

find out what secrets of State I have been confiding. You had better prepare an answer, for you can hardly inform Donna Tullia and her set that I have been calling them a parcel of—weak and ill-advised people. They might take offence—they might even call me by bad names,—fancy how very terribly that would afflict me! Good night, Giovanni—my greetings to your father.”

The Cardinal nodded, but did not offer his hand. He knew that Giovanni hated to kiss his ring, and he had too much tact to press the ceremonial etiquette upon any one whom he desired to influence. But he nodded graciously, and receiving his cloak from the gentleman who accompanied him and who had waited at a respectful distance, the statesman passed out of the great doorway, where the double line of torch-bearers stood ready to accompany him down the grand staircase to his carriage, in accordance with the custom of those days.

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## CHAPTER X.

When he was alone, Giovanni retraced his steps, and again took up his position near the entrance to the reception-rooms. He had matter for reflection in the interview which had just ended; and, having nothing better to do while he waited for Corona, he thought about what had happened. He was not altogether pleased at the interest his marriage excited in high quarters; he hated interference, and he regarded Cardinal Antonelli's advice in such a matter as an interference of the most unwarrantable kind. Neither he himself nor his father were men who sought counsel from without, for independence in action was with them a family tradition, as independence of thought was in their race a hereditary quality. To think that if he, Giovanni Saracinesca, chose to marry any woman whatsoever, any one, no matter how exalted

in station, should dare to express approval or disapproval was a shock to every inborn and cultivated prejudice in his nature. He had nearly quarrelled with his own father for seeking to influence his matrimonial projects; it was not likely that he would suffer Cardinal Antonelli to interfere with them. If Giovanni had really made up his mind—had firmly determined to ask the hand of Donna Tullia—it is more than probable that the statesman's advice would not only have failed signally in preventing the match, but by the very opposition it would have aroused in Giovanni's heart it would have had the effect of throwing him into the arms of a party which already desired his adhesion, and which, under his guidance, might have become as formidable as it was previously insignificant. But the great Cardinal was probably well informed, and his words had not fallen upon a barren soil. Giovanni had vacillated sadly in trying to come to a decision. His first Quixotic impulse to marry Madame Mayer, in order to show the world that he cared nothing for Corona d'Astrardente, had proved itself absurd, even to his impetuous intelligence. The growing antipathy he felt for Donna Tullia had made his marriage with her appear in the light of a disagreeable duty, and his rashness in confessing his love for Corona had so disturbed his previous conceptions that marriage no longer seemed a duty at all. What had been but a few days before almost a fixed resolution, had dwindled till it seemed an impracticable and even a useless scheme. When he had arrived at the Palazzo Frangipani that evening, he had very nearly forgotten Donna Tullia, and had quite determined that whatever his father might say he would not give the promised answer before Easter. By the time the Cardinal had left him, he had decided that no power on earth should induce him to marry Madame Mayer. He did not take the trouble of saying to himself that he would marry no one else.

The Cardinal's words had struck deep, in a deep nature. Giovanni had given Del Ferice a very fair exposition of

the views he believed himself to hold, on the day when they had walked together after Donna Tullia's picnic. He believed himself a practical man, loyal to the temporal power by principle rather than by any sort of enthusiastic devotion; not desirous of any great change, because any change that might reasonably be expected would be bad for his own vested interests; not prejudiced for any policy save that of peace—preferring, indeed, with Cicero, the most unjust peace to the most just war; tenacious of old customs, and not particularly inquisitive concerning ideas of progress,—on the whole, Giovanni thought himself what his father had been in his youth, and more or less what he hoped his sons, if he ever had any, would be after him.

But there was more in him than all this, and at the first distant sound of battle he felt the spirit stir within him, for his real nature was brave and loyal, unselfish and devoted, instinctively sympathizing with the weak and hating the lukewarm. He had told Del Ferice that he believed he would fight as a matter of principle: as he leaned against the marble pillar of the door in the Palazzo Frangipani, he wished the fight had already begun.

Waiting there, and staring into the moving crowd, he was aware of a young man with pale and delicate features and black hair, who stood quietly by his side, and seemed like himself an idle though not uninterested spectator of the scene. Giovanni glanced once at the young fellow, and thought he recognised him, and glancing again, he met his earnest look, and saw that it was Anastase Gouache, the painter. Giovanni knew him slightly, for Gouache was regarded as a rising celebrity, and, thanks to Donna Tullia, was invited to most of the great receptions and balls of that season, though he was not yet anywhere on a footing of intimacy. Gouache was proud, and would perhaps have stood aloof altogether rather than be treated as one of the herd who are asked "with everybody," as the phrase goes; but he was of an observing turn of mind, and it amused him immensely to stand unnoticed, follow-

ing the movements of society's planets, comets, and satellites, and studying the many types of the cosmopolitan Roman world.

"Good evening, Monsieur Gouache," said Giovanni.

"Good evening, prince," replied the artist, with a somewhat formal bow—after which both men relapsed into silence, and continued to watch the crowd.

"And what do you think of our Roman world?" asked Giovanni, presently.

"I cannot compare it to any other world," answered Gouache, simply. "I never went into society till I came to Rome. I think it is at once brilliant and sedate—it has a magnificent air of historical antiquity, and it is a little paradoxical."

"Where is the paradox?" inquired Giovanni.

"Es-tu libre? Les lois sont-elles respectées?  
Crains-tu de voir ton champ pillé par le voisin?  
Le maître a-t-il son toit, et l'ouvrier son pain?"

A smile flickered over the young artist's face as he quoted Musset's lines in answer to Giovanni's question. Giovanni himself laughed, and looked at Anastase with somewhat increased interest.

"Do you mean that we are revelling under the sword of Damocles—dancing on the eve of our execution?"

"Not precisely. A delicate flavour of uncertainty about to-morrow gives zest to the appetite of to-day. It is impossible that such a large society should be wholly unconscious of its own imminent danger—and yet these men and women go about to-night as if they were Romans of old, rulers of the world, only less sure of themselves than of the stability of their empire."

"Why not?" asked Giovanni, glancing curiously at the pale young man beside him. "In answer to your quotation, I can say that I am as free as I care to be; that the laws are sufficiently respected; that no one has hitherto thought it worth while to plunder my acres; that I have a modest roof of my own; and that, as far as I am aware,

there are no workmen starving in the streets at present. You are answered, it seems to me, Monsieur Gouache."

"Is that really your belief?" asked the artist, quietly.

"Yes. As for my freedom, I am as free as air; no one thinks of hindering my movements. As for the laws, they are made for good citizens, and good citizens will respect them; if bad citizens do not, that is their loss. My acres are safe, possibly because they are not worth taking, though they yield me a modest competence sufficient for my needs and for the needs of those who cultivate them for me."

"And yet there is a great deal of talk in Rome about misery and injustice and oppression——"

"There will be a great deal more talk about those evils, with much better cause, if people who think like you succeed in bringing about a revolution, Monsieur Gouache," answered Giovanni, coldly.

"If many people think like you, prince, a revolution is not to be thought of. As for me I am a foreigner and I see what I can, and listen to what I hear."

"A revolution is not to be thought of. It was tried here and failed. If we are overcome by a great power from without, we shall have no choice but to yield, if any of us survive—for we would fight. But we have nothing to fear from within."

"Perhaps not," returned Gouache, thoughtfully. "I hear such opposite opinions that I hardly know what to think."

"I hear that you are to paint Cardinal Antonelli's portrait," said Giovanni. "Perhaps his Eminence will help you to decide."

"Yes; they say he is the cleverest man in Europe."

"In that opinion they—whoever they may be—are mistaken," replied Giovanni. "But he is a man of immense intellect, nevertheless."

"I am not sure whether I will paint his portrait after all," said Gouache.

"You do not wish to be persuaded?"

"No. My own ideas please me very well for the present. I would not exchange them for those of any one else."

"May I ask what those ideas are?" inquired Giovanni, with a show of interest.

"I am a republican," answered Gouache, quietly. "I am also a good Catholic."

"Then you are yourself much more paradoxical than the whole of our Roman society put together," answered Giovanni, with a dry laugh.

"Perhaps. There comes the most beautiful woman in the world."

It was nearly twelve o'clock when Corona arrived, old Astrardente sauntering jauntily by her side, his face arranged with more than usual care, and his glossy wig curled cunningly to represent nature. He was said to possess a number of wigs of different lengths, which he wore in rotation, thus sustaining the impression that his hair was cut from time to time. In his eye a single eye-glass was adjusted, and as he walked he swung his hat delicately in his tightly gloved fingers. He wore the plainest of collars and the simplest of gold studs; no chain dangled showily from his waistcoat-pocket, and his small feet were encased in little patent-leather shoes. But for his painted face, he might have passed for the very incarnation of fashionable simplicity. But his face betrayed him.

As for Corona, she was dazzlingly beautiful. Not that any colour or material she wore could greatly enhance her beauty, for all who saw her on that memorable night remembered the wonderful light in her face, and the strange look in her splendid eyes; but the thick soft fall of the white velvet made as it were a pedestal for her loveliness, and the Astrardente jewels that clasped her waist and throat and crowned her black hair, collected the radiance of the many candles, and made the light cling to her and follow her as she walked. Giovanni saw her enter, and his whole adoration came upon him as a madness upon a sick man in a fever, so that he would have sprung forward

to meet her, and fallen at her feet and worshipped her, had he not suddenly felt that he was watched by more than one of the many who paused to see her go by. He moved from his place and waited near the door where she would have to pass, and for a moment his heart stood still.

He hardly knew how it was. He found himself speaking to her. He asked her for a dance, he asked boldly for the cotillon—he never knew how he had dared; she assented, let her eyes rest upon him for one moment with an indescribable expression, then grew very calm and cold, and passed on.

It was all over in an instant. Giovanni moved back to his place as she went by, and stood still like a man stunned. It was well that there were yet nearly two hours before the preliminary dancing would be over; he needed some time to collect himself. The air seemed full of strange voices, and he watched the moving faces as in a dream, unable to concentrate his attention upon anything he saw.

"He looks as though he had a stroke of paralysis," said a woman's voice near him. It did not strike him, in his strange bewilderment, that it was Donna Tullia who had spoken, still less that she was speaking of him almost to him.

"Something very like it, I should say," answered Del Ferice's oily voice. "He has probably been ill since you saw him. Saracinesca is an unhealthy place."

Giovanni turned sharply round.

"Yes; we were speaking of you, Don Giovanni," said Donna Tullia, with some scorn. "Does it strike you that you were exceedingly rude in not letting me know that you were going out of town when you had promised to dance with me at the Valdarno ball?" She curled her small lip and showed her sharp white teeth. Giovanni was a man of the world, however, and was equal to the occasion.

"I apologise most humbly," he said. "It was indeed very rude; but in the urgency of the case, I forgot all

other engagements. I really beg your pardon. Will you honour me with a dance this evening?"

"I have every dance engaged," answered Madame Mayer, coldly staring at him.

"I am very sorry," said Giovanni, inwardly thanking heaven for his good fortune, and wishing she would go away.

"Wait a moment," said Donna Tullia, judging that she had produced the desired effect upon him. "Let me look. I believe I have one waltz left. Let me see. Yes, the one before the last—you can have it if you like."

"Thank you," murmured Giovanni, greatly annoyed. "I will remember."

Madame Mayer laid her hand upon Del Ferice's arm, and moved away. She was a vain woman, and being in love with Saracinesca after her own fashion, could not understand that he should be wholly indifferent to her. She thought that in telling him she had no dances she had given him a little wholesome punishment, and that in giving one after all she had conferred a favour upon him. She also believed that she had annoyed Del Ferice, which always amused her. But Del Ferice was more than a match for her, with his quiet ways and smooth tongue.

They went into the ball-room together and danced a few minutes. When the music ceased, Ugo excused himself on the plea that he was engaged for the quadrille that followed. He at once set out in search of the Duchessa d'Astrardente, and did not lose sight of her again. She did not dance before the cotillon, she said; and she sat down in a high chair in the picture-gallery, while three or four men, among whom was Valdarno, sat and stood near her, doing their best to amuse her. Others came, and some went away, but Corona did not move, and sat amongst her little court, glad to have the time pass in any way until the cotillon. When Del Ferice had ascertained her position, he went about his business, which was manifold—dancing frequently, and making a point of speaking to every one in the room. At the end of an hour, he

joined the group of men around the Duchessa and took part in the conversation.

It was an easy matter to make the talk turn upon Giovanni Saracinesca. Every one was more or less curious about the journey he had made, and especially about the cause of his absence. Each of the men had something to say, and each, knowing the popular report that Giovanni was in love with Corona, said his say with as much wit as he could command. Corona herself was interested, for she alone understood his sudden absence, and was anxious to hear the common opinion concerning it.

The theories advanced were various. Some said he had been quarrelling with the local authorities of Saracinesca, who interfered with his developments and improvements upon the estate, and they gave laughable portraits of the village sages with whom he had been engaged. Others said he had only stopped there a day, and had been in Naples. One said he had been boar-hunting; another, that the Saracinesca woods had been infested by a band of robbers, who were terrorising the country.

"And what do you say, Del Ferice?" asked Corona, seeing a cunning smile upon the man's pale fat face.

"It is very simple," said Ugo; "it is a very simple matter indeed. If the Duchessa will permit me, I will call him, and we will ask him directly what he has been doing. There he stands with old Cantalorgano at the other end of the room. Public curiosity demands to be satisfied. May I call him, Duchessa?"

"By no means," said Corona, quickly. But before she had spoken, Valdarno, who was always sanguine and impulsive, had rapidly crossed the gallery and was already speaking to Giovanni. The latter bowed his head as though obeying an order, and came quietly back with the young man who had called him. The crowd of men parted before him as he advanced to the Duchessa's chair, and stood waiting in some surprise.

"What are your commands, Duchessa?" he asked, in somewhat formal tones.

"Valdarno is too quick," answered Corona, who was greatly annoyed. "Some one suggested calling you to settle a dispute, and he went before I could stop him. I fear it is very impertinent of us."

"I am entirely at your service," said Giovanni, who was delighted at having been called, and had found time to recover from his first excitement on seeing her. "What is the question?"

"We were all talking about you," said Valdarno.

"We were wondering where you had been," said another.

"They said you had gone boar-hunting."

"Or to Naples."

"Or even to Paris." Three or four spoke in one breath.

"I am exceedingly flattered at the interest you all show in me," said Giovanni, quietly. "There is very little to tell. I have been in Saracinesca upon a matter of business, spending my days in the woods with my steward, and my nights in keeping away the cold and the ghosts. I would have invited you all to join the festivity, had I known how much you were interested. The beef up there is monstrously tough, and the rats are abominably noisy, but the mountain air is said to be very healthy."

Most of the men present felt that they had not only behaved foolishly, but had spoiled the little circle around the Duchessa by introducing a man who had the power to interest her, whereas they could only afford her a little amusement. Valdarno was still standing, and his chair beside Corona was vacant. Giovanni calmly installed himself upon it, and began to talk as though nothing had happened.

"You are not dancing, Duchessa," he remarked. "I suppose you have been in the ball-room?"

"Yes—but I am rather tired this evening. I will wait."

"You were here at the last great ball, before the old prince died, were you not?" asked Giovanni, remembering that he had first seen her on that occasion.

"Yes," she answered; "and I remember that we danced together; and the accident to the window, and the story of the ghost."

So they fell into conversation, and though one or two of the men ventured an ineffectual remark, the little circle dropped away, and Giovanni was left alone by the side of the Duchessa. The distant opening strains of a waltz came floating down the gallery, but neither of the two heard, nor cared.

"It is strange," Giovanni said. "They say it has always happened, since the memory of man. No one has ever seen anything, but whenever there is a great ball, there is a crash of broken glass some time in the course of the evening. Nobody could ever explain why that window fell in, five years ago—five years ago this month,—this very day, I believe," he continued suddenly, in the act of recollection. "Yes—the nineteenth of January, I remember very well—it was my mother's birthday."

"It is not so extraordinary," said Corona, "for it chanced to be the name-day of the present prince. That was probably the reason why it was chosen this year." She spoke a little nervously, as though still ill at ease.

"But it is very strange," said Giovanni, in a low voice. "It is strange that we should have met here the first time, and that we should not have met here since, until—to-day."

He looked towards her as he spoke, and their eyes met and lingered in each other's gaze. Suddenly the blood mounted to Corona's cheeks, her eyelids drooped, she leaned back in her seat and was silent.

Far off, at the entrance to the ball-room, Del Ferice found Donna Tullia alone. She was very angry. The dance for which she was engaged to Giovanni Saracinesca had begun, and was already half over, and still he did not come. Her pink face was unusually flushed, and there was a disagreeable look in her blue eyes.

"Ah!—I see Don Giovanni has again forgotten his engagement," said Ugo, in smooth tones. He well knew

that he himself had brought about the omission, but none could have guessed it from his manner. "May I have the honour of a turn before your cavalier arrives?" he asked.

"No," said Donna Tullia, angrily. "Give me your arm. We will go and find him." She almost hissed the words through her closed teeth.

She hardly knew that Del Ferice was leading her as they moved towards the picture-gallery, passing through the crowded rooms that lay between. She never spoke; but her movement was impetuous, and she resented being delayed by the hosts of men and women who filled the way. As they entered the long apartment, where the portraits of the Frangipani lined the walls from end to end, Del Ferice uttered a well-feigned exclamation.

"Oh, there he is!" he cried. "Do you see him?—his back is turned—he is alone with the Astrardente."

"Come," said Donna Tullia, shortly. Del Ferice would have preferred to have let her go alone, and to have witnessed from a distance the scene he had brought about. But he could not refuse to accompany Madame Mayer.

Neither Corona, who was facing the pair, but was talking with Giovanni, nor Giovanni himself, who was turned away from them, noticed their approach until they came and stood still beside them. Saracinesca looked up and started. The Duchessa d'Astrardente raised her black eyebrows in surprise.

"Our dance!" exclaimed Giovanni, in considerable agitation. "It is the one after this——"

"On the contrary," said Donna Tullia, in tones trembling with rage, "it is already over. It is the most unparalleled insolence!"

Giovanni was profoundly disgusted at himself and Donna Tullia. He cared not so much for the humiliation itself, which was bad enough, as for the annoyance the scene caused Corona, who looked from one to the other in angry astonishment, but of course could have nothing to say.

"I can only assure you that I thought——"

"You need not assure me!" cried Donna Tullia, losing all self-control. "There is no excuse, nor pardon—it is the second time. Do not insult me further, by inventing untruths for your apology."

"Nevertheless——" began Giovanni, who was sincerely sorry for his great rudeness, and would gladly have attempted to explain his conduct, seeing that Donna Tullia was so justly angry.

"There is no nevertheless!" she interrupted. "You may stay where you are," she added, with a scornful glance at the Duchessa d'Astrardente. Then she laid her hand upon Del Ferice's arm, and swept angrily past, so that the train of her red silk gown brushed sharply against Corona's soft white velvet.

Giovanni remained standing a moment, with a puzzled expression upon his face.

"How could you do anything so rude?" asked Corona, very gravely. "She will never forgive you, and she will be quite right."

"I do not know how I forgot," he answered, seating himself again. "It is dreadful—unpardonable—but perhaps the consequences will be good."

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## CHAPTER XI.

Corona was ill at ease. In the first few moments of being alone with Giovanni the pleasure she felt outweighed all other thoughts. But as the minutes lengthened to a quarter of an hour, then to half an hour, she grew nervous, and her answers came more and more shortly. She said to herself that she should never have given him the cotillon, and she wondered how the remainder of the time would pass. The realisation of what had occurred came upon her, and the hot blood rose to

her face and ebbed away again, and rose once more. Yet she could not speak out what her pride prompted her to say, because she pitied Giovanni a little, and was willing to think for a moment that it was only compassion she felt, lest she should feel that she must send him away.

But Giovanni sat beside her, and knew that the spell was working upon him, and that there was no salvation. He had taken her unawares, though he hardly knew it, when she first entered, and he asked her suddenly for a dance. He had wondered vaguely why she had so freely consented; but, in the wild delight of being by her side, he completely lost all hold upon himself, and yielded to the exquisite charm of her presence, as a man who has struggled for a moment against a powerful opiate sinks under its influence, and involuntarily acknowledges his weakness. Strong as he was, his strength was all gone, and he knew not where he should find it.

"You will have to make her some further apology," said Corona, as Madame Mayer's red train disappeared through the doorway at the other end of the room.

"Of course—I must do something about it," said Giovanni, absently. "After all, I do not wonder—it is amazing that I should have recognised her at all. I should forget anything to-night, except that I am to dance with you."

The Duchessa looked away, and fanned herself slowly; but she sighed, and checked the deep-drawn breath as by a great effort. The waltz was over, and the dancers streamed through the intervening rooms towards the gallery in quest of fresher air and freer space. Two and two they came, quickly following each other and passing on, some filling the high seats along the walls, others hastening towards the supper-rooms beyond. A few minutes earlier Saracinesca and Corona had been almost alone in the great apartment; now they were surrounded on all sides by a chattering crowd of men and women, with flushed faces or unnaturally pale, according as the effort of dancing affected each, and the indistinguishable din of