

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.

When it was announced that Corona was to marry Giovanni after Easter, society looked and saw that the arrangement was good. There was not one dissenting voice heard in the universal applause. Corona had behaved with exemplary decency during the year of her mourning—had lived a life of religious retirement upon her estates in the sole company of a Sister of Charity, had given no cause for scandal in any way. Everybody aspired to like her—that is to say, to be noticed by her; but with one exception, she had caused no jealousy nor ill-feeling by her indifference, for no one had ever heard her say an unkind word concerning anybody she knew. Donna Tullia had her own reasons for hating Corona, and perhaps the world suspected them; but people did not connect the noisy Donna Tullia, full of animal spirits and gay silly talk, with the idea of serious hatred, much less with the execution of any scheme of revenge.

Indeed Madame Mayer had not spent the summer and autumn in nursing her wrath against Corona. She had travelled with the old Countess, her companion, and several times Ugo del Ferice had appeared suddenly at the watering-places which she had selected for her temporary residence. From time to time he gave her news of mutual friends, which she repaid conscientiously with interesting accounts of the latest scandals. They were a congenial pair, and Ugo felt that by his constant attention to her wishes, and by her never-varying willingness to accept his service, he had obtained a hold upon her intimacy which, in the ensuing winter, would give him a decided advantage over all competitors in the field. She believed that she might have married half-a-dozen times, and that with her fortune she could easily have made a very brilliant match; she even thought that she could have married Valdarno, who was very good-natured: but her attachment to Giovanni, and the expectations she had so long entertained in regard to him, had prevented her from showing any marked preference for others; and while she was hesitating, Del Ferice, by his superior skill, had succeeded in making him-

self indispensable to her—a success the more remarkable that, in spite of his gifts and the curious popularity he enjoyed, he was by far the least desirable man of her acquaintance from the matrimonial point of view.

But when Donna Tullia again met Giovanni in the world, the remembrance of her wrongs revived her anger against him, and the news of his engagement to the Astrardente brought matters to a climax. In the excitement of the moment, both her jealousy and her anger were illuminated by the light of a righteous wrath. She knew, or thought she knew, that Don Giovanni was already married. She had no proof that the peasant wife mentioned in the certificate was alive, but there was nothing either to show that she was dead. Even in the latter case it was a scandalous thing that he should marry again without informing Corona of the circumstances of his past life, and Donna Tullia felt an inner conviction that he had told the Duchessa nothing of the matter. The latter was such a proud woman, that she would be horrified at the idea of uniting herself to a man who had been the husband of a peasant.

Madame Mayer remembered her solemn promise to Del Ferice, and feared to act without his consent. An hour after she had heard the news of the engagement, she sent for him to come to her immediately. To her astonishment and dismay, her servant brought back word that he had suddenly gone to Naples upon urgent business. This news made her pause; but while the messenger had been gone to Del Ferice's house, Donna Tullia had been anticipating and going over in her mind the scene which would ensue when she told Corona the secret. Donna Tullia was a very sanguine woman, and the idea of at last being revenged for all the slights she had received worked suddenly upon her brain, so that as she paced her drawing-room in expectation of the arrival of Del Ferice, she entirely acted out in her imagination the circumstances of the approaching crisis, the blood beat hotly in her temples, and she lost all sense of prudence in the delicious

anticipation of violent words. Del Ferice had cruelly calculated upon her temperament, and he had hoped that in the excitement of the moment she would lose her head, and irrevocably commit herself to him by the betrayal of the secret. This was precisely what occurred. On being told that he was out of town, she could no longer contain herself, and with a sudden determination to risk anything blindly, rather than to forego the pleasure and the excitement she had been meditating, she ordered her carriage and drove to the Palazzo Astrardente.

Corona was surprised at the unexpected visit. She was herself on the point of going out, and was standing in her boudoir, drawing on her black gloves before the fire, while her furs lay upon a chair at her side. She wondered why Donna Tullia called, and it was in part her curiosity which induced her to receive her visit. Donna Tullia, armed to the teeth with the terrible news she was about to disclose, entered the room quickly, and remained standing before the Duchessa with a semi-tragic air that astonished Corona.

"How do you do, Donna Tullia?" said the latter, putting out her hand.

"I have come to speak to you upon a very serious matter," answered her visitor, without noticing the greeting.

Corona stared at her for a moment, but not being easily disconcerted, she quietly motioned to Donna Tullia to sit down, and installed herself in a chair opposite to her.

"I have just heard the news that you are to marry Don Giovanni Saracinesca," said Madame Mayer. "You will pardon me the interest I take in you; but is it true?"

"It is quite true," answered Corona.

"It is in connection with your marriage that I wish to speak, Duchessa. I implore you to reconsider your decision."

"And why, if you please?" asked Corona, raising her black eyebrows, and fixing her haughty gaze upon her visitor.

"I could tell you—I would rather not," answered Donna Tullia, unabashed, for her blood was up. "I could tell you—but I beseech you not to ask me. Only consider the matter again, I beg you. It is very serious. Nothing but the great interest I feel in you, and my conviction——"

"Donna Tullia, your conduct is so extraordinary," interrupted Corona, looking at her curiously, "that I am tempted to believe you are mad. I must beg you to explain what you mean by your words."

"Ah, no," answered Madame Mayer. "You do me injustice. I am not mad, but I would save you from the most horrible danger."

"Again I say, what do you mean? I will not be trifled with in this way," said the Duchessa, who would have been more angry if she had been less astonished, but whose temper was rapidly rising.

"I am not trifling with you," returned Donna Tullia. "I am imploring you to think before you act, before you marry Don Giovanni. You cannot think that I would venture to intrude upon you without the strongest reasons. I am in earnest."

"Then, in heaven's name, speak out!" cried Corona, losing all patience. "I presume that if this is a warning, you have some grounds, you have some accusation to make against Don Giovanni. Have the goodness to state what you have to say, and be brief."

"I will," said Donna Tullia, and she paused a moment, her face growing red with excitement, and her blue eyes sparkling disagreeably. "You cannot marry Don Giovanni," she said at length, "because there is an insurmountable impediment in the way."

"What is it?" asked Corona, controlling her anger.

"He is already married!" hissed Donna Tullia.

Corona turned a little pale, and started back. But in an instant her colour returned, and she broke into a low laugh.

"You are certainly insane," she said, eyeing Madame

Mayer suspiciously. It was not an easy matter to shake her faith in the man she loved. Donna Tullia was disappointed at the effect she had produced. She was a clever woman in her way, but she did not understand how to make the best of the situation. She saw that she was simply an object of curiosity, and that Corona seriously believed her mind deranged. She was frightened, and, in order to help herself, she plunged deeper.

"You may call me mad, if you please," she replied, angrily. "I tell you it is true. Don Giovanni was married on the 19th of June 1863, at Aquila, in the Abruzzi, to a woman called Felice Baldi—whoever she may have been. The register is extant, and the duplicate of the marriage certificate. I have seen the copies attested by a notary. I tell you it is true," she continued, her voice rising to a harsh treble; "you are engaged to marry a man who has a wife—a peasant woman—somewhere in the mountains."

Corona rose from her seat and put out her hand to ring the bell. She was pale, but not excited. She believed Donna Tullia to be insane, perhaps dangerous, and she calmly proceeded to protect herself by calling for assistance.

"Either you are mad, or you mean what you say," she said, keeping her eyes upon the angry woman before her. "You will not leave this house except in charge of my physician, if you are mad; and if you mean what you say, you shall not go until you have repeated your words to Don Giovanni Saracinesca himself,—no, do not start or try to escape—it is of no use. I am very sudden and violent—beware!"

Donna Tullia bit her red lip. She was beginning to realise that she had got herself into trouble, and that it might be hard to get out of it. But she felt herself strong, and she wished she had with her those proofs which would make her case good. She was so sanguine by nature that she was willing to carry the fight to the end, and to take her chance for the result.

"You may send for Don Giovanni if you please," she said. "I have spoken the truth—if he denies it I can prove it. If I were you I would spare him the humiliation——"

A servant entered the room in answer to the bell, and Corona interrupted Donna Tullia's speech by giving the man her orders.

"Go at once to the Palazzo Saracinesca, and beg Don Giovanni to come here instantly with his father the Prince. Take the carriage—it is waiting below."

The man disappeared, and Corona quietly resumed her seat. Donna Tullia was silent for a few moments, attempting to control her anger in an assumption of dignity; but soon she broke out afresh, being rendered very nervous and uncomfortable by the Duchessa's calm manner and apparent indifference to consequences.

"I cannot see why you should expose yourself to such a scene," said Madame Mayer presently. "I honestly wished to save you from a terrible danger. It seems to me it would be quite sufficient if I proved the fact to you beyond dispute. I should think that instead of being angry, you would show some gratitude."

"I am not angry," answered Corona, quietly. "I am merely giving you an immediate opportunity of proving your assertion and your sanity."

"My sanity!" exclaimed Donna Tullia, angrily. "Do you seriously believe——"

"Nothing that you say," said Corona, completing the sentence.

Unable to bear the situation, Madame Mayer rose suddenly from her seat, and began to pace the small room with short, angry steps.

"You shall see," she said, fiercely—"you shall see that it is all true. You shall see this man's face when I accuse him—you shall see him humiliated, overthrown, exposed in his villany—the wretch! You shall see how——"

Corona's strong voice interrupted her enemy's invective in ringing tones.

"Be silent!" she cried. "In twenty minutes he will be here. But if you say one word against him before he comes, I will lock you into this room and leave you. I certainly will not hear you."

Donna Tullia reflected that the Duchessa was in her own house, and moreover that she was not a woman to be trifled with. She threw herself into a chair, and taking up a book that lay upon the table, she pretended to read.

Corona remained seated by the fireplace, glancing at her from time to time. She was strangely inclined to laugh at the whole situation, which seemed to her absurd in the extreme—for it never crossed her mind to believe that there was a word of truth in the accusation against Giovanni. Nevertheless she was puzzled to account for Donna Tullia's assurance, and especially for her readiness to face the man she so calumniated. A quarter of an hour elapsed in this armed silence—the two women glancing at each other from time to time, until the distant sound of wheels rolling under the great gate announced that the messenger had returned from the Palazzo Saracinesca, probably conveying Don Giovanni and his father.

"Then you have made up your mind to the humiliation of the man you love?" asked Donna Tullia, looking up from her book with a sneer on her face.

Corona vouchsafed no answer, but her eyes turned towards the door in expectation. Presently there were steps heard without. The servant entered, and announced Prince Saracinesca and Don Giovanni. Corona rose. The old man came in first, followed by his son.

"An unexpected pleasure," he said, gaily. "Such good luck! We were both at home. Ah, Donna Tullia," he cried, seeing Madame Mayer, "how are you?" Then seeing her face, he added, suddenly, "Is anything the matter?"

Meanwhile Giovanni had entered, and stood by Corona's side near the fireplace. He saw at once that something was wrong, and he looked anxiously from the Duchessa to Donna Tullia. Corona spoke at once.

"Donna Tullia," she said, quietly, "I have the honour to offer you an opportunity of explaining yourself."

Madame Mayer remained seated by the table, her face red with anger. She leaned back in her seat, and half closing her eyes with a disagreeable look of contempt, she addressed Giovanni.

"I am sorry to cause you such profound humiliation," she began, "but in the interest of the Duchessa d'Astrardente I feel bound to speak. Don Giovanni, do you remember Aquila?"

"Certainly," he replied, coolly—"I have often been there. What of it?"

Old Saracinesca stared from one to the other.

"What is this comedy?" he asked of Corona. But she nodded to him to be silent.

"Then you doubtless remember Felice Baldi—poor Felice Baldi," continued Donna Tullia, still gazing scornfully up at Giovanni from where she sat.

"I never heard the name, that I can remember," answered Giovanni, as though trying to recall some memory of the past. He could not imagine what she was leading to, but he was willing to answer her questions.

"You do not remember that you were married to her at Aquila on the 19th of June——?"

"I—married?" cried Giovanni, in blank astonishment.

"Signora Duchessa," said the Prince, bending his heavy brows, "what is the meaning of all this?"

"I will tell you the meaning of it," said Donna Tullia, in low hissing tones, and rising suddenly to her feet she assumed a somewhat theatrical attitude as she pointed to Giovanni. "I will tell what it means. It means that Don Giovanni Saracinesca was married in the church of San Bernardino, at Aquila, on the 19th of June 1863, to the woman Felice Baldi—who is his lawful wife to-day, and for aught we know the mother of his children, while he is here in Rome attempting to marry the Duchessa d'Astrardente—can he deny it? Can he deny that his

own signature is there, there in the office of the Stato Civile at Aquila, to testify against him? Can he——?”

“Silence!” roared the Prince. “Silence, woman, or by God in heaven I will stop your talking for ever!” He made a step towards her, and there was a murderous red light in his black eyes. But Giovanni sprang forward and seized his father by the wrist.

“You cannot silence me,” screamed Donna Tullia. “I will be heard, and by all Rome. I will cry it upon the housetops to all the world——”

“Then you will precipitate your confinement in the asylum of Santo Spirito,” said Giovanni, in cold, calm tones. “You are clearly mad.”

“So I said,” assented Corona, who was nevertheless pale, and trembling with excitement.

“Allow me to speak with her,” said Giovanni, who, like most dangerous men, seemed to grow cold as others grew hot. Donna Tullia leaned upon the table, breathing hard between her closed teeth, her face scarlet.

“Madame,” said Giovanni, advancing a step and confronting her, “you say that I am married, and that I am contemplating a monstrous crime. Upon what do you base your extraordinary assertions?”

“Upon attested copies of your marriage certificate, of the civil register where your handwriting has been seen and recognised. What more would you have?”

“It is monstrous!” cried the Prince, advancing again. “It is the most abominable lie ever concocted! My son married without my knowledge, and to a peasant! Absurd!”

But Giovanni waved his father back, and kept his place before Donna Tullia.

“I give you the alternative of producing instantly those proofs you refer to,” he said, “and which you certainly cannot produce, or of waiting in this house until a competent physician has decided whether you are sufficiently sane to be allowed to go home alone.”

Donna Tullia hesitated. She was in a terrible position,

for Del Ferice had left Rome suddenly, and though the papers were somewhere in his house, she knew not where, nor how to get at them. It was impossible to imagine a situation more desperate, and she felt it as she looked round and saw the pale dark faces of the three resolute persons whose anger she had thus roused. She believed that Giovanni was capable of anything, but she was astonished at his extraordinary calmness. She hesitated for a moment.

“That is perfectly just,” said Corona. “If you have proofs, you can produce them. If you have none, you are insane.”

“I have them, and I will produce them before this hour to-morrow,” answered Donna Tullia, not knowing how she should get the papers, but knowing that she was lost if she failed to obtain them.

“Why not to-day—at once?” asked Giovanni, with some scorn.

“It will take twenty-four hours to forge them,” growled his father.

“You have no right to insult me so grossly,” cried Donna Tullia. “But beware—I have you in my power. By this time to-morrow you shall see with your own eyes that I speak the truth. Let me go,” she cried, as the old Prince placed himself between her and the door.

“I will,” said he. “But before you go, I beg you to observe that if between now and the time you show us these documents you breathe abroad one word of your accusations, I will have you arrested as a dangerous lunatic, and lodged in Santo Spirito; and if these papers are not authentic, you will be arrested to-morrow afternoon on a charge of forgery. You quite understand me?” He stood aside to let her pass. She laughed scornfully in his face, and went out.

When she was gone the three looked at each other, as though trying to comprehend what had happened. Indeed, it was beyond their comprehension. Corona leaned against the chimney-piece, and her eyes rested

lovingly upon Giovanni. No doubt had ever crossed her mind of his perfect honesty. Old Saracinesca looked from one to the other for a moment, and then, striking the palms of his hands together, turned and began to walk up and down the room.

"In the first place," said Giovanni, "at the time she mentions I was in Canada, upon a shooting expedition, with a party of Englishmen. It is easy to prove that, as they are all alive and well now, so far as I have heard. Donna Tullia is clearly out of her mind."

"The news of your engagement has driven her mad," said the old Prince, with a grim laugh. "It is a very interesting and romantic case."

Corona blushed a little, and her eyes sought Giovanni's, but her face was very grave. It was a terrible thing to see a person she had known so long becoming insane, and for the sake of the man she herself so loved. And yet she had not a doubt of Donna Tullia's madness. It was very sad.

"I wonder who could have put this idea into her head," said Giovanni, thoughtfully. "It does not look like a creation of her own brain. I wonder, too, what absurdities she will produce in the way of documents. Of course they must be forged."

"She will not bring them," returned his father, in a tone of certainty. "We shall hear to-morrow that she is raving in the delirium of a brain-fever."

"Poor thing!" exclaimed Corona. "It is dreadful to think of it."

"It is dreadful to think that she should have caused you all this trouble and annoyance," said Giovanni, warmly. "You must have had a terrible scene with her before we came. What did she say?"

"Just what she said to you. Then she began to rail against you; and I sent for you, and told her that unless she could be silent I would lock her up alone until you arrived. So she sat down in that chair, and pretended to read. But it was an immense relief when you came!"

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"You did not once believe what she said might possibly be true?" asked Giovanni, with a loving look.

"I? How could you ever think it!" exclaimed Corona. Then she laughed, and added, "But of course you knew that I would not."

"Indeed, yes," he answered. "It never entered my head."

"By-the-bye," said old Saracinesca, glancing at the Duchess's black bonnet and gloved hands, "you must have been just ready to go out when she came—we must not keep you. I suppose that when she said she would bring her proofs to-morrow at this hour, she meant she would bring them here. Shall we come to-morrow then?"

"Yes—by all means," she answered. "Come to breakfast at one o'clock. I am alone, you know, for Sister Gabrielle has insisted upon going back to her community. But what does it matter now?"

"What does it matter?" echoed the Prince. "You are to be married so soon. I really think we can do as we please." He generally did as he pleased.

The two men left her, and a few minutes later she descended the steps of the palace and entered her carriage, as though nothing had happened.

Six months had passed since she had given her troth to Giovanni upon the tower of Saracinesca, and she knew that she loved him better now than then. Little had happened of interest in the interval of time, and the days had seemed long. But until after Christmas she had remained at Astrardente, busying herself constantly with the improvements she had already begun, and aided by the counsels of Giovanni. He had taken a cottage of hers in the lower part of her village, and had fitted it up with the few comforts he judged necessary. In this lodging he had generally spent half the week, going daily to the palace upon the hill and remaining for long hours in Corona's society, studying her plans and visiting with her the works which grew beneath their joint direction. She had grown to know him as she had not known him before, and to

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understand more fully his manly character. He was a very resolute man, and very much in earnest when he chanced to be doing anything; but the strain of melancholy which he inherited from his mother made him often inclined to a sort of contemplative idleness, during which his mind seemed preoccupied with absorbing thoughts. Many people called his fits of silence an affectation, or part of his system for rendering himself interesting; but Corona soon saw how real was his abstraction, and she saw also that she alone was able to attract his attention and interest him when the fit was upon him. Slowly, by a gradual study of him, she learned what few had ever guessed, namely, that beneath the experienced man of the world, under his modest manner and his gentle ways, there lay a powerful mainspring of ambition, a mine of strength, which would one day exert itself and make itself felt upon his surroundings. He had developed slowly, feeding upon many experiences of the world in many countries, his quick Italian intelligence comprehending often more than it seemed to do, while the quiet dignity he got from his Spanish blood made him appear often very cold. But now and again, when under the influence of some large idea, his tongue was loosed in the charm of Corona's presence, and he spoke to her, as he had never spoken to any one, of projects and plans which should make the world move. She did not always understand him wholly, but she knew that the man she loved was something more than the world at large believed him to be, and there was a thrill of pride in the thought which delighted her inmost soul. She, too, was ambitious, but her ambition was all for him. She felt that there was little room for common aspirations in his position or in her own. All that high birth, and wealth, and personal consideration could give, they both had abundantly, beyond their utmost wishes; anything they could desire beyond that must lie in a larger sphere of action than mere society, in the world of political power. She herself had had dreams, and entertained them still, of founding some great institution of charity, of doing

something for her poorer fellows. But she learned by degrees that Giovanni looked further than to such ordinary means of employing power, and that there was in him a great ambition to bring great forces to bear upon great questions for the accomplishment of great results. The six months of her engagement to him had not only strengthened her love for him, already deep and strong, but had implanted in her an unchanging determination to second him in all his life, to omit nothing in her power which could assist him in the career he should choose for himself, and which she regarded as the ultimate field for his extraordinary powers. It was strange that, while granting him everything else, people had never thought of calling him a man of remarkable intelligence. But no one knew him as Corona knew him; no one suspected that there was in him anything more than the traditional temper of the Saracinesca, with sufficient mind to make him as fair a representative of his race as his father was.

There was more than mere love and devotion in the complete security she felt when she saw him attacked by Donna Tullia; there was already the certainty that he was born to be above small things, and to create a sphere of his own in which he would move as other men could not.

CHAPTER XXVII.

When Donna Tullia quitted the Palazzo Astrardente her head swam. She had utterly failed to do what she had expected; and from being the accuser, she felt that she was suddenly thrust into the position of the accused. Instead of inspiring terror in Corona, and causing Giovanni the terrible humiliation she had supposed he would feel at the exposure of his previous marriage, she had been coldly told that she was mad, and that her pretended