

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



proofs were forgeries. Though she herself felt no doubt whatever concerning the authenticity of the documents, it was very disappointing to find that the first mention of them produced no startling effect upon any one, least of all upon Giovanni himself. The man, she thought, was a most accomplished villain; since he was capable of showing such hardened indifference to her accusation, he was capable also of thwarting her in her demonstration of their truth—and she trembled at the thought of what she saw. Old Saracinesca was not a man to be trifled with, nor his son either: they were powerful, and would be revenged for the insult. But in the meanwhile she had promised to produce her proofs; and when she regained enough composure to consider the matter from all its points, she came to the conclusion that after all her game was not lost, seeing that attested documents are evidence not easily refuted, even by powerful men like Leone and Giovanni Saracinesca. She gradually convinced herself that their indifference was a pretence, and that they were accomplices in the matter, their object being to gain Corona with all her fortune for Giovanni's wife. But, at the same time, Donna Tullia felt in the depths of her heart a misgiving: she was clever enough to recognise, even in spite of herself, the difference between a liar and an honest man.

She must get possession of these papers—and immediately too; there must be no delay in showing them to Corona, and in convincing her that this was no mere fable, but an assertion founded upon very substantial evidence. Del Ferice was suddenly gone to Naples: obviously the only way to get at the papers was to bribe his servant to deliver them up. Ugo had once or twice mentioned Temistocle to her, and she judged from the few words he had let fall that the fellow was a scoundrel, who would sell his soul for money. Madame Mayer drove home, and put on the only dark-coloured gown she possessed, wound a thick veil about her head, provided herself with a number of bank-notes, which she thrust

between the palm of her hand and her glove, left the house on foot, and took a cab. There was nothing to be done but to go herself, for she could trust no one. Her heart beat fast as she ascended the narrow stone steps of Del Ferice's lodging, and stopped upon the landing before the small green door, whereon she read his name. She pulled the bell, and Temistocle appeared in his shirt-sleeves.

"Does Count Del Ferice live here?" asked Donna Tullia, peering over the man's shoulder into the dark and narrow passage within.

"He lives here, but he is gone to Naples," answered Temistocle, promptly.

"When will he be back?" she inquired. The man raised his shoulders to his ears, and spread out the palms of his hands to signify that he did not know. Donna Tullia hesitated. She had never attempted to bribe anybody in her life, and hardly knew how to go about it. She thought that the sight of the money might produce an impression, and she withdrew a bank-note from the hollow of her hand, spreading it out between her fingers. Temistocle eyed it greedily.

"There are twenty-five scudi," she said. "If you will help me to find a piece of paper in your master's room, you shall have them."

Temistocle drew himself up with an air of mock pride. Madame Mayer looked at him.

"Impossible, signora," he said. Then she drew out another. Temistocle eyed the glove curiously to see if it contained more.

"Signora," he repeated, "it is impossible. My master would kill me. I cannot think of it." But his tone seemed to yield a little. Donna Tullia found another bank-note; there were now seventy-five scudi in her hand. She thought she saw Temistocle tremble with excitement. But still he hesitated.

"Signora, my conscience," he said, in a low voice of protestation.



"Come," said Madame Mayer, impatiently, "there is another—there are a hundred scudi—that is all I have got," she added, turning down her empty glove.

Suddenly Temistocle put out his hand and grasped the bank-notes eagerly. But instead of retiring to allow her to enter, he pushed roughly past her.

"You may go in," he said in a hoarse whisper, and turning quickly, fled precipitately down the narrow steps, in his shirt-sleeves as he was. Madame Mayer stood for a moment looking after him in surprise, even when he had already disappeared.

Then she turned and entered the door rather timidly; but before she had gone two steps in the dark passage, she uttered a cry of horror. Del Ferice stood in her way, wrapped in a loose dressing-gown, a curious expression upon his pale face, which from its whiteness was clearly distinguishable in the gloom. Temistocle had cheated her, had lied in telling her that his master was absent, had taken her bribe and had fled. He would easily find an excuse for having allowed her to enter; and with his quick valet's instinct, he guessed that she would not confess to Del Ferice that she had bribed him. Ugo came forward a step and instantly recognised Madame Mayer.

"Donna Tullia!" he cried, "what are you doing? You must not be seen here."

A less clever man than Ugo would have pretended to be overjoyed at her coming. Del Ferice's fine instincts told him that for whatever cause she had come—and he guessed the cause well enough—he would get a firmer hold upon her consideration by appearing to be shocked at her imprudence. Donna Tullia was nearly fainting with fright, and stood leaning against the wall of the passage.

"I thought—I—I must see you at once," she stammered.

"Not here," he answered, quickly. "Go home at once; I will join you in five minutes. It will ruin you to have it known that you have been here."

Madame Mayer took courage at his tone.

"You must bring them—those papers," she said, hur-

riedly. "Something dreadful has happened. Promise me to come at once!"

"I will come at once, my dear lady," he said, gently pushing her towards the door. "I cannot even go downstairs with you—forgive me. You have your carriage of course?"

"I have a cab," replied Donna Tullia, faintly, submitting to be put out of the door. He seized her hand and kissed it passionately, or with a magnificent semblance of passion. With a startled look, Donna Tullia turned and went rapidly down the steps. Del Ferice smiled softly to himself when she was gone, and went in again to exchange his dressing-gown for a coat. He had her in his power at last. He had guessed that she would betray the secret—that after the engagement became known, she would not be able to refrain from communicating it to Corona d'Astradente; and so soon as he heard the news, he had shut himself up in his lodging, pretending a sudden journey to Naples, determined not to set foot out of the house until he heard that Donna Tullia had committed herself. He knew that when she had once spoken she would make a desperate attempt to obtain the papers, for he knew that such an assertion as hers would need to be immediately proved, at the risk of her position in society. His plot had succeeded so far. His only anxiety was to know whether she had mentioned his name in connection with the subject, but he guessed, from his knowledge of her character, that she would not do so: she would respect her oath enough to conceal his name, even while breaking her promise; she would enjoy taking the sole credit of the discovery upon herself, and she would shun an avowal which would prove her to have discussed with any one else the means of preventing the marriage, because it would be a confession of jealousy, and consequently of personal interest in Don Giovanni. Del Ferice was a very clever fellow.

He put on his coat, and in five minutes was seated in a cab on his way to Donna Tullia's house, with a large en-



velope full of papers in his pocket. He found her as she had left him, her face still wrapped in a veil, walking up and down her drawing-room in great excitement. He advanced and saluted her courteously, maintaining a dignified gravity of bearing which he judged fitting for the occasion.

"And now, my dear lady," he said, gently, "will you tell me exactly what you have done?"

"This morning," answered Madame Mayer, in a stifled voice, "I heard of the Astrardente's engagement to Don Giovanni. It seemed such a terrible thing!"

"Terrible, indeed," said Del Ferice, solemnly.

"I sent for you at once, to know what to do: they said you were gone to Naples. I thought, of course, that you would approve if you were here, because we ought to prevent such a dreadful crime—of course." She waited for some sign of assent, but Del Ferice's pale face expressed nothing but a sort of grave reproach.

"And then," she continued, "as I could not find you, I thought it was best to act at once, and so I went to see the Astrardente, feeling that you would entirely support me. There was a terrific scene. She sent for the two Saracinesca, and I—waited till they came, because I was determined to see justice done. I am sure I was right,—was I not?"

"What did they say?" asked Del Ferice, quietly watching her face.

"If you will believe it, that monster of villany, Don Giovanni, was as cold as stone, and denied the whole matter from beginning to end; but his father was very angry. Of course they demanded the proofs. I never saw anything like the brazen assurance of Don Giovanni."

"Did you mention me?" inquired Del Ferice.

"No, I had not seen you: of course I did not want to implicate you. I said I would show them the papers to-morrow at the same hour."

"And then you came to see me," said Del Ferice. "That was very rash. You might have seriously com-

promised yourself. I would have come if you had sent for me."

"But they said you had gone to Naples. Your servant," continued Donna Tullia, blushing scarlet at the remembrance of her interview with Temistocle,—"your servant assured me in person that you had gone to Naples——"

"I see," replied Del Ferice, quietly. He did not wish to press her to a confession of having tried to get the papers in his absence. His object was to put her at her ease.

"My dear lady," he continued, gently, "you have done an exceedingly rash thing; but I will support you in every way, by putting the documents in your possession at once. It is unfortunate that you should have acted so suddenly, for we do not know what has become of this Felice Baldi, nor have we any immediate means of finding out. It might have taken weeks to find her. Why were you so rash? You could have waited till I returned, and we could have discussed the matter carefully, and decided whether it were really wise to make use of my information."

"You do not doubt that I did right?" asked Donna Tullia, turning a little pale.

"I think you acted precipitately in speaking without consulting me. All may yet be well. But in the first place, as you did not ask my opinion, you will see the propriety of not mentioning my name, since you have not done so already. It can do no good, for the papers speak for themselves, and whatever value they may have is inherent in them. Do you see?"

"Of course, there is no need of mentioning you, unless you wish to have a share in the exposure of this abominable wickedness."

"I am satisfied with my share," replied Del Ferice, with a quiet smile.

"It is not an important one," returned Donna Tullia, nervously.



"It is the lion's share," he answered. "Most adorable of women, you have not, I am sure, forgotten the terms of our agreement—terms so dear to me, that every word of them is engraven for ever upon the tablet of my heart."

Madame Mayer started slightly. She had not realised that her promise to marry Ugo was now due—she did not believe that he would press it; he had exacted it to frighten her, and besides, she had so persuaded herself that he would approve of her conduct, that she had not felt as though she were betraying his secret.

"You will not—you cannot hold me to that; you approve of telling the Astrardente, on the whole,—it is the same as though I had consulted you—"

"Pardon me, my dear lady; you did not consult me," answered Del Ferice, soothingly. He sat near her by the fire, his hat upon his knee, no longer watching her, but gazing contemplatively at the burning logs. There was a delicacy about his pale face since the wound he had received a year before which was rather attractive: from having been a little inclined to stoutness, he had grown slender and more graceful, partly because his health had really been affected by his illness, and partly because he had determined never again to risk being too fat.

"I tried to consult you," objected Donna Tullia. "It is the same thing."

"It is not the same thing to me," he answered, "although you have not involved me in the affair. I would have most distinctly advised you to say nothing about it at present. You have acted rashly, have put yourself in a most painful situation; and you have broken your promise to me—a very solemn promise, Donna Tullia, sworn upon the memory of your mother and upon a holy relic. One cannot make light of such promises as that."

"You made me give it in order to frighten me. The Church does not bind us to oaths sworn under compulsion," she argued.

"Excuse me; there was no compulsion whatever. You wanted to know my secret, and for the sake of knowing it you bound yourself. That is not compulsion. I cannot compel you. I could not think of presuming to compel you to marry me now. But I can say to you that I am devotedly attached to you, that to marry you is the aim and object of my life, and if you refuse, I will tell you that you are doing a great wrong, repudiating a solemn contract—"

"If I refuse—well—but you would give me the papers?" asked Donna Tullia, who was beginning to tremble for the result of the interview. She had a vague suspicion that, for the sake of obtaining them, she would even be willing to promise to marry Del Ferice. It would be very wrong, perhaps; but it would be for the sake of accomplishing good, by preventing Corona from falling into the trap—Corona, whom she hated! Still, it would be a generous act to save her. The minds of women like Madame Mayer are apt to be a little tortuous when they find themselves hemmed in between their own jealousies, hatreds, and personal interests.

"If you refused—no; if you refused, I am afraid I could not give you the papers," replied Del Ferice, musing as he gazed at the fire. "I love you too much to lose that chance of winning you, even for the sake of saving the Duchessa d'Astrardente from her fate. Why do you refuse? why do you bargain?" he asked, suddenly turning towards her. "Does all my devotion count for nothing—all my love, all my years of patient waiting? Oh, you cannot be so cruel as to snatch the cup from my very lips! It is not for the sake of these miserable documents: what is it to me whether Don Giovanni appears as the criminal in a case of bigamy—whether he is ruined now, as by his evil deeds he will be hereafter, or whether he goes on unharmed and unthwarted upon his career of wickedness? He is nothing to me, nor his pale-faced bride either. It is for you that I care, for you that I will do anything, bad or good, to win you that I would risk my life and my soul."



Can you not see it? Have I not been faithful for very long? Take pity on me—forget this whole business, forget that you have promised anything, forget all except that I am here at your feet, a miserable man, unless you speak the word, and turn all my wretchedness into joy!”

He slipped from his seat and knelt upon one knee before her, clasping one of her hands passionately between both his own. The scene was well planned and well executed; his voice had a ring of emotion that sounded pleasantly in Donna Tullia's ears, and his hands trembled with excitement. She did not repulse him, being a vain woman and willing to believe in the reality of the passion so well simulated. Perhaps, too, it was not wholly put on, for she was a handsome, dashing woman, in the prime of youth, and Del Ferice was a man who had always been susceptible to charms of that kind. Donna Tullia hesitated, wondering what more he could say. But he, on his part, knew the danger of trusting too much to eloquence when not backed by a greater strength than his, and he pressed her for an answer.

“Be generous—trust me,” he cried. “Believe that your happiness is everything to me; believe that I will take no unfair advantage of a hasty promise. Tell me that, of your own free will, you will be my wife, and command me anything, that I may prove my devotion. It is so true, so honest,—Tullia, I adore you, I live only for you! Speak the word, and make me the happiest of men!”

He really looked handsome as he knelt before her, and she felt the light, nervous pressure of his hand at every word he spoke. After all, what did it matter? She might accept him, and then—well, if she did not like the idea, she could throw him over. It would only cost her a violent scene, and a few moments of discomfort. Meanwhile she would get the papers.

“But you would give me the papers, would you not, and leave me to decide whether— Really, Del Ferice,” she said, interrupting herself with a nervous laugh, “this is very absurd.”

“I implore you not to speak of the papers—it is not absurd. It may seem so to you, but it is life or death to me: death if you refuse me—life if you will speak the word and be mine!”

Donna Tullia made up her mind. He would evidently not give her what she wanted, except in return for a promise of marriage. She had grown used to him, almost fond of him, in the last year.

“Well, I do not know whether I am right,” she said, “but I am really very fond of you; and if you will do all I say—”

“Everything, my dear lady; everything in the world I will do, if you will make me so supremely happy,” cried Del Ferice, ardently.

“Then—yes; I will marry you. Only get up and sit upon your chair like a reasonable being. No; you really must be reasonable, or you must go away.” Ugo was madly kissing her hands. He was really a good actor, if it was all acting. She could not but be moved by his pale delicate face and passionate words. With a quick movement he sprang to his feet and stood before her, clasping his hands together and gazing into her face.

“Oh, I am the happiest man alive to-day!” he exclaimed, and the sense of triumph that he felt lent energy to his voice.

“Do sit down,” said Donna Tullia, gaily, “and let us talk it all over. In the first place, what am I to do first?”

Del Ferice found it convenient to let his excitement subside, and as a preliminary he walked twice the length of the room.

“It is so hard to be calm!” he exclaimed; but nevertheless he presently sat down in his former seat, and seemed to collect his faculties with wonderful ease.

“What is to be done first?” asked Donna Tullia again.

“In the first place,” answered Del Ferice, “here are those precious papers. As they are notary's copies themselves, and not the originals, it is of no importance



whether Don Giovanni tears them up or not. It is easy to get others if he does. I have noted down all the names and dates. I wish we had some information about Felice Baldi. It is very unfortunate that we have not, but it would perhaps take a month to find her."

"I must act at once," said Donna Tullia, firmly; for she remembered old Saracinesca's threats, and was in a hurry.

"Of course. These documents speak for themselves. They bear the address of the notary who made the copies in Aquila. If the Saracinesca choose, they can themselves go there and see the originals."

"Could they not destroy those too?" asked Donna Tullia, nervously.

"No; they can only see one at a time, and the person who will show them will watch them. Besides, it is easy to write to the curate of the church of San Bernardino to be on his guard. We will do that in any case. The matter is perfectly plain. Your best course is to meet the Astrardente to-morrow at the appointed time, and simply present these papers for inspection. No one can deny their authenticity, for they bear the Government stamp and the notary's seal, as you see, here and here. If they ask you, as they certainly will, how you came by them, you can afford to answer, that, since you have them, it is not necessary to know whence they came; that they may go and verify the originals; and that in warning them of the fact, you have fulfilled a duty to society, and have done a service to the Astrardente, if not to Giovanni Saracinesca. You have them in your power, and you can afford to take the high hand in the matter. They must believe the evidence of their senses; and they must either allow that Giovanni's first wife is alive, or they must account for her death, and prove it. There is no denial possible in the face of these proofs."

Donna Tullia drew a long breath, for the case seemed perfectly clear; and the anticipation of her triumph already atoned for the sacrifice she had made.

"You are a wonderful man, Del Ferice!" she exclaimed. "I do not know whether I am wise in promising to marry you, but I have the greatest admiration for your intellect."

Del Ferice glanced at her and smiled. Then he made as though he would return the papers to his pocket. She sprang towards him, and seized him by the wrist.

"Do not be afraid!" she cried, "I will keep my promise."

"Solemnly?" he asked, still smiling, and holding the envelope firmly in his hand.

"Solemnly," she answered; and then added, with a quick laugh, "but you are so abominably clever, that I believe you could make me marry you against my will."

"Never!" said Del Ferice, earnestly; "I love you far too much." He had wonderfully clear instincts. "And now," he continued, "we have settled that matter; when shall the happy day be?"

"Oh, there is time enough to think of that," answered Donna Tullia, with a blush that might have passed for the result of a coy shyness, but which was in reality caused by a certain annoyance at being pressed.

"No," objected Del Ferice, "we must announce our engagement at once. There is no reason for delay—to-day is better than to-morrow."

"To-day?" repeated Donna Tullia, in some alarm.

"Why not? Why not, my dear lady, since you and I are both in earnest?"

"I think it would be much better to let this affair pass first."

"On the contrary," he argued, "from the moment we are publicly engaged I become your natural protector. If any one offers you any insult in this matter, I shall then have an acknowledged right to avenge you—a right I dearly covet. Do you think I would dread to meet Don Giovanni again? He wounded me, it is true, but he has the marks of my sword upon his body also. Give me at once the privilege of appearing as your champion,



and you will not regret it. But if you delay doing so, all sorts of circumstances may arise, all sorts of unpleasantness—who could protect you? Of course, even in that case I would; but you know the tongues of the gossips in Rome—it would do you harm instead of good.”

“That is true, and you are very brave and very kind. But it seems almost too soon,” objected Donna Tullia, who, however, was fast learning to yield to his judgment.

“Those things cannot be done too soon. It gives us liberty, and it gives the world satisfaction; it protects you, and it will be an inestimable pleasure to me. Why delay the inevitable? Let us appear at once as engaged to be married, and you put a sword in my hand to defend you and to enforce your position in this unfortunate affair with the Astrardente.”

“Well, you may announce it if you please,” she answered, reluctantly.

“Thank you, my dear lady,” said Del Ferice. “And here are the papers. Make the best use of them you can—any use that you make of them will be good, I know. How could it be otherwise?”

Donna Tullia's fingers closed upon the large envelope with a grasping grip, as though she would never relinquish that for which she had paid so dear a price. She had, indeed, at one time almost despaired of getting possession of them, and she had passed a terrible hour, besides having abased herself to the fruitless bribery she had practised upon Temistocle. But she had gained her end, even at the expense of permitting Del Ferice to publish her engagement to marry him. She felt that she could break it off if she decided at last that the union was too distasteful to her; but she foresaw that, from the point of worldly ambition, she would be no great loser by marrying a man of such cunning wit, who possessed such weapons against his enemies, and who, on the whole, as she believed, entirely sympathised with her view of life. She recognised that her chances of making

a great match were diminishing rapidly; she could not tell precisely why, but she felt, to her mortification, that she had not made a good use of her rich widowhood: people did not respect her much, and as this touched her vanity, she was susceptible to their lack of deference. She had done no harm, but she knew that every one thought her an irresponsible woman, and the thrifty Romans feared her extravagance, though some of them perhaps courted her fortune: many had admired her, and had to some extent expressed their devotion, but no scion of all the great families had asked her to be his wife. The nearest approach to a proposal had been the doubtful attention she had received from Giovanni Saracinesca during the time when his headstrong father had almost persuaded him to marry her, and she thought of her disappointed hopes with much bitterness. To destroy Giovanni by the revelations she now proposed to make, to marry Del Ferice, and then to develop her position by means of the large fortune she had inherited from her first husband, seemed on the whole a wise plan. Del Ferice's title was not much, to be sure, but, on the other hand, he was intimate with every one she knew, and for a few thousand scudi she could buy some small estate with a good title attached to it. She would then change her mode of life, and assume the pose of a social power, which as a young widow she could not do. It was not so bad, after all, especially if she could celebrate the first day of her engagement by destroying the reputation of Giovanni Saracinesca, root and branch, and dealing a blow at Corona's happiness from which it would not recover.

As for Del Ferice, he regarded his triumph as complete. He cared little what became of Giovanni—whether he was able to refute the evidence brought against him or not. There had been nothing in the matter which was dishonest, and properly made out marriage-certificates are not easy things to annul. Giovanni might swim or sink—it was nothing to Ugo del Ferice, now that he had gained the great object of his life, and was at liberty to



publish his engagement to Donna Tullia Mayer. He lost no time in telling his friends the good news, and before the evening was over a hundred people had congratulated him. Donna Tullia, too, appeared in more than usually gay attire, and smilingly received the expressions of good wishes which were showered upon her. She was not inclined to question the sincerity of those who spoke, for in her present mood the stimulus of a little popular noise was soothing to her nerves, which had been badly strained by the excitement of the day. When she closed her eyes she had evil visions of Temistocle retreating at full speed down the stairs with his unearned bribe, or of Del Ferice's calm, pale face, as he had sat in her house that afternoon grasping the precious documents in his hand until she promised to pay the price he asked, which was herself. But she smiled at each new congratulation readily enough, and said in her heart that she would yet become a great power in society, and make her house the centre of all attractions. And meanwhile she pondered on the title she should buy for her husband: she came of high blood herself, and she knew how such dignities as a "principe" or a "duca" were regarded when bought. There was nothing for it but to find some snug little marquisate—"marchese" sounded very well, though one could not be called "eccellenza" by one's servants; still, as the daughter of a prince, she might manage even that. "Marchese"—yes, that would do. What a pity there were only four "canopy" marquises—"marchesi del baldacchino"—in Rome with the rank of princes! That was exactly the combination of dignities Donna Tullia required for her husband. But once a "marchese," if she was very charitable, and did something in the way of a public work, the Holy Father might condescend to make Del Ferice a "duca" in the ordinary course as a step in the nobility. Donna Tullia dreamed many things that night, and she afterwards accomplished most of them, to the surprise of everybody, and, if the truth were told, to her own considerable astonishment.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

"Giovanni, you are the victim of some outrageous plot," said old Saracinesca, entering his son's room on the following morning. "I have thought it all out in the night, and I am convinced of it."

Giovanni was extended upon a sofa, with a book in his hand and a cigar between his lips. He looked up quietly from his reading.

"I am not the victim yet, nor ever will be," he answered; "but it is evident that there is something at the bottom of this besides Madame Mayer's imagination. I will find out."

"What pleases me especially," remarked the old Prince, "is the wonderful originality of the idea. It would have been commonplace to make out that you had poisoned half-a-dozen wives, and buried their bodies in the vaults of Saracinesca; it would have been *banal* to say that you were not yourself, but some one else; or to assert that you were a revolutionary agent in disguise, and that the real Giovanni had been murdered by you, who had taken his place without my discovering it,—very commonplace all that. But to say that you actually have a living wife, and to try to prove it by documents, is an idea worthy of a great mind. It takes one's breath away."

Giovanni laughed.

"It will end in our having to go to Aquila in search of my supposed better half," he said. "Aquila, of all places! If she had said Paris—or even Florence—but why, in the name of geography, Aquila?"

"She probably looked for some out-of-the-way place upon an alphabetical list," laughed the Prince. "Aquila stood first. We shall know in two hours—come along. It is time to be going."

They found Corona in her boudoir. She had passed an uneasy hour on the previous afternoon after they had left