

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-

lowed your instructions. I did precisely as you told me."

"Had I doubted that you would do as I asked, I would not have spoken," answered Corona.

"There was one thing you advised me to do which I have not even attempted."

"What was that?"

"You told me to forget you. I have spent six months in constantly remembering you, and in looking forward to this moment. Was I wrong?"

"Of course," replied the Duchessa, with a little laugh. "You should by this time have forgotten my existence. They said you were gone to the North Pole—why did you change your mind?"

"I followed my load-star. It led me from Rome to Saracinesca by the way of Paris. I should have remained at Saracinesca—but you also changed your mind. I began to think you never would."

"How long do you think of staying up there?" asked Corona, to turn the conversation.

"Just so long as you stay at Astrardente," he answered.

"You will not forbid me to follow you to Rome?"

"How can I prevent you if you choose to do it?"

"By a word, as you did before."

"Do you think I would speak that word?" she asked.

"I trust not. Why should you cause me needless pain and suffering? If it was right then, it is not right now. Besides, you know me too well to think that I would annoy you or thrust myself upon you. But I will do as you wish."

"Thank you," she said quietly. But she turned her dark face toward him, and looked at him for a moment very gently, almost lovingly. Where was the use of trying to conceal what would not be hidden? Every word he spoke told of his unchanged love, although the phrases were short and simple. Why should she conceal what she felt? She knew it was a foregone conclusion. They loved each other, and she would certainly marry him in the course of a year. The long pent up

forces of her nature were beginning to assert themselves; she had conquered and fought down her natural being in the effort to be all things to her old husband, to quench her growing interest in Giovanni, to resist his declared love, to drive him from her in her widowhood; but now it seemed as though all obstacles were suddenly removed. She saw clearly how well she loved him, and it seemed folly to try and conceal it. As she sat by his side she was unboundedly happy, as she had never been in her life before: the cool morning breeze fanned her cheeks, and the music of his low voice soothed her, while the delicious sense of rapid motion lent a thrill of pleasure to every breath she drew. It was no matter what she said; it was as though she spoke unconsciously. All seemed predestined and foreplanned from all time, to be acted out to the end. The past vanished slowly as a retreating landscape. The weary traveller, exhausted with the heat of the scorching Campagna, slowly climbs the ascent towards Tivoli, the haven of cool waters, and pausing now and then upon the path, looks back and sees how the dreary waste of undulating hillocks beneath him seems gradually to subside into a dim flat plain, while, in the far distance, the mighty domes and towers of Rome dwindle to an unreal mirage in the warm haze of the western sky; then advancing again, he feels the breath of the mountains upon him, and hears the fresh plunge of the cold cataract, till at last, when his strength is almost failing, it is renewed within him, and the dust and the heat of the day's journey are forgotten in the fulness of refreshment. So Corona d'Astrardente, wearied though not broken by the fatigues and the troubles and the temptations of the past five years, seemed suddenly to be taken up and borne swiftly through the gardens of an earthly paradise, where there was neither care nor temptation, and where, in the cool air of a new life, the one voice she loved was ever murmuring gentle things to her willing ear.

As the road began to ascend, sweeping round the base

of the mountain and upwards by even gradations upon its southern flank, the sun rose higher in the heavens, and the locusts broke into their summer song among the hedges with that even, long-drawn, humming note, so sweet to southern ears. But Corona did not feel the heat, nor notice the dust upon the way; she was in a new state, wherein such things could not trouble her. The first embarrassment of a renewed intimacy was fast disappearing, and she talked easily to Giovanni of many things, reviewing past scenes and speaking of mutual acquaintances, turning the conversation when it concerned Giovanni or herself too directly, yet ever and again coming back to that sweet ground which was no longer dangerous now. At last, at a turn in the road, the grim towers of ancient Saracinesca loomed in the distance, and the carriage entered a vast forest of chestnut trees, shady and cool after the sunny ascent. So they reached the castle, and the sturdy horses sprang wildly forward up the last incline till their hoofs struck noisily upon the flagstones of the bridge, and with a rush and a plunge they dashed under the black archway, and halted in the broad court beyond.

Corona was surprised at the size of the old fortress. It seemed an endless irregular mass of towers and buildings, all of rough grey stone, surrounded by battlements and ramparts, kept in perfect repair, but destitute of any kind of ornament whatever. It might have been even now a military stronghold, and it was evident that there were traditions of precision and obedience within its walls which would have done credit to any barracks. The dominant temper of the master made itself felt at every turn, and the servants moved quickly and silently about their duties. There was something intensely attractive to Corona in the air of strength that pervaded the place, and Giovanni had never seemed to her so manly and so much in his element as under the grey walls of his ancestral home. The place, too, was associated in history with so many events,—the two men,

Leone and Giovanni Saracinesca, stood there beside her, where their ancestors of the same names had stood nearly a thousand years before, their strong dark faces having the same characteristics that for centuries had marked their race, features familiar to Romans by countless statues and pictures, as the stones of Rome themselves—but for a detail of dress, it seemed to Corona as though she had been suddenly transported back to the thirteenth century. The idea fascinated her. The two men led her up the broad stone staircase, and ushered her and Sister Gabrielle into the apartments of state which had been prepared for them.

“We have done our best,” said the Prince, “but it is long since we have entertained ladies at Saracinesca.”

“It is magnificent!” exclaimed Corona, as she entered the ante-chamber. The walls were hung from end to end with priceless tapestries, and the stone floor was covered with long eastern carpets. Corona paused.

“You must show us all over the castle by-and-by,” she said.

“Giovanni will show you everything,” answered the Prince. “If it pleases you, we will breakfast in half-an-hour.” He turned away with his son, and left the two ladies to refresh themselves before the mid-day meal.

Giovanni kept his word, and spared his guests no detail of the vast stronghold, until at last poor Sister Gabrielle could go no farther. Giovanni had anticipated that she would be tired, and with the heartlessness of a lover seeking his opportunity, he had secretly longed for the moment when she should be obliged to stop.

“You have not yet seen the view from the great tower,” he said. “It is superb, and this is the very best hour for it. Are you tired, Duchessa?”

“No—I am never tired,” answered Corona.

“Why not go with Giovanni?” suggested the Prince. “I will stay with Sister Gabrielle, who has nearly exhausted herself with seeing our sights.”

Corona hesitated. The idea of being alone with Gio-

vanni for a quarter of an hour was delightful, but somehow it did not seem altogether fitting for her to be wandering over the castle with him. On the other hand, to refuse would seem almost an affectation: she was not in Rome, where her every movement was a subject for remark; moreover, she was not only a married woman, but a widow, and she had known Giovanni for years—it would be ridiculous to refuse.

"Very well," said she. "Let us see the view before it is too late."

Sister Gabrielle and old Saracinesca sat down on a stone seat upon the rampart to wait, and the Duchessa disappeared with Giovanni through the low door that led into the great tower.

"What a wonderful woman you are!" exclaimed Giovanni, as they reached the top of the winding stair, which was indeed broader than the staircase of many great houses in Rome. "You seem to be never tired."

"No—I am very strong," answered Corona, with a smile. She was not even out of breath. "What a wonderful view!" she exclaimed, as they emerged upon the stone platform at the top of the tower. Giovanni was silent for a moment. The two stood together and looked far out at the purple mountains to eastward that caught the last rays of the sun high up above the shadows of the valley; and then looking down, they saw the Prince and the Sister a hundred feet below them upon the rampart.

Both were thinking of the same thing: three days ago, their meeting had seemed infinitely far off, a thing dreamed of and hoped for—and now they were standing alone upon the topmost turret of Giovanni's house, familiar with each other by a long day's conversation, feeling as though they had never been parted, feeling also that most certainly they would not be parted again.

"It is very strange," said Giovanni, "how things happen in this world, and how little we ever know of what is before us. Last week I wondered whether I should

ever see you—now I cannot imagine not seeing you. Is it not strange?"

"Yes," answered Corona, in a low voice.

"That, yesterday, we should have seemed parted by an insurmountable barrier, and that to-day——" he stopped. "Oh, if to-day could only last for ever!" he exclaimed, suddenly.

Corona gazed out upon the purple hills in silence, but her face caught some of the radiance of the distant glow, and her dark eyes had strange lights in them. She could not have prevented him from speaking; she had loosed the bonds that had held her life so long; the anchor was up, and the breath of love fanned the sails, and gently bore the craft in which she trusted out to seaward over the fair water. In seeing him she had resigned herself to him, and she could not again get the mastery if she would. It had come too soon, but it was sweet.

"And why not?" he said, very softly. "Why should it not remain so for ever—till our last breath? Why will you not let it last?"

Still she was silent; but the tears gathered slowly in her eyes, and welled over and lay upon her velvet cheek like dewdrops on the leaves of a soft dark tulip. Giovanni saw them, and knew that they were the jewels which crowned his life.

"You will," he said, his broad brown hand gently covering her small fingers and taking them in his. "You will—I know that you will."

She said nothing, and though she at first made a slight movement—not of resistance, but of timid reluctance, utterly unlike herself—she suffered him to hold her hand. He drew closer to her, himself more diffident in the moment of success than he had ever been when he anticipated failure; she was so unlike any woman he had ever known before. Very gently he put his arm about her, and drew her to him.

"My beloved—at last," he whispered, as her head sank upon his shoulder.

Then with a sudden movement she sprang to her height, and for one instant gazed upon him. Her whole being was transfigured in the might of her passion: her dark face was luminously pale, her lips almost white, and from her eyes there seemed to flash a blazing fire. For one instant she gazed upon him, and then her arms went round his neck, and she clasped him fiercely to her breast.

"Ah, Giovanni," she cried, passionately, "you do not know what love means!"

A moment later her arms dropped from him; she turned and buried her face in her hands, leaning against the high stone parapet of the tower. She was not weeping, but her face was white, and her bosom heaved with quick and strong-drawn breath.

Giovanni went to her side and took her strongly in his right arm, and again her head rested upon his shoulder.

"It is too soon—too soon," she murmured. "But how can I help it? I love you so that there is no counting of time. It seems years since we met last night, and I thought it would be years before I told you. Oh, Giovanni, I am so happy! Is it possible that you love me as I love you?"

It is a marvellous thing to see how soon two people who love each other learn the gentle confidence that only love can bring. A few moments later Giovanni and Corona were slowly pacing the platform, and his arm was about her waist and her hand in his.

"Do you know," she was saying, "I used to wonder whether you would keep your word, and never try to see me. The days were so long at Astrardente."

"Not half so long as at Saracinesca," he answered. "I was going to call my aqueduct the Bridge of Sighs; I will christen it now the Spring of Love."

"I must go and see it to-morrow," said she.

"Or the next day——"

"The next day!" she exclaimed, with a happy laugh. "Do you think I am going to stay——"

"For ever," interrupted Giovanni. "We have a priest here, you know,—he can marry us to-morrow, and then you need never go away."

Corona's face grew grave.

"We must not talk of that yet," she said, gently, "even in jest."

"No; you are right. Forgive me," he answered; "I forget many things—it seems to me I have forgotten everything, except that I love you."

"Giovanni,"—she lingered on the name,—"Giovanni, we must tell your father at once."

"Are you willing I should?" he asked, eagerly.

"Of course—he ought to know; and Sister Gabrielle too. But no one else must be told. There must be no talk of this in Rome until—until next year."

"We will stay in the country until then, shall we not?" asked Giovanni, anxiously. "It seems to me so much better. We can meet here, and nobody will talk. I will go and live in the town at Astrardente, and play the engineer, and build your roads for you."

"I hardly know," said Corona, with a doubtful smile. "You could not do that. But you may come and spend the day once—in a week, perhaps."

"We will arrange all that," answered Giovanni, laughing. "If you think I can exist by only seeing you once a week—well, you do not know me."

"We shall see," returned Corona, laughing too. "By the bye, how long have we been here?"

"I do not know," said Giovanni; "but the view is magnificent, is it not?"

"Enchanting," she replied, looking into his eyes. Then suddenly the blood mounted to her cheeks. "Oh, Giovanni," she said, "how could I do it?"

"I should have died if you had not," he answered, and clasped her once more in his arms.

"Come," said she, "let us be going down. It is growing late."

When they reached the foot of the tower, they found

the Prince walking the rampart alone. Sister Gabrielle was afraid of the evening air, and had retired into the house. Old Saracinesca faced them suddenly. He looked like an old lion, his thick white hair and beard bristling about his dark features.

"My father," said Giovanni, coming forward, "the Duchessa d'Astrardente has consented to be my wife. I crave your blessing."

The old man started, and then stood stock-still. His son had fairly taken his breath away, for he had not expected the news for three or four months to come. Then he advanced and took Corona's hand, and kissed it.

"Madam," he said, "you have done my son an honour which extends to myself and to every Saracinesca, dead, living, and to come."

Then he laid Corona's hand in Giovanni's, and held his own upon them both.

"God bless you," he said, solemnly; and as Corona bent her proud head, he touched her forehead with his lips. Then he embraced Giovanni, and his joy broke out in wild enthusiasm.

"Ha, my children," he cried, "there has not been such a couple as you are for generations—there has not been such good news told in these old walls since they have stood here. We will illuminate the castle, the whole town, in your honour—we will ring the bells and have a *Te Deum* sung—we will have such a festival as was never seen before—we will go to Rome to-morrow and celebrate the espousal—we will——"

"Softly, *padre mio*," interrupted Giovanni. "No one must know as yet. You must consider——"

"Consider what? consider the marriage? Of course we will consider it, as soon as you please. You shall have such a wedding as was never heard of—you shall be married by the Cardinal Archpriest of Saint Peter's, by the Holy Father himself. The whole country shall ring with it."

It was with difficulty Giovanni succeeded in calming his

father's excitement, and in recalling to his mind the circumstances which made it necessary to conceal the engagement for the present. But at last the old man reluctantly consented, and returned to a quieter humour. For some time the three continued to pace the stone rampart.

"This is a case of arrant cruelty to a man of my temper," said the Prince. "To be expected to behave like an ordinary creature, with grins and smiles and decent paces, when I have just heard what I have longed to hear for years. But I will revenge myself by making a noise about it by-and-by. I will concoct schemes for your wedding, and dream of nothing but illuminations and decorations. You shall be Prince of Sant' Ilario, Giovanni, as I was before my father died; and I will give you that estate outright, and the palace in the Corso to live in."

"Perhaps we might live in my palace," suggested Corona. It seemed strange to her to be discussing her own marriage, but it was necessary to humour the old Prince.

"Of course," he said. "I forgot all about it. You have places enough to live in. One forgets that you will in the end be the richest couple in Italy. Ha!" he cried, in sudden enthusiasm, "the Saracinesca are not dead yet! They are greater than ever—and our lands here so near together, too. We will build a new road to Astrardente, and when you are married you shall be the first to drive over it from Astrardente here. We will do all kinds of things—we will tunnel the mountain!"

"I am sure you will do that in the end," said Giovanni, laughing.

"Well—let us go to dinner," answered his father. "It has grown quite dark since we have been talking, and we shall be falling over the edge if we are not careful."

"I will go and tell Sister Gabrielle before dinner," said Corona to Giovanni.

So they left her at the door of her apartment, and she went in. She found the Sister in an inner room, with a book of devotions in her hand.

"Pray for me, my Sister," she said, quietly. "I have

resolved upon a great step. I am going to be married again."

Sister Gabrielle looked up, and a quiet smile stole over her thin face.

"It is soon, my friend," she said. "It is soon to think of that. But perhaps you are right—is it the young Prince?"

"Yes," answered Corona, and sank into a deep tapestried chair. "It is soon I know well. But it has been long—I have struggled hard—I love him very much—so much, you do not know!"

The Sister sighed faintly, and came and took her hand.

"It is right that you should marry," she said, gently. "You are too young, too famously beautiful, too richly endowed, to lead the life you have led at Astrardente these many months."

"It is not that," said Corona, an expression of strange beauty illuminating her lovely face. "Not that I am young, beautiful as you say, if it is so, or endowed with riches—those reasons are nothing. It is this that tells me," she whispered, pressing her left hand to her heart. "When one loves as I love, it is right."

"Indeed it is," assented the good Sister. "And I think you have chosen wisely. When will you be married?"

"Hardly before next summer—I can hardly think connectedly yet—it has been very sudden. I knew I should marry him in the end, but I never thought I could consent so soon. Oh, Sister Gabrielle, you are so good—were you never in love?"

The Sister was silent, and looked away.

"No—of course you cannot tell me," continued Corona; "but it is such a wonderful thing. It makes days seem like hundreds of years, or makes them pass in a flash of light, in a second. It oversets every idea of time, and plays with one's resolutions as the wind with a feather. If once it gets the mastery of one, it crowds a lifetime of

pain and pleasure into one day; it never leaves one for a moment. I cannot explain love—it is a wonderful thing."

"My dear friend," said the Sister, "the explanation of love is life."

"But the end of it is not death. It cannot be," continued Corona, earnestly. "It must last for ever and ever. It must grow better and purer and stronger, until it is perfect in heaven at last: but where is the use of trying to express such things?"

"I think it is enough to feel them," said Sister Gabrielle.

CHAPTER XXVI.

The summer season ripened into autumn, and autumn again turned to winter, and Rome was once more full. The talk of society turned frequently upon the probability of the match between the Duchessa d'Astrardente and Giovanni Saracinesca; and when at last, three weeks before Lent, the engagement was made known, there was a general murmur of approbation. It seemed as though the momentous question of Corona's life, which had for years agitated the gossips, were at last to be settled: every one had been accustomed to regard her marriage with old Astrardente as a temporary affair, seeing that he certainly could not live long, and speculation in regard to her future had been nearly as common during his lifetime as it was after his death. One of the duties most congenial to society, and one which it never fails to perform conscientiously, is that judicial astrology, whereby it forecasts the issue of its neighbour's doings. Everybody's social horoscope must be cast by the circle of five-o'clock-tea-drinking astro-sociologists, and, generally speaking, their predictions are not far short of the truth, for society knoweth its own bitterness, and is uncommonly quick in the diagnosis of its own state of health.