

she always does. Come at seven. Besides, she is deaf, you know."

The old lady in question was the aged Countess whom Donna Tullia affected as a companion in her solitary magnificence.

"And now, will you take me back to the ball-room? I have an idea that a partner is looking for me."

Del Ferice left her dancing, and went home in his little coupé. He was desperately fatigued, for he was still very weak, and he feared lest his imprudence in going out so soon might bring on a relapse from his convalescence. Nevertheless, before he went to bed he dismissed Temistocle, and opened a shabby-looking black box which stood upon his writing-table. It was bound with iron, and was fastened by a patent lock which had frequently defied Temistocle's ingenuity. From this repository he took a great number of papers, which were all neatly filed away and marked in the owner's small and ornamented handwriting. Beneath many packages of letters he found what he sought for, a long envelope containing several folded documents.

He spread out the papers and read them carefully over.

"It is a very singular thing," he said to himself; "but there can be no doubt about it. There it is."

He folded the papers again, returned them to their envelope, and replaced the latter deep among the letters in his box. He then locked it, attached the key to a chain he wore about his neck, and went to bed, worn out with fatigue.

CHAPTER XXI.

Del Ferice had purposely excited Donna Tullia's curiosity, and he meant before long to tell more than he had vouchsafed in his first confidence. But he himself trembled before the magnitude of what he had suddenly

thought of doing, for the fear of Giovanni was in his heart. The temptation to boast to Donna Tullia that he had the means of preventing Giovanni from marrying was too strong; but when it had come to telling her what those means were, prudence had restrained him. He desired that if the scheme were put into execution it might be by some one else; for, extraordinary as it was, he was not absolutely certain of its success. He was not sure of Donna Tullia's discretion, either, until by a judicious withholding of the secret he had given her a sufficient idea of its importance. But on mature reflection he came to the conclusion that, even if she possessed the information he was able to give, she would not dare to mention it, nor even to hint at it.

The grey light of Ash-Wednesday morning broke over Rome, and stole through the windows of Giovanni Saracinesca's bedroom. Giovanni had not slept much, but his restlessness was due rather to his gladness at having performed the last of his social duties than to any disturbance of mind. All night he lay planning what he should do,—how he might reach his place in the mountains by a circuitous route, leaving the general impression that he was abroad—and how, when at last he had got to Saracinesca unobserved, he would revel in the solitude and in the thought of being within half a day's journey of Corona d'Astrardente. He was willing to take a great deal of trouble, for he did not wish people to know his whereabouts; he would not have it said that he had gone into the country to be near Corona and to see her every day, as would certainly be said if his real movements were discovered. Accordingly, he fulfilled his programme to the letter. He left Rome on the afternoon of Ash-Wednesday for Florence; there he visited several acquaintances who, he knew, would write to their friends in Rome of his appearance; from Florence he went to Paris, and gave out that he was going upon a shooting expedition in the Arctic regions, as soon as the weather was warm enough. As he was well known for a sportsman and a traveller, this

statement created no suspicion; and when he finally left Paris, the newspapers and the gossips all said he had gone to Copenhagen on his way to the far north. In due time the statement reached Rome, and it was supposed that society had lost sight of Giovanni Saracinesca for at least eight months. It was thought that he had acted with great delicacy in absenting himself; he would thus allow the first months of Corona's mourning to pass before formally presenting himself to society as her suitor. Considering the peculiar circumstances of the case, there would be nothing improper, from a social point of view, in his marrying Corona at the expiration of a year after her husband's death. Of course he would marry her; there was no doubt of that—he had been in love with her so long, and now she was both free and rich. No one suspected that Giovanni, instead of being in Scandinavia, was quietly established at Saracinesca, a day's journey from Rome, busying himself with the management of the estate, and momentarily satisfied in feeling himself so near the woman he loved.

Donna Tullia could hardly wait until the day when Del Ferice was coming to dinner: she was several times on the point of writing a note to ask him to come at once. But she wisely refrained, guessing that the more she pressed him the more difficulties he would make. At last he came, looking pale and worn—interesting, as Donna Tullia would have expressed it. The old Countess talked a great deal during dinner; but as she was too deaf to hear more than a quarter of what was said by the others, the conversation was not interesting. When the meal was over, she established herself in a comfortable chair in the little sitting-room, and took a book. After a few minutes, Donna Tullia suggested to Del Ferice that they should go into the drawing-room. She had received some new waltz-music from Vienna which she wanted to look over, and Ugo might help her. She was not a musician, but was fond of a cheerful noise, and played upon the piano with the average skill of a well-educated young woman of the

world. Of course the doors were left open between the drawing-room and the boudoir, where the Countess dozed over her book and presently fell asleep.

Donna Tullia sat at the grand piano, and made Del Ferice sit beside her. She struck a few chords, and played a fragment of dance-music.

"Of course you have heard that Don Giovanni is gone?" she asked, carelessly. "I suppose he is gone to Saracinesca; they say there is a very good road between that and Astrardente."

"I should think he would have more decency than to pursue the Duchessa in the first month of her mourning," answered Del Ferice, resting one arm upon the piano, and supporting his pale face with his hand as he watched Donna Tullia's fingers move upon the keys.

"Why? He does not care what people say—why should he? He will marry her when the year is out. Why should he care?"

"He can never marry her unless I choose to allow it," said Del Ferice, quietly.

"So you told me the other night," returned Donna Tullia. "But you will allow him, of course. Besides, you could not stop it, after all. I do not believe that you could." She leaned far back in her chair, her hands resting upon the keys without striking them, and she looked at Del Ferice with a sweet smile. There was a moment's pause.

"I have decided to tell you something," he said at last, "upon one condition."

"Why make conditions?" asked Donna Tullia, trying to conceal her excitement.

"Only one, that of secrecy. Will you promise never to mention what I am going to tell you without previously consulting me? I do not mean a common promise; I mean it to be an oath." He spoke very earnestly. "This is a very serious matter. We are playing with fire and with life and death. You must give me some guarantee that you will be secret."

His manner impressed Donna Tullia; she had never seen him so much in earnest in her life.

"I will promise in any way you please," she said.

"Then say this," he answered. "Say, 'I swear and solemnly bind myself that I will faithfully keep the secret about to be committed to me; and that if I fail to keep it I will atone by immediately marrying Ugo del Ferice——'"

"That is absurd!" cried Donna Tullia, starting back from him. He did not heed her.

"And I take to witness of this oath the blessed memory of my mother, the hope of the salvation of my soul, and this relic of the True Cross." He pointed to the locket she wore at her neck, which she had often told him contained the relic he mentioned.

"It is impossible!" she cried again. "I cannot swear so solemnly about such a matter. I cannot promise to marry you."

"Then it is because you cannot promise to keep my secret," he answered calmly. He knew her very well, and he believed that she would not break such an oath as he had dictated, under any circumstances. He did not choose to risk anything by her indiscretion. Donna Tullia hesitated, seeing that he was firm. She was tortured with curiosity beyond all endurance.

"I am only promising to marry you in case I reveal the secret?" she asked. He bowed assent. "So that I am really only promising to be silent? Well, I cannot understand why it should be solemn; but if you wish it so, I will do it. What are the words?"

He repeated them slowly, and she followed him. He watched her at every word, to be sure she overlooked nothing.

"I, Tullia Mayer, swear and solemnly bind myself that I will faithfully keep the secret about to be committed to me; and that if I fail to keep it, I will atone by immediately marrying Ugo del Ferice"—her voice trembled nervously: "and I take to witness of this oath the blessed memory of my mother, the hope of the salvation

of my soul, and this relic of the True Cross." At the last words she took the locket in her fingers.

"You understand that you have promised to marry me if you reveal my secret? You fully understand that?" asked Del Ferice.

"I understand it," she answered hurriedly, as though ashamed of what she had done. "And now, the secret," she added eagerly, feeling that she had undergone a certain humiliation for the sake of what she so much coveted.

"Don Giovanni cannot marry the Duchessa d' Astradente, because"—he paused a moment to give full weight to his statement—"because Don Giovanni Saracinesca is married already."

"What!" cried Donna Tullia, starting from her chair in amazement at the astounding news.

"It is quite true," said Del Ferice, with a quiet smile. "Calm yourself; it is quite true. I know what you are thinking of—all Rome thought he was going to marry you."

Donna Tullia was overcome by the strangeness of the situation. She hid her face in her hands for a moment as she leaned forward over the piano. Then she suddenly looked up.

"What a hideous piece of villany!" she exclaimed, in a stifled voice. Then slowly recovering from the first shock of the intelligence, she looked at Del Ferice; she was almost as pale as he. "What proof have you?" she asked.

"I have the attested copy of the banns published by the priest who married them. That is evidence. Moreover, the real book of banns exists, and Giovanni's name is upon the parish register. I have also a copy of the certificate of the civil marriage, which is signed by Giovanni himself."

"Tell me more," said Donna Tullia, eagerly. "How did you find it?"

"It is very simple," answered Del Ferice. "You may

go and see for yourself, if you do not mind making a short journey. Last summer I was wandering a little for my health's sake, as I often do, and I chanced to be in the town of Aquila—you know, the capital of Abruzzi. One day I happened to go into the sacristy of one of the parish churches to see some pictures which are hung there. There had been a marriage service performed, and as the sacristan moved about explaining the pictures, he laid his hand upon an open book which looked like a register of some kind. I idly asked him what it was, and he showed it to me; it was amusing to look at the names of the people, and I turned over the leaves curiously. Suddenly my attention was arrested by a name I knew—'Giovanni Saracinesca,' written clearly across the page, and below it, 'Felice Baldi,'—the woman he had married. The date of the marriage was the 19th of June 1863. You remember, perhaps, that in that summer, in fact during the whole of that year, Don Giovanni was supposed to be absent upon his famous shooting expedition in Canada, about which he talks so much. It appears, then, that two years ago, instead of being in America, he was living in Aquila, married to Felice Baldi—probably some pretty peasant girl. I started at the sight of the names. I got permission to have an attested copy of it made by a notary. I found the priest who had married them, but he could not remember the couple. The man, he said, was dark, he was sure; the woman, he thought, had been fair. He married so many people in a year. These were not natives of Aquila; they had apparently come there from the country—perhaps had met. The banns—yes, he had the book of banns; he had also the register of marriages from which he sometimes issued certified extracts. He was a good old man, and seemed ready to oblige me; but his memory was very defective. He allowed me to take notary's copies of the banns and the entry in the list, as well as of the register. Then I went to the office of the Stato Civile. You know that people do not sign the register in the church themselves; the names are

written down by the priest. I wanted to see the signatures, and the book of civil marriages was shown to me.

The handwriting was Giovanni's, I am sure—larger, and a little less firm, but distinguishable at a glance. I took the copies for curiosity, and never said anything about it, but I have kept them. That is the history. Do you see how serious a matter it is?"

"Indeed, yes," answered Donna Tullia, who had listened with intense interest to the story. "But what could have induced him to marry that woman?"

"One of those amiable eccentricities peculiar to his family," replied Del Ferice, shrugging his shoulders. "The interesting thing would be to discover what became of Felice Baldi—Donna Felice Saracinesca, as I suppose she has a right to be called."

"Let us find her—Giovanni's wife," exclaimed Donna Tullia, eagerly. "Where can she be?"

"Who knows?" ejaculated Del Ferice. "I would be curious to see her. The name of her native village is given, and the names of her parents. Giovanni described himself in the paper as 'of Naples, a landholder,' and omitted somehow the details of his parentage. Nothing could be more vague; everybody is a landholder, from the wretched peasant who cultivates one acre to their high-and-mightinesses the Princes of Saracinesca. Perhaps by going to the village mentioned some information might be obtained. He probably left her sufficiently provided for, and, departing on pretence of a day's journey, never returned. He is a perfectly unscrupulous man, and thinks no more of this mad scrape than of shooting a chamois in the Tyrol. He knows she can never find him—never guessed who he really was."

"Perhaps she is dead," suggested Donna Tullia, her face suddenly growing grave.

"Why? He would not have taken the trouble to kill her—a peasant girl in the Abruzzi! He would have had no difficulty in leaving her, and she is probably alive and

well at the present moment, perhaps the mother of the future Prince Saracinesca—who can tell?"

"But do you not see," said Donna Tullia, "that unless you have proof that she is alive, we have no hold upon him? He may acknowledge the whole thing, and calmly inform us that she is dead."

"That is true; but even then he must show that she came to a natural end and was buried. Believe me, Giovanni would relinquish all intentions of marrying the Astrardente rather than have this scandalous story published."

"I would like to tax him with it in a point-blank question, and watch his face," said Donna Tullia, fiercely.

"Remember your oath," said Del Ferice. "But he is gone now. You will not meet him for some months."

"Tell me, how could you make use of this knowledge, if you really wanted to prevent his marriage with the Astrardente?"

"I would advise you to go to her and state the case. You need mention nobody. Any one who chooses may go to Aquila and examine the registers. I think that you could convey the information to her with as much command of language as would be necessary."

"I daresay I could," she answered, between her teeth. "What a strange chance it was that brought that register under your hand!"

"Heaven sends opportunities," said Del Ferice, devoutly; "it is for man to make good use of them. Who knows but what you may make a brilliant use of this?"

"I cannot, since I am bound by my promise," said Donna Tullia.

"No; I am sure you will not think of doing it. But then, we might perhaps agree that circumstances made it advisable to act. Many months must pass before he can think of offering himself to her. It will be time enough to consider the matter then—to consider whether we should be justified in raising such a terrible scandal, in

causing so much unhappiness to an innocent woman like the Duchessa, and to a worthless man like Don Giovanni. Think what a disgrace it would be to the Saracinesca to have it made public that Giovanni was openly engaged to marry a great heiress while already secretly married to a peasant woman!"

"It would indeed be horrible," said Donna Tullia, with a disagreeable look in her blue eyes. "Perhaps we should not even think of it," she added, turning over the leaves of the music upon the piano. Then suddenly she added, "Do you know that you have put me in a dreadful position by exacting that promise from me?"

"No," said Del Ferice, quietly. "You wanted to hear the secret. You have heard it. You have nothing to do but to keep it to yourself."

"That is precisely——" She checked herself, and struck a loud chord upon the instrument. She had turned from Del Ferice, and could not see the smile upon his face, which flickered across the pale features and vanished instantly.

"Think no more about it," he said pleasantly. "It is so easy to forget such stories when one resolutely puts them out of one's mind."

Donna Tullia smiled bitterly, and was silent. She began playing from the sheet before her, with indifferent accuracy, but with more than sufficient energy. Del Ferice sat patiently by her side, turning over the leaves, and glancing from time to time at her face, which he really admired exceedingly. He belonged to the type of pale and somewhat phlegmatic men who frequently fall in love with women of sanguine complexion and robust appearance. Donna Tullia was a fine type of this class, and was called handsome, though she did not compare well with women of less pretension to beauty, but more delicacy and refinement. Del Ferice admired her greatly, however; and, as has been said, he admired her fortune even more. He saw himself gradually approaching the goal of his intentions, and as he neared the desired

end he grew more and more cautious. He had played one of his strongest cards that night, and he was content to wait and let matters develop quietly, without any more pushing from him. The seed would grow, there was no fear of that, and his position was strong. He could wait quietly for the result.

At the end of half an hour he excused himself upon the plea that he was still only convalescent, and was unable to bear the fatigue of late hours. Donna Tullia did not press him to stay, for she wished to be alone; and when he was gone she sat long at the open piano, pondering upon what she had done, and even more upon what she had escaped doing. It was a hideous thought that if Giovanni, in all that long winter, had asked her to be his wife, she would readily have consented; it was fearful to think what her position would have been towards Del Ferice, who would have been able by a mere word to annul her marriage by proving the previous one at Aquila. People do not trifle with such accusations, and he certainly knew what he was doing; she would have been bound hand and foot. Or supposing that Del Ferice had died of the wound he received in the duel, and his papers had been ransacked by his heirs, whoever they might be—these attested documents would have become public property. What a narrow escape Giovanni had had! And she herself, too, how nearly had she been involved in his ruin! She liked to think that he had almost offered himself to her; it flattered her, although she now hated him so cordially. She could not help admiring Del Ferice's wonderful discretion in so long concealing a piece of scandal that would have shaken Roman society to its foundations, and she trembled when she thought what would happen if she herself were ever tempted to reveal what she had heard. Del Ferice was certainly a man of genius—so quiet, and yet possessing such weapons; there was some generosity about him too, or he would have revenged himself for his wound by destroying Giovanni's reputation. She

considered whether she could have kept her counsel so well in his place. After all, as he had said, the moment for using the documents had not yet come, for hitherto Giovanni had never proposed to marry any one. Perhaps this secret wedding in Aquila explained his celibacy; Del Ferice had perhaps misjudged him in saying that he was unscrupulous; he had perhaps left his peasant wife, repenting of his folly, but it was perhaps on her account that he had never proposed to marry Donna Tullia; he had, then, only been amusing himself with Corona. That all seemed likely enough—so likely, that it heightened the certainty of Del Ferice's information.

A few days later, as Giovanni had intended, news began to reach Rome that he had been in Florence, and was actually in Paris; then it was said that he was going upon a shooting expedition somewhere in the far north during the summer. It was like him, and in accordance with his tastes. He hated the quiet receptions at the great houses during Lent, to which, if he remained in Rome, he was obliged to go. He naturally escaped when he could. But there was no escape for Donna Tullia, and after all she managed to extract some amusement from these gatherings. She was the acknowledged centre of the more noisy set, and wherever she went, people who wanted to be amused, and were willing to amuse each other, congregated around her. On one of these occasions she met old Saracinesca. He did not go out much since his son had left; but he seemed cheerful enough, and as he liked Madame Mayer, for some inscrutable reason, she rather liked him. Moreover, her interest in Giovanni, though now the very reverse of affectionate, made her anxious to know something of his movements.

"You must be lonely since Don Giovanni has gone upon his travels again," she said.

"That is the reason I go out," said the Prince. "It is not very gay, but it is better than nothing. It suggests cold meat served up after the dessert; but when people

are hungry, the order of their food is not of much importance."

"Is there any news, Prince? I want to be amused."

"News? No. The world is at peace, and consequently given over to sin, as it mostly is when it is resting from a fit of violence."

"You seem to be inclined to moralities this evening," said Donna Tullia, smiling, and gently swaying the red fan she always carried.

"Am I? Then I am growing old, I suppose. It is the privilege of old age to censure in others what it is no longer young enough to praise in itself. It is a bad thing to grow old, but it makes people good, or makes them think they are, which in their own eyes is precisely the same thing."

"How delightfully cynical!"

"Doggish?" inquired the Prince, with a laugh. "I have heard it said by scholars, that cynical means dog-gish in Greek. The fable of the dog in the horse's manger was invented to define the real cynic—the man who neither enjoys life himself nor will allow other people to enjoy it. I am not such a man. I hope you, for instance, will enjoy everything that comes in your way."

"Even the cold meat after the dessert which you spoke of just now?" asked Donna Tullia. "Thank you—I will try; perhaps you can help me."

"My son despised it," said Saracinesca. "He is gone in search of fresh pastures of sweets."

"Leaving you behind."

"Somebody once said that the wisest thing a son could do was to get rid of his father as soon as possible——"

"Then Don Giovanni is a wise man," returned Donna Tullia.

"Perhaps. However, he asked me to accompany him."

"You refused?"

"Of course. Such expeditions are good enough for boys. I dislike Florence, I am not especially fond of Paris, and I detest the North Pole. I suppose you have

seen from the papers that he is going in that direction? It is like him, he hankers after originality, I suppose. Being born in the south, he naturally goes to the extreme north."

"He will write you very interesting letters, I should think," remarked Donna Tullia. "Is he a good correspondent?"

"Remarkably, for he never gives one any trouble. He sends his address from time to time, and draws frequently on his banker. His letters are not so full of interest as might be thought, as they rarely extend over five lines; but on the other hand it does not take long to read them, which is a blessing."

"You seem to be an affectionate parent," said Donna Tullia, with a laugh.

"If you measure affection by the cost of postage-stamps, you have a right to be sarcastic. If you measure it in any other way, you are wrong. I could not help loving any one so like myself as my son. It would show a detestable lack of appreciation of my own gifts."

"I do not think Don Giovanni so very like you," said Donna Tullia, thoughtfully.

"Perhaps you do not know him so well as I do," remarked the Prince. "Where do you see the greatest difference?"

"I think you talk better, and I think you are more—not exactly more honest, perhaps, but more straightforward."

"I do not agree with you," said old Saracinesca, quickly. "There is no one alive who can say they ever knew Giovanni approach in the most innocent way to a distortion of truth. I daresay you have discovered, however, that he is reticent; he can hold his tongue; he is no chatterer, no parrot, my son."

"Indeed he is not," answered Donna Tullia, and the reply pacified the old man; but she herself was thinking what supreme reticence Giovanni had shown in the matter of his marriage, and she wondered whether the Prince had ever heard of it.