

was enough of joy. But he might come if he would; her anger would not be great if he broke his promise now, he had kept it so long—six whole months. But by-and-by, as the days passed, the first note of happiness was marred by the discordant ring of a distant fear. What if she had too effectually forbidden him to see her? What if he had gone out disappointed of all hope, and was really in distant Scandinavia, as the papers said, risking his life in mad adventures?

But after all, that was not what she feared. He was strong, young, brave—he had survived a thousand dangers, he would survive these also. There arose between her and the thought of him an evil shadow, the image of a woman, and it took the shape of Donna Tullia so vividly that she could see the red lips move and almost hear the noisy laugh. She was angry with herself at the idea, but it recurred continually and gave her pain, and the pain grew to an intolerable fear. She began to feel that she must know where he was, at any cost, or she could have no peace. She was restless and nervous, and began to be absent-minded in her conversation with Sister Gabrielle. The good woman saw it, and advised a little change—anything, an excursion of a day for instance. Corona, she said, was too young to lead this life.

Her mind leaped at the idea. It was but half a day's ride, he had said; she would climb those hills and look down upon Saracinesca—only once. She might perhaps meet some peasant, and by a careless inquiry she would learn whether he was there—or would be there in the summer. No one would know; and besides, Sister Gabrielle had said that an excursion would do Corona good. Sister Gabrielle had probably never heard that Saracinesca was so near, and she certainly would not guess that the Duchessa had any interest in its lord. She announced her intention, and the Sister approved—she herself, she said, was too weak to undergo the fatigue.

On the following morning, Corona alone entered her carriage and was driven many miles up the southward

hills, till the road was joined by a broad bridle-path that led eastwards towards the Abruzzi. Here she was met by a party of horsemen, her own *guardiani*, or forest-keepers, as they are called, in rough dark-blue coats and leathern gaiters. Each man wore upon his breast a round plate of chiselled silver, bearing the arms of the Astrardente; each had a long rifle slung behind him, and carried a holster at the bow of his huge saddle. A couple of sturdy black-browed peasants held a mule by the bridle, heavily caparisoned in the old fashion, under a great red velvet Spanish saddle, with long tarnished trappings that had once been embroidered with silver. A little knot of peasants and ragged boys stood all around watching the preparations with interest, and commenting audibly upon the beauty of the great lady.

Corona mounted from a stone by the wayside, and the young men led her beast up the path. She smiled to herself, for she had never done such a thing before, but she was not uneasy in the company of her rough-looking escort. She knew well enough that she was as safe with them as in her own house.

As the bridle-path wound up from the road, the country grew more rugged, the vegetation more scanty, and the stones more plentiful. It was a wilderness of rocky desolation; as far as one could see there was no sign of humanity, not a soul upon the solitary road, not a living thing upon the desolate hills that rose on either side in jagged points to the sky. Corona talked a little with the head-keeper who rode beside her with a slack rein, letting his small mountain horse pick its own way over the rough path. He told her that few people ever passed that way. It was the short road to Saracinesca. The princes sometimes sent their carriage round by the longer way and rode over the hills; and in the vintage-time there was some traffic, as many of the smaller peasants carried grapes across the pass to the larger wine-presses, and sold them outright. It was not a dangerous road, for the very reason that it was so unfrequented. The

Duchessa explained that she only wanted to see the valley beyond from the summit of the pass, and would then return. It was past mid-day when the party reached the highest point,—a depression between the crags just wide enough to admit one loaded mule. The keeper said she could see Saracinesca from the end of the narrow way, before the descent began. She uttered an exclamation of surprise as she reached the spot.

Scarcely a quarter of a mile to the right, at the extremity of a broad hill-road, she saw the huge towers of Saracinesca, grey and storm-beaten, rising out of a thick wood. The whole intervening space—and indeed the whole deep valley as far as she could see—was an unbroken forest of chestnut-trees. Here and there below the castle the houses of the town showed their tiled gables, but the mass of the buildings was hidden completely from sight. Corona had had no idea that she should find herself so near to the place, and she was seized with a sudden fear lest Giovanni should appear upon the long straight path that led into the trees. She drew back a little among her followers.

“Are the princes there now?” she asked of the head-keeper.

He did not know; but a moment later a peasant, riding astride of a bag of corn upon his donkey’s back, passed along the straight road by the entrance to the bridle-path. The keeper hailed him, and put the question. Seeing Corona upon her mule, surrounded by armed men in livery, the man halted, and pulled off his soft black-cloth hat.

Both the princes were in Saracinesca, he said. The young prince had been there ever since Easter. They were busy building an aqueduct which was to supply the whole town with water; it was to pass above, up there among the woods. The princes went almost every day to visit the works. Her Excellency might, perhaps, find them there now, or if not, they were at the castle.

But her Excellency had no intention of finding them.

She gave the fellow a coin, and beat a somewhat hasty retreat. Her followers were silent men, accustomed to obey, and they followed her down the steep path without even exchanging a word among themselves. Beneath the shade of an overhanging rock she halted, and, dismounting from her mule, was served with the lunch that had been brought. She ate little, and then sat thoughtfully contemplating the bare stones, while the men at a little distance hastily disposed of the remains of her meal. She had experienced an extraordinary emotion on finding herself suddenly so near to Giovanni; it was almost as though she had seen him, and her heart beat fast, while a dark flush rose from time to time to her cheek. It would have been so natural that he should pass that way, just as she was halting at the entrance to the bridle-path. How unspeakably dreadful it would have been to be discovered thus spying out his dwelling-place when she had so strictly forbidden him to attempt to see her! The blush burned upon her cheeks—she had done a thing so undignified, so ill befitting her magnificent superiority. For a moment she was desperately ashamed. But for all that, she could not repress the glad delight she felt at knowing that he was there after all; that, if he had kept his word in avoiding her, he had, nevertheless, also fulfilled his intention of spending the summer in Saracinesca. He had even been there since Easter, and the story of his going to the North had been a mere invention of the newspapers. She could not understand his conduct, nor why he had gone to Paris—a fact attested by people who knew him. It had probably been for some matter of business—that excuse which, in a woman’s mind, explains almost any sudden journey a man may undertake. But he was there in the castle now, and her heart was satisfied.

The men packed the things in the basket, and Corona was helped upon her mule. Slowly the party descended the steep path that grew broader and more practicable as they neared the bottom; there the carriage awaited her,

and soon she was bowling along the smooth road towards home, leaving far behind her the mounted guards, the peasants, and her slow-paced mule. The sun was low when the carriage rolled under the archway of Astrardente. Sister Gabrielle said Corona looked much the better for her excursion, and she added that she must be very strong to bear such fatigue so well. And the next day—and for many days—the Sister noticed the change in her hostess's manner, and promised herself that if the Duchessa became uneasy again she would advise another day among the hills, so wonderful was the effect of a slight change from the ordinary routine of her life.

That night old Saracinesca and his son sat at dinner in a wide hall of their castle. The faithful Pasquale served them as solemnly as he was used to do in Rome. This evening he spoke again. He had ventured no remark since he had informed them of the Duca d'Astrardente's death.

"I beg your Excellencies' pardon," he began, adopting his usual formula of apologetic address.

"Well, Pasquale, what is it?" asked old Saracinesca.

"I did not know whether your Excellency was aware that the Duchessa d'Astrardente had been here to-day."

"What?" roared the Prince.

"You must be mad, Pasquale?" exclaimed Giovanni in a low voice.

"I beg your Excellencies' pardon if I am wrong, but this is how I know. Gigi Secchi, the peasant from Aquaviva in the lower forest, brought a bag of corn to the mill to-day, and he told the miller, and the miller told Ettore, and Ettore told Nino, and Nino told——"

"What the devil did he tell him?" interrupted old Saracinesca.

"Nino told the cook's boy," continued Pasquale unmoved, "and the cook's boy told me, your Excellency, that Gigi was passing along the road to Serveti coming here, when he was stopped by a number of *guardiani* who accompanied a beautiful dark lady in black, who rode upon a mule, and the *guardiani* asked him if your Excellencies

were at Saracinesca; and when he said you were, the lady gave him a coin, and turned at once and rode down the bridle-path towards Astrardente, and he said the *guardiani* were those of the Astrardente, because he remembered to have seen one of them, who has a scar over his left eye, at the great fair at Genazzano last year. And that is how I heard."

"That is a remarkable narrative, Pasquale," answered the Prince, laughing loudly, "but it seems very credible. Go and send for Gigi Secchi if he is still in the neighbourhood, and bring him here, and let us have the story from his own lips."

When they were alone the two men looked at each other for a moment, and then old Saracinesca laughed again; but Giovanni looked very grave, and his face was pale. Presently his father became serious again.

"If this thing is true," he said, "I would advise you, Giovanni, to pay a visit to the other side of the hills. It is time."

Giovanni was silent for a moment. He was intensely interested in the situation, but he could not tell his father that he had promised Corona not to see her, and he had not yet explained to himself her sudden appearance so near Saracinesca.

"I think it would be better for you to go first," he said to his father. "But I am not at all sure this story is true."

"I? Oh, I will go when you please," returned the old man, with another laugh. He was always ready for anything active.

But Gigi Secchi could not be found. He had returned to Aquaviva at once, and it was not easy to send a message. Two days later, however, Giovanni took the trouble of going to the man's home. He was not altogether surprised when Gigi confirmed Pasquale's tale in every particular. Corona had actually been at Saracinesca to find out if Giovanni was there or not; and on hearing that he was at the castle, she had fled precipitately. Giovanni was

naturally grave and of a melancholy temper; but during the last few months he had been more than usually taciturn, occupying himself with dogged obstinacy in the construction of his aqueduct, visiting the works in the day and spending hours in the evening over the plans. He was waiting. He believed that Corona cared for him, and he knew that he loved her, but for the present he must wait patiently, both for the sake of his promise and for the sake of a decent respect of her widowhood. In order to wait he felt the necessity of constant occupation, and to that end he had set himself resolutely to work with his father, whose ideal dream was to make Saracinesca the most complete and prosperous community in that part of the mountains.

"I think if you would go over," he said, at the end of a week, "it would be much better. I do not want to intrude myself upon her at present, and you could easily find out whether she would like to see me. After all, she may have been merely making an excursion for her amusement, and may have chanced upon us by accident. I have often noticed how suddenly one comes in view of the castle from that bridle-path."

"On the other hand," returned the Prince with a smile, "any one would tell her that the path leads nowhere except to Saracinesca. But I will go to-morrow," he added. "I will set your mind at rest in twenty-four hours."

"Thank you," said Giovanni.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Old Saracinesca kept his word, and on the following morning, eight days after Corona's excursion upon the hills, he rode down to Astrardente, reaching the palace at about mid-day. He sent in his card, and stood waiting beneath the great gate, beating the dust from his boots

with his heavy whip. His face looked darker than ever, from constant exposure to the sun, and his close-cropped hair and short square beard had turned even whiter than before in the last six months, but his strong form was erect, and his step firm and elastic. He was a remarkable old man; many a boy of twenty might have envied his strength and energetic vitality.

Corona was at her mid-day breakfast with Sister Gabrielle, when the old Prince's card was brought. She started at the sight of the name; and though upon the bit of pasteboard she read plainly enough, "*Il Principe di Saracinesca*," she hesitated, and asked the butler if it was really the Prince. He said it was.

"Would you mind seeing him?" she asked of Sister Gabrielle. "He is an old gentleman," she added, in explanation—"a near neighbour here in the mountains."

Sister Gabrielle had no objection. She even remarked that it would do the Duchessa good to see some one.

"Ask the Prince to come in, and put another place at the table," said Corona.

A moment later the old man entered, and Corona rose to receive him. There was something refreshing in the ring of his deep voice and the clank of his spurs as he crossed the marble floor.

"Signora Duchessa, you are very good to receive me. I did not know that this was your breakfast-hour. Ah!" he exclaimed, glancing at Sister Gabrielle, who had also risen to her feet, "good day, my Sister."

"Sister Gabrielle," said Corona, as an introduction; "she is good enough to be my companion in solitude."

To tell the truth, Corona felt uneasy; but the sensation was somehow rather pleasurable, although it crossed her mind that the Prince might have heard of her excursion, and had possibly come to find out why she had been so near to his place. She boldly faced the situation.

"I nearly came upon you the other day as unexpectedly as you have visited me," she said with a smile. "I had a fancy to look over into your valley, and when