

what I advise now. We are fighting now, and we have no time to think of the arts of peace. We shall have peace some day. We shall lose an ornament or two from our garments in the struggle, but our body will not be injured, and in time of peace our ornaments will be restored to us fourfold. But now there is war and rumour of war. There is a vast difference between the ideal republic which I was speaking of, and the real anarchy and confusion which would be brought about by what is called republicanism."

"In other words, if the attack upon the Church were suddenly abandoned, your Eminence would immediately abandon your reactionary policy," said Gouache, "and adopt progressive views?"

"Immediately," replied the Cardinal.

"I see," said Gouache. "A little more towards me—just so that I can catch that eye. Thank you—that will do."

### CHAPTER XIX.

When Del Ferice was thought sufficiently recovered of his wound to hear some of the news of the day, which was about three weeks after the duel, he learned that Astrardente was dead, that the Duchessa had inherited all his fortune, and that she was on the point of leaving Rome. It would be hard to say how the information of her approaching departure had got abroad; it might be merely a clever guess of the gossips, or it might be the report gleaned from her maid by all the other maids in town. Be that as it may, when Del Ferice heard it he ground his teeth as he lay upon his bed, and swore that if it were possible to prevent the Duchessa d'Astrardente from leaving town he would do it. In his judgment it would be a dangerous thing to let Corona and Giovanni part, and to allow Donna Tullia free play in her matri-

monial designs. Of course Giovanni would never marry Madame Mayer, especially as he was now at liberty to marry the Astrardente; but Madame Mayer herself might become fatally interested in him, as she already seemed inclined to be, and this would be bad for Del Ferice's own prospects. It would not do to squander any of the advantages gained by the death of the old Duca. Giovanni must be hastened into a marriage with Corona; it would be time enough to think of revenge upon him afterwards for the ghastly wound that took so long to heal.

It was a pity that Del Ferice and Donna Tullia were not allies, for if Madame Mayer hated Corona d'Astrardente, Ugo del Ferice detested Giovanni with equal virulence, not only because he had been so terribly worsted by him in the duel his own vile conduct had made inevitable, but because Donna Tullia loved him and was doing her very best to marry him. Evidently the best thing to be done was to produce a misunderstanding between the two; but it would be dangerous to play any tricks with Giovanni, for he held Del Ferice in his power by his knowledge of that disagreeable scene behind the plants in the conservatory. Saracinesca was a great man in society and celebrated for his honesty; people would believe him rather than Del Ferice, if the story got abroad. This would not do. The next best thing was to endeavour to draw Giovanni and Corona together as quickly as possible, to precipitate their engagement, and thus to clear the field of a dangerous rival. Del Ferice was a very obstinate and a very intelligent man. He meant more than ever to marry Donna Tullia himself, and he would not be hindered in the accomplishment of his object by an insignificant scruple.

He was not allowed to speak much, lest the effort should retard the healing of his throat; but in the long days and nights, when he lay silent in his quiet lodging, he had ample time to revolve many schemes in his brain. At last he no longer needed the care of the Sister of



Mercy; his servant took charge of him, and the surgeon came twice a-day to dress his wound. He lay in bed one morning watching Temistocle, who moved noiselessly about the room.

"Temistocle," he said, "you are a youth of intelligence: you must use the gifts nature has given you."

Temistocle was at that time not more than five-and-twenty years of age. He had a muddy complexion, a sharp hooked nose, and a cast in one eye that gave him a singularly unpleasant expression. As his master addressed him, he stood still and listened with a sort of distorted smile in acknowledgment of the compliment made him.

"Temistocle, you must find out when the Duchessa d'Astrardente means to leave Rome, and where she is going. You know somebody in the house?"

"Yes, sir—the under-cook; he stood godfather with me for the baby of a cousin of mine—the young man who drives Prince Valdarno's private brougham: a clever fellow, too."

"And this under-cook," said Del Ferice, who was not above entering into details with his servant—"is he a discreet character?"

"Oh, for that, you may trust him. Only sometimes——" Temistocle grinned, and made a gesture which signified drinking.

"And when he is drunk?" asked Del Ferice.

"When he is drunk he tells everything; but he never remembers anything he has been told, or has said. When he is drunk he is a dictionary; but the first draught of water washes out his memory like a slate."

"Well—give me my purse; it is under my pillow. Go. Here is a *scudo*, Temistocle. You can make him very drunk for that."

Temistocle hesitated, and looked at the money.

"Another couple of *pauls* would make it safer," he remarked.

"Well, there they are; but you must make him very

drunk indeed. You must find out all he knows, and you must keep sober yourself."

"Leave that to me. I will make of him a sponge; he shall be squeezed dry, and sopped again and squeezed again. I will be his confessor."

"If you find out what I want, I will give you——" Del Ferice hesitated; he did not mean to give too much.

"The grey trousers?" asked Temistocle, with an avaricious light in the eye which did not wander.

"Yes," answered his master, rather regretfully; "I suppose you must have the grey trousers at last."

"For those grey trousers I will upset heaven and earth," returned Temistocle in great glee.

Nothing more was said on that day, but early on the following morning the man entered and opened the shutters, and removed the little oil-light that had burned all night. He kept one eye upon his master, who presently turned slowly and looked inquiringly at him.

"The Duchessa goes to Astrardente in the Sabines on the day after to-morrow," said Temistocle. "It is quite sure that she goes, because she has already sent out two pairs of horses, and several boxes of effects, besides the second housemaid and the butler and two grooms."

"Ah! that is very good. Temistocle, I think I will get up this morning and sit in the next room."

"And the grey trousers?"

"Take them, and wear them in honour of the most generous master living," said Del Ferice, impressively. "It is not every master who gives his servant a pair of grey trousers. Remember that."

"Heaven bless you, Signor Conte!" exclaimed Temistocle, devoutly.

Del Ferice lost no time. He was terribly weak still, and his wound was not entirely healed yet; but he set himself resolutely to his writing-table, and did not rise until he had written two letters. The first was carefully written in a large round hand, such as is used by copyists in Italy, resembling the Gothic. It was impossible to con-



neet the laboriously formed and conventional letters with any particular person. It was very short, as follows:—

“It may interest you to know that the Duchessa d’As-trardente is going to her castle in the Sabines on the day after to-morrow.”

This laconic epistle Del Ferice carefully directed to Don Giovanni Saracinesca at his palace, and fastened a stamp upon it; but he concealed the address from Temistocele. The second letter was longer, and written in his own small and ornate handwriting. It was to Donna Tullia Mayer. It ran thus:—

“You would forgive my importuning you with a letter, most charming Donna Tullia, if you could conceive of my desolation and loneliness. For more than three weeks I have been entirely deprived of the pleasure, the exquisite delight, of conversing with her for whom I have suffered. I still suffer so much. Ah! if my paper were a cloth of gold, and my pen in moving traced characters of diamond and pearl, yet any words which speak of you would be ineffectually honoured by such transcription! In the miserable days and nights I have passed between life and death, it is your image which has consoled me, the echo of your delicate voice which has soothed my pain, the remembrance of the last hours I spent with you which has gilded the feverish dreams of my sickness. You are the guardian angel of a most unhappy man, Donna Tullia. Do you know it? But for you I would have wooed death as a comforter. As it is, I have struggled desperately to keep my grasp upon life, in the hope of once more seeing your smile and hearing your happy laugh; perhaps—I dare not expect it—I may receive from you some slight word of sympathy, some little half-sighed hint that you do not altogether regret having been in these long weeks the unconscious comforter of my sorrowing spirit and tormented body. You would hardly know me, could you see me; but saving for your sweet spiritual presence, which has rescued me from the jaws of death, you would

never have seen me again. Is it presumption in me to write thus? Have you ever given me a right to speak in these words? I do not know. I do not care. Man has a right to be grateful. It is the first and most divine right I possess, to feel and to express my gratitude. For out of the store of your kindness shown me when I was in the world, strong and happy in the privilege of your society, I have drawn healing medicine in my sickness, as tormented souls in purgatory get refreshment from the prayers of good and kind people who remember them on earth. So, therefore, if I have said too much, forgive me, forgive the heartfelt gratitude which prompts me; and believe still in the respectful and undying devotion of the humblest of your servants, UGO DEL FERICE.”

Del Ferice read over what he had written with considerable satisfaction, and having addressed his letter to Donna Tullia, he lost no time in despatching Temistocele with it, instructing him to ask if there would be an answer. As soon as the man was out of the house, Ugo rang for his landlady, and sent for the porter’s little boy, to whom he delivered the letter to Don Giovanni, to be dropped into the nearest post-box. Then he lay down, exhausted with his morning’s work. In the course of two hours Temistocele returned from Donna Tullia’s house with a little scented note—too much scented, and the paper just a shade too small. She took no notice of what he had said in his carefully penned epistle; but merely told him she was sincerely glad that he was better, and asked him to call as soon as he could. Ugo was not disappointed; he had expected no compromising expression of interest in response to his own effusions; and he was well pleased with the invitation, for it showed that what he had written had produced the desired result.

Don Giovanni Saracinesca received the anonymous note late in the evening. He had, of course, together with his father, deposited cards of condolence at the Palazzo As-trardente, and he had been alone to inquire if the Duchessa



would receive him. The porter had answered that, for the present, there were standing orders to admit no one; and as Giovanni could boast of no especial intimacy, and had no valid excuse to give, he was obliged to be satisfied. He had patiently waited in the Villa Borghese and by the band-stand on the Pincio, taking it for granted that sooner or later Corona's carriage would appear; but when at last he had seen her brougham, she had driven rapidly past him, thickly veiled, and he did not think she had even noticed him. He would have written to her, but he was still unable to hold a pen; and he reflected that, after all, it would have been a hideous farce for him to offer condolences and sympathy, however much he might desire to hide from himself his secret satisfaction at her husband's death. Too proud to think of obtaining information through such base channels as Del Ferice was willing to use, he was wholly ignorant of Corona's intentions; and it was a brilliant proof of Ugo's astuteness that he had rightly judged Giovanni's position with regard to her, and justly estimated the value of the news conveyed by his anonymous note.

Saracinesca read the scrap of writing, and tossed it angrily into the fire. He hated underhand dealings, and scorned himself for the interest the note excited in him, wondering who could find advantage in informing him of the Duchessa's movements. But the note took effect, nevertheless, although he was ashamed of it, and all night he pondered upon what it told him. The next day, at three o'clock, he went out alone, and walked rapidly towards the Palazzo Astrardente. He was unable to bear the suspense any longer; the thought that Corona was going away, apparently to shut herself up in the solitude of the ancient fortress, for any unknown number of months, and that he might not see her until the autumn, was intolerable. He knew that by the mere use of his name he could at least make sure that she should know he was at her door, and he determined to make the attempt. He waited a long time, pacing slowly the broad

flagstones beneath the arch of the palace, while the porter himself went up with his card and message. The fellow had hesitated, but Don Giovanni Saracinesca was not a man to be refused by a servant. At last the porter returned, and, bowing to the ground, said that the Signora Duchessa would receive him.

In five minutes he was waiting alone in the great drawing-room. It had cost Corona a struggle to allow him to be admitted. She hesitated long, for it seemed like a positive wrong to her husband's memory, but the woman in her yielded at last; she was going away on the following morning, and she could not refuse to see him for once. She hesitated again as she laid her hand upon the latch of the door, knowing that he was in the room beyond; then at last she entered.

Her face was very pale and very grave. Her simple gown of close-fitting black set off her height and figure, and flowed softly in harmony with her stately movements as she advanced towards Giovanni, who stood almost awestruck in the middle of the room. He could not realise that this dark sad princess was the same woman to whom less than a month ago he had spoken such passionate words, whom he had madly tried to take into his arms. Proud as he was, it seemed presumptuous in him to think of love in connection with so royal a woman; and yet he knew that he loved her better and more truly than he had done a month before. She held out her hand to him, and he raised it to his lips. Then they both sat down in silence.

"I had despaired of ever seeing you again," said Giovanni at last, speaking in a subdued voice. "I had wished for some opportunity of telling you how sincerely I sympathise with you in your great loss." It was a very formal speech, such as men make in such situations. It might have been better, but he was not eloquent; even his rough old father had a better command of language on ordinary occasions, though Giovanni could speak well enough when he was roused. But he felt constrained in the presence



of the woman he adored. Corona herself hardly knew how to answer.

"You are very kind," she said, simply.

"I wish it were possible to be of any service to you," he answered. "I need not tell you that both my father and myself would hold it an honour to assist you in any way." He mentioned his father from a feeling of delicacy; he did not wish to put himself forward.

"You are very kind," repeated Corona, gravely. "I have not had any annoyance. I have an excellent man of business."

There was a moment's pause. Then she seemed to understand that he was embarrassed, and spoke again.

"I am glad to see that you are recovered," she said.

"It was nothing," answered Giovanni, with a glance at his right arm, which was still confined in a bandage of black silk, but was no longer in a sling.

"It was very wrong of you," returned Corona, looking seriously into his eyes. "I do not know why you fought, but it was wrong; it is a great sin."

Giovanni smiled a little.

"We all have to sin sometimes," he said. "Would you have me stand quietly and see an abominable piece of baseness, and not lift a hand to punish the offender?"

"People who do base things always come to a bad end," answered the Duchessa.

"Perhaps. But we poor sinners are impatient to see justice done at once. I am sorry to have done anything you consider wrong," he added, with a shade of bitterness. "Will you permit me to change the subject? Are you thinking of remaining in Rome, or do you mean to go away?"

"I am going up to Astrardente to-morrow," answered Corona, readily. "I want to be alone and in the country."

Giovanni showed no surprise: his anonymous information had been accurate; Del Ferice had not parted with the grey trousers in vain.

"I suppose you are right," he said. "But at this time

of year I should think the mountains would be very cold."

"The castle is comfortable. It has been recently fitted up, and there are many warm rooms in it. I am fond of the old place, and I need to be alone for a long time."

Giovanni thought the conversation was becoming oppressive. He thought of what had passed between them at their last meeting in the conservatory of the Palazzo Frangipani.

"I shall myself pass the summer in Saracinesca," he said, suddenly. "You know it is not very far. May I hope that I may sometimes be permitted to see you?"

Corona had certainly had no thought of seeing Giovanni when she had determined to go to Astrardente; she had not been there often, and had not realised that it was within reach of the Saracinesca estate. She started slightly.

"Is it so near?" she asked.

"Half a day's ride over the hills," replied Giovanni.

"I did not know. Of course, if you come, you will not be denied hospitality."

"But you would rather not see me?" asked Saracinesca, in a tone of disappointment. He had hoped for something more encouraging. Corona answered courageously.

"I would rather not see you. Do not think me unkind," she added, her voice softening a little. "Why need there be any explanations? Do not try to see me. I wish you well; I wish you more—all happiness—but do not try to see me."

Giovanni's face grew grave and pale. He was disappointed, even humiliated; but something told him that it was not coldness which prompted her request.

"Your commands are my laws," he answered.

"I would rather that instead of regarding what I ask you as a command, you should feel that it ought to be the natural prompting of your own heart," replied Corona, somewhat coldly.



"Forgive me if my heart dictates what my obedience to you must effectually forbid," said Giovanni. "I beseech you to be satisfied that what you ask I will perform—blindly."

"Not blindly—you know all my reasons."

"There is that between you and me which annihilates reason," answered Giovanni, his voice trembling a little.

"There is that in my position which should command your respect," said Corona. She feared he was going too far, and yet this time she knew she had not said too much, and that in bidding him avoid her, she was only doing what was strictly necessary for her peace. "I am a widow," she continued, very gravely; "I am a woman, and I am alone. My only protection lies in the courtesy I have a right to expect from men like you. You have expressed your sympathy; show it then by cheerfully fulfilling my request. I do not speak in riddles, but very plainly. You recall to me a moment of great pain, and your presence, the mere fact of my receiving you, seems a disloyalty to the memory of my husband. I have given you no reason to believe that I ever took a greater interest in you than such as I might take in a friend. I hourly pray that this—this too great interest you show in me, may pass quickly, and leave you what you were before. You see I do not speak darkly, and I do not mean to speak unkindly. Do not answer me, I beseech you, but take this as my last word. Forget me if you can—"

"I cannot," said Giovanni, deeply moved.

"Try. If you cannot, God help you! but I am sure that if you try faithfully, you will succeed. And now you must go," she said, in gentler tones. "You should not have come—I should not have let you see me. But it is best so. I am grateful for the sympathy you have expressed. I do not doubt that you will do as I have asked you, and as you have promised. Good-bye."

Corona rose to her feet, her hands folded before her. Giovanni had no choice. She let her eyes rest upon him,

not unkindly, but she did not extend her hand. He stood one moment in hesitation, then bowed and left the room without a word. Corona stood still, and her eyes followed his retreating figure until at the door he turned once more and bent his head and then was gone. Then she fell back into her chair and gazed listlessly at the wall opposite.

"It is done," she said at last. "I hope it is well done and wisely." Indeed it had been a hard thing to say; but it was better to say it at once than to regret an ill-timed indulgence when it should be too late. And yet it had cost her less to send him away definitely than it had cost her to resist his passionate appeal a month ago. She seemed to have gained strength from her sorrows. So he was gone! She gave a sigh of relief, which was instantly followed by a sharp throb of pain, so sudden that she hardly understood it.

Her preparations were all made. She had at the last moment realised that it was not fitting for her, at her age, to travel alone, nor to live wholly alone in her widowhood. She had revolved the matter in her mind, and had decided that there was no woman of her acquaintance whom she could ask even for a short time to stay with her. She had no friends, no relations, none to turn to in such a need. It was not that she cared for company in her solitude; it was merely a question of propriety. To overcome the difficulty, she obtained permission to take with her one of the sisters of a charitable order of nuns, a lady in middle life, but broken down and in ill health from her untiring labours. The thing was easily managed; and the next morning, on leaving the palace, she stopped at the gate of the community and found Sister Gabrielle waiting with her modest box. The nun entered the huge travelling carriage, and the two ladies set out for Astrardente.

It was the first day of Carnival, and a memorably sad one for Giovanni Saracinesca. He would have been capable of leaving Rome at once, but that he had promised



Corona not to attempt to see her. He would have gone to Saracinesca for the mere sake of being nearer to her, had he not reflected that he would be encouraging all manner of gossip by so doing. But he determined that so soon as Lent began, he would declare his intention of leaving the city for a year. No one ever went to Saracinesca, and by making a circuit he could reach the ancestral castle without creating suspicion. He might even go to Paris for a few days, and have it supposed that he was wandering about Europe, for he could trust his own servants implicitly; they were not of the type who would drink wine at a tavern with Temistocle or any of his class.

The old Prince came into his son's room in the morning and found him disconsolately looking over his guns, for the sake of an occupation.

"Well, Giovanni," he said, "you have time to reflect upon your future conduct. What! are you going upon a shooting expedition?"

"I wish I could. I wish I could find anything to do," answered Giovanni, laying down the breech-loader and looking out of the window. "The world is turned inside out like a beggar's pocket, and there is nothing in it."

"So the Astrardente is gone," remarked the Prince.

"Yes; gone to live within twenty miles of Saracinesca," replied Giovanni, with an angry intonation.

"Do not go there yet," said his father. "Leave her alone a while. Women become frantic in solitude."

"Do you think I am an idiot?" exclaimed Giovanni. "Of course I shall stay where I am till Carnival is over." He was not in a good humour.

"Why are you so petulant?" retorted the old man. "I merely gave you my advice."

"Well, I am going to follow it. It is good. When Carnival is over I will go away, and perhaps get to Saracinesca by a roundabout way, so that no one will know where I am. Will you not come too?"

"I daresay," answered the Prince, who was always

pleased when his son expressed a desire for his company. "I wish we lived in the good old times."

"Why?"

"We would make small scruple of besieging Astrardente and carrying off the Duchessa for you, my boy," said the Prince, grimly.

Giovanni laughed. Perhaps the same idea had crossed his mind. He was not quite sure whether it was respectful to Corona to think of carrying her off in the way his father suggested; but there was a curious flavour of possibility in the suggestion, coming as it did from a man whose grandfather might have done such a thing, and whose great-grandfather was said to have done it. So strong are the instincts of barbaric domination in races where the traditions of violence exist in an unbroken chain, that both father and son smiled at the idea as if it were quite natural, although Giovanni had only the previous day promised that he would not even attempt to see Corona d'Astrardente without her permission. He did not tell his father of his promise, however, for his more delicate instinct made him sure that though he had acted rightly, his father would laugh at his scruples, and tell him that women liked to be wooed roughly.

Meanwhile Giovanni felt that Rome had become for him a vast solitude, and the smile soon faded from his face at the thought that he must go out into the world, and for Corona's sake act as though nothing had happened.

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## CHAPTER XX.

Poor Madame Mayer was in great anxiety of mind. She had not a great amount of pride, but she made up for it by a plentiful endowment of vanity, in which she suffered acutely. She was a good-natured woman enough, and by nature she was not vindictive; but she could not