

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

her, but her equanimity was now entirely restored. She had made up her mind that, however ingenious the concocted evidence might turn out to be, it was absolutely impossible to harm Giovanni by means of it. His position was beyond attack, as, in her mind, his character was above slander. Far from experiencing any sensation of anxiety as to the result of Donna Tullia's visit, what she most felt was curiosity to see what these fancied proofs would be like. She still believed that Madame Mayer was mad.

"I have been remarking to Giovanni upon Donna Tullia's originality," said old Saracinesca. "It is charming; it shows a talent for fiction which the world has been long in realising, which we have not even suspected—an amazing and transcendent genius for invention."

"It is pure insanity," answered Corona, in a tone of conviction. "The woman is mad."

"Mad as an Englishman," asseverated the Prince, using the most powerful simile in the Italian language. "We will have her in Santo Spirito before night, and she will puzzle the doctors."

"She is not mad," said Giovanni, quietly. "I do not even believe we shall find that her documents are forgeries."

"What?" cried his father. Corona looked quickly at Giovanni.

"You yourself," said the latter, turning to old Saracinesca, "were assuring me half an hour ago that I was the victim of a plot. Now, if anything of the kind is seriously attempted, you may be sure it will be well done. She has a good ally in the man to whom she is engaged. Del Ferice is no fool, and he hates me."

"Del Ferice!" exclaimed Corona, in surprise. As she went nowhere as yet, she had, of course, not heard the news which had been published on the previous evening. "You do not mean to say that she is going to marry Del Ferice?"

"Yes, indeed," said Giovanni. "They both appeared last night and announced the fact, and received everybody's congratulations. It is a most appropriate match."

"I agree with you—a beautiful triangular alliteration of wit, wealth, and wickedness," observed the Prince. "He has brains, she has money, and they are both as bad as possible."

"I thought you used to like Donna Tullia," said Corona, suppressing a smile.

"I did," said old Saracinesca, stoutly. "I wanted Giovanni to marry her. It has pleased Providence to avert that awful catastrophe. I liked Madame Mayer because she was rich and noisy and good-looking, and I thought that, as Giovanni's wife, she would make the house gay. We are such a pair of solemn bears together, that it seemed appropriate that somebody should make us dance. It was a foolish idea, I confess, though I thought it very beautiful at the time. It merely shows how liable we are to make mistakes. Imagine Giovanni married to a lunatic!"

"I repeat that she is not mad," said Giovanni. "I cannot tell how they have managed it, but I am sure it has been managed well, and will give us trouble. You will see."

"I do not understand at all how there can be any trouble about it," said Corona, proudly. "It is perfectly simple for us to tell the truth, and to show that what they say is a lie. You can prove easily enough that you were in Canada at the time. I wish it were time for her to come. Let us go to breakfast in the meanwhile."

The views taken by the three were characteristic of their various natures. The old Prince, who was violent of temper, and inclined always to despise an enemy in any shape, scoffed at the idea that there was anything to show; and though his natural wit suggested from time to time that there was a plot against his son, his general opinion was, that it was a singular case of madness. He hardly believed Donna Tullia would appear at all; and if she did, he expected some extraordinary outburst, some pitiable exhibition of insanity. Corona, on the other hand, maintained a proud indifference, scorning to suppose that anything could possibly injure Giovanni in

any way, loving him too entirely to admit that he was vulnerable at all, still less that he could possibly have done anything to give colour to the accusation brought against him. Giovanni alone of all the three foresaw that there would be trouble, and dimly guessed how the thing had been done; for he did not fall into his father's error of despising an enemy, and he had seen too much of the world not to understand that danger is often greatest when the appearance of it is least.

Breakfast was hardly over when Donna Tullia was announced. All rose to meet her, and all looked at her with equal interest. She was calmer than on the previous day, and she carried a package of papers in her hand. Her red lips were compressed, and her eyes looked defiantly round upon all present. Whatever might be her faults, she was not a coward when brought face to face with danger. She was determined to carry the matter through, both because she knew that she had no other alternative, and because she believed herself to be doing a righteous act, which, at the same time, fully satisfied her desire for vengeance. She came forward boldly and stood beside the table in the midst of the room. Corona was upon one side of the fireplace, and the two Saracinesca upon the other. All three held their breath in expectation of what Donna Tullia was about to say; the sense of her importance impressed her, and her love of dramatic situations being satisfied, she assumed something of the air of a theatrical avenging angel, and her utterance was rhetorical.

"I come here," she said, "at your invitation, to exhibit to your eyes the evidence of what I yesterday asserted—the evidence of the monstrous crime of which I accuse that man." Here she raised her finger with a gesture of scorn, and extending her whole arm, pointed towards Giovanni.

"Madam," interrupted the old Prince, "I will trouble you to select your epithets and expressions with more care. Pray be brief, and show what you have brought."

"I will show it, indeed," replied Donna Tullia, "and you shall tremble at what you see. When you have evidence of the truth of what I say, you may choose any language you please to define the action of your son. These documents," she said, holding up the package, "are attested copies made from the originals—the first two in the possession of the curate of the church of San Bernardino da Siena, at Aquila, the other in the office of the Stato Civile in the same city. As they are only copies, you need not think that you will gain anything by destroying them."

"Spare your comments upon our probable conduct," interrupted the Prince, roughly. Donna Tullia eyed him with a scornful glance, and her face began to grow red.

"You may destroy them if you please," she repeated; "but I advise you to observe that they bear the Government stamp and the notarial seal of Gianbattista Caldani, notary public in the city of Aquila, and that they are, consequently, beyond all doubt genuine copies of genuine documents."

Donna Tullia proceeded to open the envelope and withdraw the three papers it contained. Spreading them out, she took up the first, which contained the extract from the curate's book of banns. It set forth that upon the three Sundays preceding the 19th of June 1863, the said curate had published, in the parish church of San Bernardino da Siena, the banns of marriage between Giovanni Saracinesca and Felice Baldi. Donna Tullia read it aloud.

Giovanni could hardly suppress a laugh, it sounded so strangely. Corona herself turned pale, though she firmly believed the whole thing to be an imposture of some kind.

"Permit me, madam," said old Saracinesca, stepping forward and taking the paper from her hand. He carefully examined the seal and stamp. "It is very cleverly done," he said with a sneer; "but there should be only one letter *r* in the name Saracinesca—here it is spelt with

two! Very clever, but a slight mistake! Observe," he said, showing the place to Donna Tullia.

"It is a mistake of the copyist," she said, scornfully. "The name is properly spelt in the other papers. Here is the copy of the marriage register. Shall I read it also?"

"Spare me the humiliation," said Giovanni, in quiet contempt. "Spare me the unutterable mortification of discovering that there is another Giovanni Saracinesca in the world!"

"I could not have believed that any one could be so hardened," said Donna Tullia. "But whether you are humiliated or not by the evidence of your misdeeds, I will spare you nothing. Here it is in full, and you may notice that your name is spelt properly too."

She held up the document and then read it out—the copy of the curate's register, stating that on the 19th of June 1863 Giovanni Saracinesca and Felice Baldi were united in holy matrimony in the church of San Bernardino da Siena. She handed the paper to the Prince, and then read the extract from the register of the Civil marriage and the notary's attestation to the signatures. She gave this also to old Saracinesca, and then folding her arms in a fine attitude, confronted the three.

"Are you satisfied that I spoke the truth?" she asked, defiantly.

"The thing is certainly remarkably well done," answered the old Prince, who scrutinised the papers with a puzzled air. Though he knew perfectly well that his son had been in Canada at the time of this pretended marriage, he confessed to himself that if such evidence had been brought against any other man, he would have believed it.

"It is a shameful fraud!" exclaimed Corona, looking at the papers over the old man's shoulder.

"That is a lie!" cried Donna Tullia, growing scarlet with anger.

"Do not forget your manners, or you will get into

trouble," said Giovanni, sternly. "I see through the whole thing. There has been no fraud, and yet the deductions are entirely untrue. In the first place, Donna Tullia, how do you make the statements here given to coincide with the fact that during the whole summer of 1863 and during the early part of 1864 I was in Canada with a party of gentlemen, who are all alive to testify to the fact?"

"I do not believe it," answered Madame Mayer, contemptuously. "I would not believe your friends if they were here and swore to it. You will very likely produce witnesses to prove that you were in the arctic regions last summer, as the newspapers said, whereas every one knows now that you were at Saracinesca. You are exceedingly clever at concealing your movements, as we all know."

Giovanni did not lose his temper, but calmly proceeded to demonstrate his theory.

"You will find that the courts of law will accept the evidence of gentlemen upon oath," he replied, quietly. "Moreover, as a further evidence, and a piece of very singular proof, I can probably produce Giovanni Saracinesca and Felice Baldi themselves to witness against you. And I apprehend that the said Giovanni Saracinesca will vehemently protest that the said Felice Baldi is his wife, and not mine."

"You speak in wonderful riddles, but you will not deceive me. Money will doubtless do much, but it will not do what you expect."

"Certainly not," returned Giovanni, unmoved by her reply. "Money will certainly not create out of nothing a second Giovanni Saracinesca, nor his circle of acquaintances, nor the police registers concerning him which are kept throughout the kingdom of Italy, very much as they are kept here in the Pontifical States. Money will do none of these things."

While he was speaking, his father and the Duchessa listened with intense interest.

"Donna Tullia," continued Giovanni, "I am willing to believe from your manner that you are really sure that I am the man mentioned in your papers; but permit me to inform you that you have been made the victim of a shallow trick, probably by the person who gave those same papers into your hands, and suggested to you the use you have made of them."

"I? I, the victim of a trick?" repeated Donna Tullia, frightened at last by his obstinately calm manner.

"Yes," he replied. "I know Aquila and the Abruzzi very well. It chances that although we, the Saracinesca of Rome, are not numerous, the name is not uncommon in that part of the country. It is the same with all our great names. There are Colonna, Orsini, Caetani all over the country—there are even many families bearing the name of the Medici, who are extinct. You know it as well as I, or you should know it, for I believe your mother was my father's cousin. Has it not struck you that this same Giovanni Saracinesca herein mentioned, is simply some low-born namesake of mine?"

Donna Tullia had grown very pale, and she leaned upon the table as though she were faint. The others listened breathlessly.

"I do not believe it," said Madame Mayer, in a low and broken voice.

"Now I will tell you what I will do," continued Giovanni. "I will go to Aquila at once, and I daresay my father will accompany me——"

"Of course I will," broke in the old Prince.

"We will go, and in a fortnight's time we will produce the whole history of this Giovanni Saracinesca, together with his wife and himself in his own person, if they are both alive; we will bring them here, and they will assure you that you have been egregiously deceived, played upon and put in a false position by—by the person who furnished you with these documents. I wonder that any Roman of common-sense should not have seen at once the cause of this mistake."

"I cannot believe it," murmured Donna Tullia. Then raising her voice, she added, "Whatever may be the result of your inquiry, I cannot but feel that I have done my duty in this affair. I do not believe in your theory, nor in you, and I shall not, until you produce this other man. I have done my duty——"

"An exceedingly painful one, no doubt," remarked old Saracinesca. Then he broke into a loud peal of laughter.

"And if you do not succeed in your search, it will be my duty, in the interests of society, to put the matter in the hands of the police. Since you have the effrontery to say that those papers are of no use, I demand them back."

"Not at all, madam," replied the Prince, whose laughter subsided at the renewed boldness of her tone. "I will not give them back to you. I intend to compare them with the originals. If there are no originals, they will serve very well to commit the notary whose seal is on them, and yourself, upon a well-founded indictment for forgery, wilful calumny, and a whole list of crimes sufficient to send you to the galleys for life. If, on the other hand, the originals exist, they can be of no possible value to you, as you can send to Aquila and have fresh copies made whenever you please, as you yourself informed me."

Things were taking a bad turn for Donna Tullia. She believed the papers to be genuine, but a fearful doubt crossed her mind that Del Ferice might possibly have deceived her by having them manufactured. Anybody could buy Government paper, and it would be but a simple matter to have a notary's seal engraved. She was terrified at the idea, but there was no possibility of getting the documents back from the old Prince, who held them firmly in his broad brown hand. There was nothing to be done but to face the situation out to the end and go.

"As you please," she said. "It is natural that you should insult me, a defenceless woman trying to do what is right. It is worthy of your race and reputation. I will

leave you to the consideration of the course you intend to follow, and I advise you to omit nothing which can help to prove the innocence of your son."

Donna Tullia bestowed one more glance of contemptuous defiance upon the group, and brushed angrily out of the room.

"So much for her madness!" exclaimed Giovanni, when she was gone. "I think I have got to the bottom of that affair."

"It seems so simple, and yet I never thought of it," said Corona. "How clever you are, Giovanni!"

"There was not much cleverness needed to see through so shallow a trick," replied Giovanni. "I suspected it this morning; and when I saw that the documents were genuine and all in order, I was convinced of it. This thing has been done by Del Ferice, I suppose in order to revenge himself upon me for nearly killing him in fair fight. It was a noble plan. With a little more intelligence and a little more pains, he could have given me great trouble. Certificates like those he produced, if they had come from a remote French village in Canada, would have given us occupation for some time."

"I wish Donna Tullia joy of her husband," remarked the Prince. "He will spend her money in a year or two, and then leave her to the contemplation of his past extravagance. I wonder how he induced her to consent."

"Many people like Del Ferice," said Giovanni. "He is popular, and has attractions."

"How can you say that!" exclaimed Corona, indignantly. "You should have a better opinion of women than to think any woman could find attractions in such a man."

"Nevertheless, Donna Tullia is going to marry him," returned Giovanni. "She must find him to her taste. I used to think she might have married Valdarno—he is so good-natured you know!"

Giovanni spoke in a tone of reflection; the other two laughed.

"And now, Giovannino," said his father, "we must set out for Aquila, and find your namesake."

"You will not really go?" asked Corona, with a look of disappointment. She could not bear the thought of being separated even for a day from the man she loved.

"I do not see that we can do anything else," returned the Prince. "I must satisfy myself whether those papers are forgeries or not. If they are, that woman must go to prison for them."

"But she is our cousin—you cannot do that," objected Giovanni.

"Indeed I will. I am angry. Do not try to stop me. Do you suppose I care anything for the relationship in comparison with repaying her for all this trouble? You are not going to turn merciful, Giovanni? I should not recognise you."

There was a sort of mournful reproach about the old Prince's tone, as though he were reproving his son for having fallen from the paths of virtue. Corona laughed; she was not hard-hearted, but she was not so angelic of nature as to be beyond feeling deep and lasting resentment for injuries received. At that moment the idea of bringing Donna Tullia to justice was pleasant.

"Well," said Giovanni, "no human being can boast of having ever prevented you from doing whatever you were determined to do. The best thing that can happen will be, that you should find the papers genuine, and my namesake alive. I wish Aquila were Florence or Naples," he added, turning to Corona; "you might manage to go at the same time."

"That is impossible," she answered, sadly. "How long will you be gone, do you think?"

Giovanni did not believe that, if the papers were genuine, and if they had to search for the man mentioned in them, they could return in less than a fortnight.

"Why not send a detective—a *sbirro*?" suggested Corona.

"He could not accomplish anything," replied the Prince.

"He would be at a great disadvantage there; we must go ourselves."

"Both?" asked Corona, regretfully, gazing at Giovanni's face.

"It is my business," replied the latter. "I can hardly ask my father to go alone."

"Absurd!" exclaimed the old Prince, resenting the idea that he needed any help to accomplish his mission. "Do you think I need some one to take care of me, like a baby in arms? I will go alone; you shall not come even if you wish it. Absurd, to talk of my needing anybody with me! I will show you what your father can do when his blood is up."

Protestations were useless after that. The old man grew angry at the opposition, and, regardless of all propriety, seized his hat and left the room, growling that he was as good as anybody, and a great deal better.

Corona and Giovanni looked at each other when he was gone, and smiled.

"I believe my father is the best man alive," said Giovanni. "He would go in a moment if I would let him. I will go after him and bring him back—I suppose I ought."

"I suppose so," answered Corona; but as they stood side by side, she passed her hand under his arm affectionately, and looked into his eyes. It was a very tender look, very loving and gentle—such a look as none but Giovanni had ever seen upon her face. He put his arm about her waist and drew her to him, and kissed her dark cheek.

"I cannot bear to go away and leave you, even for a day," he said, pressing her to his side.

"Why should you?" she murmured, looking up to him. "Why should he go, after all? This has been such a silly affair. I wonder if that woman thought that anything could ever come between you and me? That was what made me think she was really mad."

"And an excellent reason," he answered. "Anybody

must be insane who dreams of parting us two. It seems as though a year ago I had not loved you at all."

"I am so glad," said Corona. "Do you remember, last summer, on the tower at Saracinesca, I told you that you did not know what love was?"

"It was true, Corona—I did not know. But I thought I did. I never imagined what the happiness of love was, nor how great it was, nor how it could enter into every thought."

"Into every thought? Into your great thoughts too?"

"If any thoughts of mine are great, they are so because you are the mainspring of them," he answered.

"Will it always be so?" she asked. "You will be a very great man some day, Giovanni; will you always feel that I am something to you?"

"Always—more than anything to me, more than all of me together."

"I sometimes wonder," said Corona. "I think I understand you better than I used to do. I like to think that you feel how I understand you when you tell me anything. Of course I am not clever like you, but I love you so much that just while you are talking I seem to understand everything. It is like a flash of light in a dark room."

Giovanni kissed her again.

"What makes you think that I shall be great, Corona? Nobody ever thinks I am even clever. My father would laugh at you, and say it is quite enough greatness to be born a Saracinesca. What makes you think it?"

Corona stood up beside him and laid her delicate hand upon his thick, close-cut black hair, and gazed into his eyes.

"I know it," she said. "I know it, because I love you so. A man like you must be great. There is something in you that nobody guesses but I, that will amaze people some day—I know it."

"I wonder if you could tell me what it is? I wonder if it is really there at all?" said Giovanni.

"It is ambition," said Corona, gravely. "You are the most ambitious man I ever knew, and nobody has found it out."

"I believe it is true, Corona," said Giovanni, turning away and leaning upon the chimneypiece, his head supported on one hand. "I believe you are right. I am ambitious: if I only had the brains that some men have I would do great things."

"You are wrong, Giovanni. It is neither brains nor ambition nor strength that you lack—it is opportunity."

"They say that a man who has anything in him creates opportunities for himself," answered Giovanni, rather sadly. "I fear it is because I really have nothing in me that I can do nothing. It sometimes makes me very unhappy to think so. I suppose that is because my vanity is wounded."

"Do not talk like that," said Corona. "You have vanity, of course, but it is of the large kind, and I call it ambition. It is not only because I love you better than any man was ever loved before that I say that. It is that I know it instinctively. I have heard you say that these are unsettled times. Wait; your opportunity will come, as it came often to your forefathers in other centuries."

"I hardly think that their example is a good one," replied Giovanni, with a smile.

"They generally did something remarkable in remarkable times," said Corona. "You will do the same. Your father, for instance, would not."

"He is far more clever than I," objected Giovanni.

"Clever! It passes for cleverness. He is quick, active, a good talker, a man with a ready wit and a sharp answer—kind-hearted when the fancy takes him, cruel when he is so disposed—but not a man of great convictions or of great actions. You are very different from him."

"Will you draw my portrait, Corona?" asked Giovanni.

"As far as I know you. You are a man quick to think and slow to make a decision. You are not brilliant in conversation—you see I do not flatter you; I am just.

You have the very remarkable quality of growing cold when others grow hot, and of keeping the full use of your faculties in any situation. When you have made a decision, you cannot be moved from it; but you are open to conviction in argument. You have a great repose of manner, which conceals a very restless brain. All your passions are very strong. You never forgive, never forget, and scarcely ever repent. Beneath all, you have an untamable ambition which has not yet found its proper field. Those are your qualities—and I love them all, and you more than them all."

Corona finished her speech by throwing her arms round his neck, and breaking into a happy laugh as she buried her face upon his shoulder. No one who saw her in the world would have believed her capable of those sudden and violent demonstrations—she was thought so very cold.

When Giovanni reached home, he was informed that his father had left Rome an hour earlier by the train for Terni, leaving word that he had gone to Aquila.

CHAPTER XXIX.

In those days the railroad did not extend beyond Terni in the direction of Aquila, and it was necessary to perform the journey of forty miles between those towns by diligence. It was late in the afternoon of the next day before the cumbrous coach rolled up to the door of the Locanda del Sole in Aquila, and Prince Saracinesca found himself at his destination. The red evening sun gilded the snow of the Gran Sasso d'Italia, the huge domed mountain that towers above the city of Frederick. The city itself had long been in the shade, and the spring air was sharp and biting. Saracinesca deposited his slender luggage with the portly landlord, said he would return for supper in half an hour, and inquired the way