement! — just a little *banal*. However, any excuse was good enough which took him away."

"Did he say that?" asked Corona. "I did not hear. Of course, any excuse would do, as you say."

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## CHAPTER IX.

Giovanni left the theatre at once, alone, and on foot. He was very much agitated. He had done suddenly and unawares the thing of all others he had determined never to do; his resolutions had been broken down and carried away as an ineffectual barrier is swept to the sea

by the floods of spring. His heart had spoken in spite of him, and in speaking had silenced every prompting of reason. He blamed himself bitterly, as he strode out across the deserted bridge of Sant' Angelo and into the broad gloom beyond, where the street widens from the fortress to the entrance of the three Borghi: he walked on and on, finding at every step fresh reason for self-reproach, and trying to understand what he had done. He paused at the end of the open piazza and looked down towards the black rushing river which he could hear, but hardly see; he turned into the silent Borgo Santo Spirito, and passed along the endless wall of the great hospital up to the colonnades, and still wandering on, he came to the broad steps of St. Peter's and sat down, alone in the darkness, at the foot of the stupendous pile.

He was perhaps not so much to blame as he was willing to allow in his just anger against himself. Corona had tempted him sorely in that last question she had put to him. She had not known, she had not even faintly guessed what she was doing, for her own brain was intoxicated with a new and indescribable sensation which had left no room for reflection nor for weighing the force of words. But Giovanni, who had been willing to give up everything, even to his personal liberty, for the sake of concealing his love, would not allow himself any argument in extenuation of what he had done. He had had but very few affairs of the heart in his life, and they had been for the most part very insignificant, and his experience was limited. Even now it never entered his mind to imagine that Corona would condone his offence; he felt sure that she was deeply wounded, and that his next meeting with her would be a terrible ordeal—so terrible, indeed, that he doubted whether he had the courage to meet her at all. His love was so great, and its object so sacred to him, that he hesitated to conceive himself loved in return; perhaps if he had been able to understand that Corona loved him he would have left Rome for ever, rather than trouble her peace by his presence.