said I had no convictions, and you were right. I had none, and I listened to your exposition of your own with considerable interest. My case is changed. I need not tell you what I believe, for I wear the uniform of a Papal Zouave. When I put it on, I certainly did not contemplate offending you; I do not wish to offend you now—I only beg that you will refrain from offending me. For my part, I need only say that henceforth I do not desire to take a part in your councils. If Donna Tullia is satisfied with her portrait, there need be no further occasion for our meeting. If, on the contrary, we are to meet again, I beg that we may meet on a footing of courtesy and mutual respect."

It was impossible to say more; and Gouache's speech terminated the situation so far as Del Ferice was concerned. Donna Tullia smilingly expressed her approval.

"Quite right, Gouache," she said. "You know it would be impossible to leave the portrait as it is now. The mouth, you know—you promised to do something to it—just the expression, you know."

Gouache bowed his head a little, and set to work again without a word. Del Ferice did not speak again during the sitting, but sat moodily staring at the canvas, at Donna Tullia, and at the floor. It was not often that he was moved from his habitual suavity of manner, but Gouache's conduct had made him feel particularly uncomfortable.

The next time Donna Tullia came to sit, she brought her old Countess, and Del Ferice did not appear. The portrait was ultimately finished to the satisfaction of all parties, and was hung in Donna Tullia's drawing-room, to be admired and criticised by all her friends. But Gouache rejoiced when the thing was finally removed from his studio, for he had grown to hate it, and had been almost willing to flatter it out of all likeness to Madame Mayer, for the sake of not being eternally confronted by the cold stare of her blue eyes. He finished the Cardinal's portrait too; and the statesman not only paid for it

with unusual liberality, but gave the artist what he called a little memento of the long hours they had spent together. He opened one of the lockers in his study, and from a small drawer selected an ancient ring, in which was set a piece of crystal with a delicate intaglio of a figure of Victory. He took Gouache's hand and slipped the ring upon his finger. He had taken a singular liking to Anastase.

"Wear it as a little souvenir of me," he said kindly. "It is a Victory; you are a soldier now, so I pray that victory may go with you; and I give Victory herself into your hands."

"And I," said Gouache, "will pray that it may be a symbol in my hand of the real victories you are to win."

"Only a symbol," returned the Cardinal, thoughtfully. "Nothing but a symbol. I was not born to conquer, but to lead a forlorn-hope—to deceive vanquished men with a hope not real, and to deceive the victors with an unreal fear. Nevertheless, my friend," he added, grasping Gouache's hand, and fixing upon him his small bright eyes,—"nevertheless, let us fight, fight—fight to the very end!"

"We will fight to the end, Eminence," said Gouache. He was only a private of Zouaves, and the man whose hand he held was great and powerful; but the same spirit was in the hearts of both, the same courage, the same devotion to the failing cause—and both kept their words, each in his own way.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Astrardente was in some respects a picturesque place. The position of the little town gave it a view in both directions from where it stood; for it was built upon a precipitous eminence rising suddenly out of the midst of the narrow strip of fertile land, the long and rising valley

which, from its lower extremity, conducted by many cir cuits to the Roman Campagna, and which ended above in the first rough passes of the lower Abruzzi. The base of the town extended into the vineyards and olive-orchards which surrounded the little hill on all sides; and the summit of it was crowned by the feudal palace-castle—an enormous building of solid stone, in the style of the fifteenth century. Upon the same spot had formally stood a rugged fortress, but the magnificent ideas of the Astrardente pope had not tolerated such remains of barbarism; the ancient stronghold had been torn down, and on its foundations rose a gigantic mansion, consisting of a main palace, with great balconies and columned front, overlooking the town, and of two massive wings leading back like towers to the edge of the precipitous rock to northwards. Between these wings a great paved court formed a sort of terrace, open upon one side, and ornamented within with a few antique statues dug up upon the estates, and with numerous plants, which the old duke had caused to be carefully cultivated in vases, and which were only exposed upon the terrace during the warm summer months. The view from the court was to the north—that is to say, down the valley, comprehending ranges of hills that seemed to cross and recross into the extreme distance, their outlines being each time less clearly defined, as the masses in each succeeding range took a softer purple hue.

Within, the palace presented a great variety of apartments. There were suites of vaulted rooms upon the lower floor, frescoed in the good manner of the fifteenth century; there were other suites above, hung with ancient tapestry and furnished with old-fashioned marble tables, and mirrors in heavily gilt frames, and one entire wing had been lately fitted up in the modern style. In this part of the house Corona established herself with Sister Gabrielle, and began to lead a life of regular occupations and profound retirement, which seemed to be rather a continuation of her existence in the convent where she had been educated as a girl, than to form any part in the life

of the superb Duchessa d'Astrardente, who for five years had been one of the most conspicuous persons in society. Every morning at eight o'clock the two ladies, always clad in deep black, attended the Mass which was celebrated for them in the palace chapel. Then Corona walked for an hour with her companion upon the terrace, or, if it rained, beneath the covered balconies upon the south side. The morning hours she passed in solitude, reading such books of devotion and serious matter as most suited the sad temper of her mind; precisely at mid-day she and Sister Gabrielle breakfasted together in a sort of solemn state; and at three o'clock the great landau, with its black horses and mourning liveries, stood under the inner gate. The two ladies appeared five minutes later, and by a gesture Corona indicated whether she would be driven up or down the valley. The dashing equipage descended the long smooth road that wound through the town, and returned invariably at the end of two hours, again ascended the tortuous way, and disappeared beneath the dark entrance. At six o'clock dinner was served, with the same solemn state as attended the morning meal; Corona and Sister Gabrielle remained together until ten, and the day was over. There was no more variation in the routine of their lives than if they had been moved by a machinery connected with the great castle clock overhead, which chimed the hours and the quarters by day and night, and regulated the doings of the town below.

But in spite of this unchanging sequence of similar habit, the time passed pleasantly for Corona. She had had too much of the brilliant lights and the buzzing din of society for the last five years, too much noise, too much idle talk, too much aimless movement; she needed rest, too, from the constant strain of her efforts to fulfil her self-imposed duties towards her husband—most of all, perhaps, she required a respite from the sufferings she had undergone through her stifled love for Giovanni Saracinesca. All this she found in the magnificent calm of the life at Astrardente. She meditated long upon the

memory of her husband, recalling lovingly those things which had been most worthy in him, willingly forgetting his many follies and vanities and moments of petulance. She went over in her mind the many and varied scenes of the past, and learned to love the sweet and silent solitude of the present by comparison of it with all the useless and noisy activity of the world she had for a time abandoned. She had not expected to find anything more than a passive companion in Sister Gabrielle; but in the course of their daily converse she discovered in her a character of extreme refinement and quick perception, a depth of human sympathy and a breadth of experience which amazed her, and made her own views of things seem small. The Sister was devout and rigid in the observance of the institutions of her order, in so far as she was able to follow out the detail of religious regulation without interfering with the convenience of her companion; but in her conversation she showed an intimate knowledge of character which was a constant source of pleasure to Corona, who told the Sister long stories of people she had known for the sake of hearing her admirable comments upon social questions.

But besides her reading and her long hours of meditation and her talks with Sister Gabrielle, Corona found occupation in the state of the town below her residence. She attempted once or twice to visit the poor cottages, in the hope of doing some good; but she found that she was such an object of holy awe to the inmates that they were speechless in her presence, or became so nervous in their desire to answer her questions, that the information she was able to obtain concerning their troubles was too vague to be of any use.

The Italian peasant is not the same in all parts of the country, as is generally supposed; and although the Tuscan, who is constantly brought into familiar contact with his landlord, and acquires a certain pleasant faith in him, grows eloquent upon the conditions of his being, the same is not true of the rougher race that labours in the

valleys of the Sabine and the Samnite hills. The peasant of the Agro Romano is indeed capable of civilisation, and he is able to understand his superiors, provided that he is gradually accustomed to seeing them: unfortunately this occurs but rarely. Many of the great Roman landholders spend a couple of months of every year upon their estates: old Astrardente had in his later years gone to considerable expense in refitting and repairing the castle, but he had done little for the town. Men like the Saracinesca, however, were great exceptions at that time; though they travelled much abroad, they often remained for many months in their rugged old fortress. They knew the inhabitants of their lands far and wide, and were themselves not only known but loved; they spent their money in improving the condition of their peasants, in increasing the area of their forests, and in fostering the fertility of the soil, but they cared nothing for adorning the grey stone walls of their ancestors' stronghold. It had done well enough for a thousand years, it would do well enough still; it had stood firm against fierce sieges in the dark ages of the Roman baronry, it could afford to stand unchanged in its monumental strength against the advancing sea of nineteenth-century civilisation. They themselves, father and son, were content with such practical improvements as they could introduce for the good of their people and the enriching of their land; a manly race, despising luxury, they cared little whether their home was thought comfortable by the few guests they occasionally invited to spend a week with them. They saw much of the peasantry, and went daily among them, understanding their wants, and wisely promoting in their minds the belief that land cannot prosper unless both landlord and tenant do their share.

But Astrardente was a holding of a very different kind, and Corona, in her first attempts at understanding the state of things, found herself stopped by a dead wall of silence, beyond which she guessed that there lay an

undiscovered land of trouble. She knew next to nothing of the condition of her people; she only imperfectly understood the relations in which they actually stood to herself, the extent of her power over them, and of their power over her. The mysteries of *emphyteusis, emphyteuma*, and *emphyteuta* were still hidden to her, though her steward spoke of them with surprising loquacity and fluency. She laboured hard to understand the system upon which her tenants held their lands from her, and it was some time before she succeeded. It is easier to explain the matter at once than to follow Corona in her attempts to comprehend it.

To judge from the terms employed, the system of holdings common in the Pontifical States has descended without interruption from the time of the Romans to the present day. As in old Roman law, *emphyteusis*, now spelt *emfiteuse*, means the possession of rights over another person's land, capable of transmission by inheritance; and to-day, as under the Romans, the holder of such rights is called the *emphyteuta*, or *emfiteuta*. How the Romans came to use Greek words in their tenant-law does not belong to the matter in hand; these words are the only ones now in use in this part of Italy, and they are used precisely as they were in remote times.

A tenant may acquire rights of *emfiteuse* directly from the owner of the land, like an ordinary lease; or he may acquire them by settlement—"squatting," as the popular term is. Wherever land is lying waste, any one may establish himself upon it and cultivate it, on condition of paying to the owner a certain proportion of the yield of the land—generally one quarter—either in kind or in money. The landlord may, indeed, refuse the right of settlement in the first instance, which would very rarely occur, since most people who own barren tracts of rock and heath are only too glad to promote any kind of cultivation. But when the landlord has once allowed the right, the right itself is constituted thereby into a possession of which the peasant may dispose as he pleases,

even by selling it to another. The law provides, however, that in case of transfers by sale, the landlord shall receive one year's rent in kind or in money in addition to the rent due, and this bonus is paid jointly by the buyer and the seller according to agreement. Such holdings are inherited from father to son for many generations, and are considered to be perpetual leases. The landlord cannot expel a tenant except for non-payment of rent during three consecutive years. In actual fact, the right of the *emfiteuta* in the soil is far more important than that of the landlord; for the tenant can cheat his landlord as much as he pleases, whereas the injustice of the law provides that under no circumstances whatsoever shall the landlord cheat the tenant. In actual fact, also, the rents are universally paid in kind, and the peasant eats what remains of the produce, so that very little cash is seen in the land.

Corona discovered that the income she enjoyed from the lands of Astrardente was collected by the basketful from the threshing-floors, and by the barrel from the vineyards of some two hundred tenants. It was a serious matter to gather from two hundred threshing-floors precisely a quarter of the grain threshed, and from fifty or sixty vineyards precisely a quarter of the wine made in each. The peasants all made their wine at the same time, and all threshed their grain in the same week. If the agent was not on the spot during the threshing and the vintage, the peasant had no difficulty whatever in hiding a large quantity of his produce. As the rent was never fixed, but depended solely on the yield of the year, it was preeminently to the advantage of the tenant to throw dust in the eyes of the landlord whenever he got a chance. The landlord found the business of watching his tenants tedious and unprofitable, and naturally resorted to the crowning evil of agricultural evils—the employment of a rent-farmer. The latter, at all events, was willing to pay a fixed sum yearly; and if the sum paid was generally considerably below the real value of the rents, the arrange-

ment at least assured a fixed income to the landlord, with the certainty of getting it without trouble to himself. The middleman then proceeded to grind the tenants at his leisure and discretion in order to make the best of his bargain. The result was, that while the tenant starved and the landlord got less than his due in consideration of being saved from annoyance, the middleman gradually accumulated money.

Upon this system nine-tenths of the land in the Pontifical States was held, and much of the same land is so held to-day, in spite of the modern tenant-law, for reasons which will be clearly explained in another part of this history. Corona saw and understood that the evil was very great. She discussed the matter with her steward, or *ministro* as he was called, who was none other than the aforesaid middleman; and the more she discussed the question, the more hopeless the question appeared. The steward held a contract from her dead husband for a number of years. He had regularly paid the yearly sums agreed upon, and it would be impossible to remove him for several years to come. He, of course, was strenuously opposed to any change, and did his best to make himself appear as an angel of mercy and justice, presiding over a happy family of rejoicing peasants in the heart of a terrestrial paradise. Unfortunately for himself, however, he had not at first understood the motive which prompted Corona's inquiries. He supposed in the beginning that she was not satisfied with the amount of rent he paid, and that at the expiration of his contract she intended to raise the sum; so that, on the first occasion when she sent for him, he had drawn a piteous picture of the peasant's condition, and had expatiated with eloquence on his own poverty, and on the extreme difficulty of collecting any rents at all. It was not until he discovered that Corona's chief preoccupation was for the welfare of her tenants that he changed his tactics, and endeavoured to prove that all was for the best upon the best of all possible estates.

Then, to his great astonishment, Corona informed him

that his contract would not be renewed, and that at the expiration of his term she would collect her rents herself. It had taken her long to understand the situation, but when she had comprehended it, she made up her mind that something must be done. If her fortune had depended solely upon the income she received from the Astrardente lands, she would have made up her mind to reduce herself to penury rather than allow things to go in the way they were going. Fortunately she was rich, and if she had not all the experience necessary to deal with such matters, she had plenty of goodwill, plenty of generosity, and plenty of money. In her simple theory of agrarian economy the best way to improve an estate seemed to be to spend the income arising from it directly upon its improvement, until she could take the whole management of it into her own hands. The trouble, as she thought, was that there was too little money among the peasants; the best way to help them was to put money within their reach. The only question was how to do this without demoralising them, and without increasing their liabilities towards the *ministro* or middleman.

Then she sent for the curate. From him she learned that the people did well enough in the summer, but that the winter was dreaded. She asked why. He answered that they were not provident; that the land system was bad; and that even if they saved anything the *ministro* would take it from them. She inquired whether he thought it possible to induce them to be more thrifty. He thought it might be done in ten years, but not in one.

"In that case," said Corona, "the only way to improve their condition is to give them work in the winter. I will make roads through the estate, and build large dwelling-houses in the town. There shall be work enough for everybody."

It was a simple plan, but it was destined to be carried into execution, and to change the face of the Astrardente domain in a few years. Corona sent to Rome for an engineer who was also a good architect, and she set her-

self to study the possibilities of the place, giving the man sufficient scope, and only insisting that there should be no labour and no material imported from beyond the limits of her lands. This provided her with an occupation whereby the time passed quickly enough.

The Lenten season ended, and Eastertide ran swiftly on to Pentecost. The early fruit-trees blossomed white, and the flowers fell in a snow-shower to the ground, to give place to the cherries and the almonds and the pears. The brown bramble-hedges turned leafy, and were alive with little birds; and the great green lizards shot across the woodland paths upon the hillside, and caught the flies that buzzed noisily in the spring sunshine. The dried-up vines put forth tiny leaves, and the maize shot suddenly up to the sun out of the rich furrows, like myriads of brilliant green poignards piercing the brown skin of the earth. By the roadside the grass grew high, and the broad shallow brooks shrank to narrow rivulets, and disappeared in the overgrowing rushes before the increasing heat of the climbing sun.

Corona's daily round of life never changed, but as the months wore on, a stealing thought came often and often again—shy, as though fearing to be driven away; silent at first, as a shadow in a dream, but taking form and reality from familiarity with its own self, and speaking intelligible words, saying at last plainly, "Will he keep his promise? Will he never come?"

But he came not as the fresh colours of spring deepened with the rich maturity of summer; and Corona, gazing down the valley, saw the change that came over the fair earth, and half guessed the change that was coming over her own life. She had sought solitude instinctively, but she had not known what it would bring her. She had desired to honour her dead husband by withdrawing from the world for a time and thinking of him and remembering him. She had done so, but the youth in her rebelled at last against the constant memory of old age—of an old age, too, which had passed away from her and was dead for ever.

It was right to dwell for a time upon the thought of her widowhood, but the voice said it would not be always right. The calm and noiseless tide of the old man's ceasing life had ebbed slowly and reluctantly from her shore, and she had followed the sad sea in her sorrow to the furthest verge of its retreat; but as she stood upon the edge of the stagnant waters, gazing far out and trying to follow even further the slow subsiding ooze, the tide had turned upon her unawares, the fresh seaward breeze sprang up and broke the dead calm with the fresh motion of crisp ripples that once more flowed gladly over the dreary sand, and the waters of life plashed again and laughed gladly together around her feet.

The thought of Giovanni—the one thought that again and again kept recurring in her mind—grew very sweet,—as sweet as it had once been bitter. There was nothing to stop its growth now, and she let it have its way. What did it matter, so long as he did not come near her—for the present? Some day he would come; she wondered when, and how long he would keep his promise. But meanwhile she was not unhappy, and she went about her occupations as before; only sometimes she would go alone at evening to the balcony that faced the higher mountains, and there she would stand for half an hour gazing southward towards the precipitous rocks that caught the red glare of the sinking sun, and she asked herself if he were there, or whether, as report had told her, he were in the far north. It was but half a day's ride over the hills, he had said. But strain her sight as she would, she could not pierce the heavy crags nor see into the wooded dells beyond. He had said he would pass the summer there; had he changed his mind?

But she was not unhappy. There was that in her which forbade unhappiness, which would have broken out into great joy if she would have let it; but yet she would not. It was too soon yet to say aloud what she said in her heart daily, that she loved Giovanni with a great love, and that she knew she was free to love him. In that thought there