

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

I reached the top of the hill I found I was almost in your house."

"I wish you had quite been there," returned the Prince. "Of course I heard that you had been seen, and we guessed you had stumbled upon us in some mountain excursion. My son rode all the way to Aquaviva to see the man who had spoken with you."

Saracinesca said this as though it were perfectly natural, helping himself to the dish the servant offered him. But when he looked up he saw that Corona blushed beneath her dark skin.

"It is such a very sudden view at that point," she said, nervously, "that I was startled."

"I wish you had preserved your equanimity to the extent of going a little further. Saracinesca has rarely been honoured with the visit of a Duchessa d'Astrardente. But since you have explained your visit—or the visit which you did not make—I ought to explain mine. You must know, in the first place, that I am not here by accident, but by intention, preconceived, well pondered, and finally executed to my own complete satisfaction. I came, not to get a glimpse of your valley nor a distant view of your palace, but to see you, yourself. Your hospitality in receiving me has therefore crowned and complimented the desire I had of seeing you."

Corona laughed a little.

"That is a very pretty speech," she said.

"Which you would have lost if you had not received me," he answered, gaily. "I have not done yet. I have many pretty speeches for you. The sight of you induces beauty in language as the sun in May makes the flowers open."

"That is another," laughed Corona. "Do you spend your days in studying the poets at Saracinesca? Does Don Giovanni study with you?"

"Giovanni is a fact," returned the Prince; "I am a fable. Old men are always fables, for they represent, in a harmless form, the follies of all mankind; their end is

always in itself a moral, and young people can learn much by studying them."

"Your comparison is witty," said Corona, who was much amused at old Saracinesca's conversation; "but I doubt whether you are so harmless as you represent. You are certainly not foolish, and I am not sure whether, as a study for the young——" she hesitated, and laughed.

"Whether extremely young persons would have the wit to comprehend virtue by the concealment of it—to say, as that witty old Roman said, that the images of Cassius and Brutus were more remarkable than those of any one else, for the very reason that they were nowhere to be seen—like my virtues? Giovanni, for instance, is the very reverse of me in that, though he has shown such singularly bad taste in resembling my outward man."

"One should never conceal virtues," said Sister Gabrielle, gently. "One should not hide one's light under a basket, you know."

"My Sister," replied the old Prince, his black eyes twinkling merrily, "if I had in my whole composition as much light as would enable you to read half-a-dozen words in your breviary, it should be at your disposal. I would set it in the midst of Piazza Colonna, and call it the most wonderful illumination on record. Unfortunately my light, like the lantern of a solitary miner, is only perceptible to myself, and dimly at that."

"You must not depreciate yourself so very much," said Corona.

"No; that is true. You will either believe I am speaking the truth, or you will not. I do not know which would be the worse fate. I will change the subject. My son Giovanni, Duchessa, desires to be remembered in your good graces."

"Thanks. How is he?"

"He is well, but the temper of him is marvellously melancholy. He is building an aqueduct, and so am I.

The thing is accomplished by his working perpetually while I smoke cigarettes and read novels."

"The division of labour is to your advantage, I should say," remarked Corona.

"Immensely, I assure you. He promotes the natural advantages of my lands, and I encourage the traffic in tobacco and literature. He works from morning till night, is his own engineer, contractor, overseer, and master-mason. He does everything, and does it well. If we were less barbarous in our bachelor establishment I would ask you to come and see us—in earnest this time—and visit the work we are doing. It is well worth while. Perhaps you would consent as it is. We will vacate the castle for your benefit, and mount guard outside the gates all night."

Again Corona blushed. She would have given anything to go, but she felt that it was impossible.

"I would like to go," she said. "If one could come back the same day."

"You did before," remarked Saracinesca, bluntly.

"But it was late when I reached home, and I spent no time at all there."

"I know you did not," laughed the old man. "You gave Gigi Secchi some money, and then fled precipitately."

"Indeed I was afraid you would suddenly come upon me, and I ran away," answered Corona, laughing in her turn, as the dark blood rose to her olive cheeks.

"As my amiable ancestors did in the same place when anybody passed with a full purse," suggested Saracinesca. "But we have improved a little since then. We would have asked you to breakfast. Will you come?"

"I do not like to go alone; I cannot, you see. Sister Gabrielle could never ride up that hill on a mule."

"There is a road for carriages," said the Prince. "I will propose something in the way of a compromise. I will bring Giovanni down with me and our team of mountain horses. Those great beasts of yours cannot do this

kind of work. We will take you and Sister Gabrielle up almost as fast as you could go by the bridle-path."

"And back on the same day?" asked Corona.

"No; on the next day."

"But I do not see where the compromise is," she replied.

"Sister Gabrielle is at once the compromise and the cause that you will not be compromised. I beg her pardon——"

Both ladies laughed.

"I will be very glad to go," said the Sister. "I do not see that there is anything extraordinary in the Prince's proposal."

"My Sister," returned Saracinesca, "you are on the way to saintship; you already enjoy the beatific vision; you see with a heavenly perspicuity."

"It is a charming proposition," said Corona; "but in that case you will have to come down the day before." She was a little embarrassed.

"We will not invade the cloister," answered the Prince. "Giovanni and I will spend the night in concocting pretty speeches, and will appear armed with them at dawn before your gates."

"There is room in Astrardente," replied Corona. "You shall not lack hospitality for a night. When will you come?"

"To-morrow evening, if you please. A good thing should be done quickly, in order not to delay doing it again."

"Do you think I would go again?"

Saracinesca fixed his black eyes on Corona's, and gazed at her some seconds before he answered.

"Madam," he said at last, very gravely, "I trust you will come again and stay longer."

"You are very good," returned Corona, quietly. "At all events, I will go this first time."

"We will endeavour to show our gratitude by making you comfortable," answered the Prince, resuming his former tone. "You shall have a mass in the morning

and a litany in the evening. We are godless fellows up there, but we have a priest."

"You seem to associate our comfort entirely with religious services," laughed Corona. "But you are very considerate."

"I see the most charming evidence of devotion at your side," he replied; "Sister Gabrielle is both the evidence of your piety and is in herself an exposition of the benefits of religion. There shall be other attractions, however, besides masses and litanies."

Breakfast being ended, Sister Gabrielle left the two together. They went from the dining-room to the great vaulted hall of the inner building. It was cool there, and there were great old arm-chairs ranged along the walls. The closed blinds admitted a soft green light from the hot noonday without. Corona loved to walk upon the cool marble floor; she was a very strong and active woman, delighting in mere motion—not restless, but almost incapable of weariness; her movements not rapid, but full of grace and ease. Saracinesca walked by her side, smoking thoughtfully for some minutes.

"Duchessa," he said at last, glancing at her beautiful face, "things are greatly changed since we met last. You were angry with me then. I do not know whether you were so justly, but you were very angry for a few moments. I am going to return to the subject now; I trust you will not be offended with me."

Corona trembled for a moment, and was silent. She would have prevented him from going on, but before she could find the words she sought he continued.

"Things are much changed, in some respects; in others, not at all. It is but natural to suppose that in the course of time you will think of the possibility of marrying again. My son, Duchessa, loves you very truly. Pardon me, it is no disrespect to you, now, that he should have told me so. I am his father, and I have no one else to care for. He is too honest a gentleman to have spoken of his affection for you at an earlier period, but he has told me of it now."

Corona stood still in the midst of the great hall, and faced the old Prince. She had grown pale while he was speaking. Still she was silent.

"I have nothing more to say—that is all," said Saracinesca, gazing earnestly into the depths of her eyes. "I have nothing more to say."

"Do you then mean to repeat the warning you once gave me?" asked Corona, growing whiter still. "Do you mean to imply that there is danger to your son?"

"There is danger—great danger for him, unless you will avert it."

"And how?" asked Corona, in a low voice.

"Madam, by becoming his wife."

Corona started and turned away in great agitation. Saracinesca stood still while she slowly walked a few steps from him. She could not speak.

"I could say a great deal more, Duchessa," he said, as she came back towards him. "I could say that the marriage is not only fitting in every other way, but is also advantageous from a worldly point of view. You are sole mistress of Astrardente; my son will before long be sole master of Saracinesca. Our lands are near together—that is a great advantage, that question of fortune. Again, I would observe that, with your magnificent position, you could not condescend to accept a man of lower birth than the highest in the country. There is none higher than the Saracinesca—pardon my arrogance,—and among princes there is no braver, truer gentleman than my son Giovanni. I ask no pardon for saying that; I will maintain it against all comers. I forego all questions of advantage, and base my argument upon that. He is the best man I know, and he loves you devotedly."

"Is he aware that you are here for this purpose?" asked Corona, suddenly. She spoke with a great effort.

"No. He knows that I am here, and was glad that I came. He desired me to ascertain if you would see him. He would certainly not have thought of addressing you

at present. I am an old man, and I feel that I must do things quickly. That is my excuse."

Corona was again silent. She was too truthful to give an evasive answer, and yet she hesitated to speak. The position was an embarrassing one; she was taken unawares, and was terrified at the emotion she felt. It had never entered her mind that the old Prince could appear on his son's behalf, and she did not know how to meet him.

"I have perhaps been too abrupt," said Saracinesca. "I love my son very dearly, and his happiness is more to me than what remains of my own. If from the first you regard my proposition as an impossible one, I would spare him the pain of a humiliation,—I fear I could not save him from the rest, from a suffering that might drive him mad. It is for this reason that I implore you, if you are able, to give me some answer, not that I may convey it to him, but in order that I may be guided in future. He cannot forget you; but he has not seen you for six months. To see you again if he must leave you for ever, would only inflict a fresh wound." He paused, while Corona slowly walked by his side.

"I do not see why I should conceal the truth from you," she said at last. "I cannot conceal it from myself. I am not a child that I should be ashamed of it. There is nothing wrong in it—no reason why it should not be. You are honest, too—why should we try to deceive ourselves? I trust to your honour to be silent, and I own that I—that I love your son."

Corona stood still and turned her face away, as the burning blush rose to her cheeks. The answer she had given was characteristic of her, straightforward and honest. She was not ashamed of it, and yet the words were so new, so strange in their sound, and so strong in their meaning, that she blushed as she uttered them. Saracinesca was greatly surprised, too, for he had expected some evasive turn, some hint that he might bring Giovanni. But his delight had no bounds.

"Duchessa," he said, "the happiest day I can remember was when I brought home my wife to Saracinesca. My proudest day will be that on which my son enters the same gates with you by his side."

He took her hand and raised it to his lips, with a courteous gesture.

"It will be long before that—it must be very long," answered Corona.

"It shall be when you please, Madam, provided it is at last. Meanwhile we will come down to-morrow, and take you to our tower. Do you understand now why I said that I hoped you would come again and stay longer? I trust you have not changed your mind in regard to the excursion."

"No. We will expect you to-morrow night. Remember, I have been honest with you—I trust to you to be silent."

"You have my word. And now, with your permission, I will return to Saracinesca. Believe me, the news that you expect us will be good enough to tell Giovanni."

"You may greet him from me. But will you not rest awhile before you ride back? You must be tired."

"No fear of that!" answered the Prince. "You have put a new man into an old one. I shall never tire of bearing the news of your greetings."

So the old man left her, and mounted his horse and rode up the pass. But Corona remained for hours in the vaulted hall, pacing up and down. It had come too soon—far too soon. And yet, how she had longed for it! how she had wondered whether it would ever come at all!

The situation was sufficiently strange, too. Giovanni had once told her of his love, and she had silenced him. He was to tell her again, and she was to accept what he said. He was to ask her to marry him, and her answer was a foregone conclusion. It seemed as though this greatest event of her life were planned to the very smallest details beforehand; as though she were to act a part which

she had studied, and which was yet no comedy because it was the expression of her life's truth. The future had been, as it were, prophesied and completely foretold to her, and held no surprises; and yet it was more sweet to think of than all the past together. She wondered how he would say it, what his words would be, how he would look, whether he would again be as strangely violent as he had been that night at the Palazzo Frangipani. She wondered, most of all, how she would answer him. But it would be long yet. There would be many meetings, many happy days before that happiest day of all.

Sister Gabrielle saw a wonderful change in Corona's face that afternoon when they drove up the valley together, and she remarked what wonderful effect a little variety had upon her companion's spirits—she could not say upon her health, for Corona seemed made of velvet and steel, so smooth and dark, and yet so supple and strong. Corona smiled brightly as she looked far up at the beetling crags behind which Saracinesca was hidden.

"We shall be up there the day after to-morrow," she said. "How strange it will seem!" And leaning back, her deep eyes flashed, and she laughed happily.

On the following evening, again, they drove along the road that led up the valley. But they had not gone far when they saw in the distance a cloud of dust, from which in a few moments emerged a vehicle drawn by three strong horses, and driven by Giovanni Saracinesca himself. His father sat beside him in front, and a man in livery was seated at the back, with a long rifle between his knees. The vehicle was a kind of double cart, capable of holding four persons, and two servants at the back.

In a moment the two carriages met and stopped side by side. Giovanni sprang from his seat, throwing the reins to his father, who stood up hat in hand, and bowed from where he was. Corona held out her hand to Giovanni as he stood bareheaded in the road beside her. One long look told all the tale; there could be no words there before the Sister and the old Prince, but their eyes told all—the

pain of past separation, the joy of two loving hearts that met at last without hindrance.

"Let your servant drive, and get in with us," said Corona, who could hardly speak in her excitement. Then she started slightly, and smiled in her embarrassment. She had continued to hold Giovanni's hand, unconsciously leaving her fingers in his.

The Prince's groom climbed into the front seat, and old Saracinesca got down and entered the landau. It was a strangely silent meeting, long expected by the two who so loved each other—long looked for, but hardly realised now that it had come. The Prince was the first to speak, as usual.

"You expected to meet us, Duchessa?" he said; "we expected to meet you. An expectation fulfilled is better than a surprise. Everything at Saracinesca is prepared for your reception. Don Angelo, our priest, has been warned of your coming, and the boy who serves mass has been washed. You may imagine that a great festivity is expected. Giovanni has turned the castle inside out, and had a room hung entirely with tapestries of my great-grandmother's own working. He says that since the place is so old, its antiquity should be carried into the smallest details."

Corona laughed gaily—she would have laughed at anything that day—and the old Prince's tone was fresh and sparkling and merry. He had relieved the first embarrassment of the situation.

"There have been preparations at Astrardente for your reception, too," answered the Duchessa. "There was a difficulty of choice, as there are about a hundred vacant rooms in the house. The butler proposed to give you a suite of sixteen to pass the night in, but I selected an airy little nook in one of the wings, where you need only go through ten to get to your bedroom."

"There is nothing like space," said the Prince; "it enlarges the ideas."

"I cannot imagine what my father would do if his

ideas were extended," remarked Giovanni. "Everything he imagines is colossal already. He talks about tunnelling the mountains for my aqueduct, as though it were no more trouble than to run a stick through a piece of paper."

"Your aqueduct, indeed!" exclaimed his father. "I would like to know whose idea it was?"

"I hear you are working like an engineer yourself, Don Giovanni," said Corona. "I have a man at work at Astrardente on some plans of roads. Perhaps some day you could give us your advice."

Some day! How sweet the words sounded to Giovanni as he sat opposite the woman he loved, bowling along through the rich vine lands in the cool of the summer evening!

CHAPTER XXV.

The opportunity which Giovanni sought of being alone with Corona was long in coming. Sister Gabrielle retired immediately after dinner, and the Duchessa was left alone with the two men. Old Saracinesca would gladly have left his son with the hostess, but the thing was evidently impossible. The manners of the time would not allow it, and the result was that the Prince spent the evening in making conversation for two rather indifferent listeners. He tried to pick a friendly quarrel with Giovanni, but the latter was too absent-minded even to be annoyed; he tried to excite the Duchessa's interest, but she only smiled gently, making a remark from time to time which was conspicuous for its irrelevancy. But old Saracinesca was in a good humour, and he bore up bravely until ten o'clock, when Corona gave the signal for retiring. They were to start very early in the morning, she said, and she must have rest.

When the two men were alone, the Prince turned upon

his son in semi-comic anger, and upbraided him with his obstinate dulness during the evening. Giovanni only smiled calmly, and shrugged his shoulders. There was nothing more to be said.

But on the following morning, soon after six o'clock, Giovanni had the supreme satisfaction of installing Corona beside him upon the driving-seat of his cart, while his father and Sister Gabrielle sat together behind him. The sun was not yet above the hills, and the mountain air was keen and fresh; the stamping of the horses sounded crisp and sharp, and their bells rang merrily as they shook their sturdy necks and pricked their short ears to catch Giovanni's voice.

"Have you forgotten nothing, Duchessa?" asked Giovanni, gathering the reins in his hand.

"Nothing, thanks. I have sent our things on mules—by the bridle-path." She smiled involuntarily as she recalled her adventure, and half turned her face away.

"Ah, yes—the bridle-path," repeated Giovanni, as he nodded to the groom to stand clear of the horses' heads. In a moment they were briskly descending the winding road through the town of Astrardente: the streets were quiet and cool, for the peasants had all gone to their occupations two hours before, and the children were not yet turned loose.

"I never hoped to have the honour of myself driving you to Saracinesca," said Giovanni. "It is a wild place enough, in its way. You will be able to fancy yourself in Switzerland."

"I would rather be in Italy," answered Corona. "I do not care for the Alps. Our own mountains are as beautiful, and are not infested by tourists."

"You are a tourist to-day," said Giovanni. "And it has pleased Heaven to make me your guide."

"I will listen to your explanations of the sights with interest."

"It is a reversal of the situation, is it not? When we last met, it was you who guided me, and I humbly fol-