

"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

to the church of San Bernardino da Siena. There was no difficulty in finding it, at the end of the Corso—the inevitable “Corso” of every Italian town. The old gentleman walked briskly along the broad, clean street, and reached the door of the church just as the sacristan was hoisting the heavy leathern curtain, preparatory to locking up for the night.

“Where can I find the Padre Curato?” inquired the Prince. The man looked at him but made no answer, and proceeded to close the doors with great care. He was an old man in a shabby cassock, with four days’ beard on his face, and he appeared to have taken snuff recently.

“Where is the Curator?” repeated the Prince, plucking him by the sleeve. But the man shook his head, and began turning the ponderous key in the lock. Two little ragged boys were playing a game upon the church steps, piling five chestnuts in a heap and then knocking them down with a small stone. One of them having upset the heap, desisted and came near the Prince.

“That one is deaf,” he said, pointing to the sacristan. Then running behind him he stood on tiptoe and screamed in his ear—“*Brutta bestia!*”

The sacristan did not hear, but caught sight of the urchin and made a lunge at him. He missed him, however, and nearly fell over.

“What education!—*che educazione!*” cried the old man, angrily.

Meanwhile the little boy took refuge behind Saracinesca, and pulling his coat asked for a *soldo*. The sacristan calmly withdrew the key from the lock, and went away without vouchsafing a look to the Prince.

“He is deaf,” screamed the little boy, who was now joined by his companion, and both in great excitement danced round the fine gentleman.

“Give me a *soldo*,” they yelled together.

“Show me the house of the Padre Curato,” answered the Prince, “then I will give you each a *soldo*. *Lesti! Quick!*”

Whereupon both the boys began turning cart-wheels on their feet and hands with marvellous dexterity. At last they subsided into a natural position, and led the way to the curate’s house, not twenty yards from the church, in a narrow alley. The Prince pulled the bell by the long chain which hung beside the open street door, and gave the boys the promised coppers. They did not leave him, however, but stood by to see what would happen. An old woman looked out of an upper window, and after surveying the Prince with care, called down to him—

“What do you want?”

“Is the Padre Curato at home?”

“Of course he is at home,” screamed the old woman. “At this hour!” she added, contemptuously.

“*Ebbene*—can I see him?”

“What! is the door shut?” returned the hag.

“No.”

“Then why don’t you come up without asking?” The old woman’s head disappeared, and the window was shut with a clattering noise.

“She is a woman without education,” remarked one of the ragged boys, making a face towards the closed window.

The Prince entered the door and stumbled up the dark stairs, and after some further palaver obtained admittance to the curate’s lodging. The curate sat in a room which appeared to serve as dining-room, living-room, and study. A small table was spread with a clean cloth, upon which were arranged a plate, a loaf of bread, a battered spoon, a knife, and a small measure of thin-looking wine. A brass lamp with three wicks, one of which only was burning, shed a feeble light through the poor apartment. Against the wall stood a rough table with an inkstand and three or four mouldy books. Above this hung a little black cross bearing a brass Christ, and above this again a coloured print of San Bernardino of Siena. The walls were white-washed, and perfectly clean,—as indeed was everything else in the room,—and there was a sweet smell of flowers

from a huge pot of pinks which had been taken in for the night, and stood upon the stone sill within the closed window.

The curate was a tall old man, with a singularly gentle face and soft brown eyes. He wore a threadbare cassock, carefully brushed; and from beneath his three-cornered black cap his thin hair hung in a straight grey fringe. As the Prince entered the room, the old woman called over his shoulder to the priest an uncertain formula of introduction.

"Don Paolo, *c'è uno*—there is one." Then she retired, grumbling audibly.

The priest removed his cap, and bowing politely, offered one of the two chairs to his visitor. With an apology, he replaced his cap upon his head, and seated himself opposite the Prince. There was much courteous simplicity in his manner.

"In what way can I serve you, Signore?" he asked.

"These papers," answered the Prince, drawing the famous envelope from his breast-pocket, "are copies of certain documents in your keeping, relating to the supposed marriage of one Giovanni Saracinesca. With your very kind permission, I desire to see the originals."

The old curate bowed, as though giving his assent, and looked steadily at his visitor for a moment before he answered.

"There is nothing simpler, my good sir. You will pardon me, however, if I venture to inquire your name, and to ask you for what purpose you desire to consult the documents?"

"I am Leone Saracinesca of Rome——"

The priest started uneasily.

"A relation of Giovanni Saracinesca?" he inquired. Then he added immediately, "Will you kindly excuse me for one moment?" and left the room abruptly. The Prince was considerably astonished, but he held his papers firmly in his hand, and did not move from his seat. The curate returned in a few seconds, bringing with him a

little painted porcelain basket, much chipped and the worse for age, and which contained a collection of visiting-cards. There were not more than a score of them, turning brown with accumulated dust. The priest found one which was rather newer than the rest, and after carefully adjusting a pair of huge spectacles upon his nose, he went over to the lamp and examined it.

"Il Conte del Ferice," he read slowly. "Do you happen to know that gentleman, my good sir?" he inquired, turning to the Prince, and looking keenly at him over his glasses.

"Certainly," answered Saracinesca, beginning to understand the situation. "I know him very well."

"Ah, that is good!" said the priest. "He was here two years ago, and had those same entries concerning Giovanni Saracinesca copied. Probably—certainly, indeed—the papers you have there are the very ones he took away with him. When he came to see me about it, he gave me this card."

"I wonder he did," answered Saracinesca.

"Indeed," replied the curate, after a moment's thought, "I remember that he came the next day—yes—and asked to have his card returned. But I could not find it for him. There was a hole in one of my pockets—it had slipped down. Carmela, my old servant, found it a day or two later in the lining of my cassock. I thought it strange that he should have asked for it."

"It was very natural. He wished you to forget his existence."

"He asked me many questions about Giovanni," said the priest, "but I could not answer him at that time."

"You could answer now?" inquired the Prince, eagerly.

"Excuse me, my good sir; what relation are you to Giovanni? You say you are from Rome?"

"Let us understand each other, Signor Curato," said Saracinesca. "I see I had better explain the position. I am Leone Saracinesca, the prince of that name, and the head of the family." The priest bowed respectfully at

this intelligence. "My only son lives with me in Rome—he is now there—and his name is Giovanni Saracinesca. He is engaged to be married. When the engagement became known, an enemy of the family attempted to prove, by means of these papers, that he was married already to a certain Felice Baldi. Now I wish to know who this Giovanni Saracinesca is, where he is, and how he comes to have my son's name. I wish a certificate or some proof that he is not my son,—that he is alive, or that he is dead and buried."

The old priest burst into a genial laugh, and rubbed his hands together in delight.

"My dear sir—your Excellency, I mean—I baptised Felice Baldi's second baby a fortnight ago! There is nothing simpler——"

"I knew it!" cried the Prince, springing from his chair in great excitement; "I knew it! Where is that baby? Send and get the baby at once—the mother—the father—everybody!"

"*Subito!* At once—or come with me. I will show you the whole family together," said the curate, in innocent delight. "Splendid children they are, too. Carmela, my cloak—*sbrigati*, be quick!"

"One moment," objected Saracinesca, as though suddenly recollecting something. "One moment, Signor Curato; who goes slowly goes safely. Where does this man come from, and how does he come by his name? I would like to know something about him before I see him."

"True," answered the priest, resuming his seat. "I had forgotten. Well, it is not a long story. Giovanni Saracinesca is from Naples. You know there was once a branch of your family in the Neapolitan kingdom—at least so Giovanni says, and he is an honest fellow. Their title was Marchese di San Giacinto; and if Giovanni liked to claim it, he has a right to the title still."

"But those Saracinesca were extinct fifty years ago," objected the Prince, who knew his family history very well.

"Giovanni says they were not. They were believed to be. The last Marchese di San Giacinto fought under Napoleon. He lost all he possessed—lands, money, everything—by confiscation, when Ferdinand was restored in 1815. He was a rough man; he dropped his title, married a peasant's only daughter, became a peasant himself, and died obscurely in a village near Salerno. He left a son who worked on the farm and inherited it from his mother, married a woman of the village of some education, and died of the cholera, leaving his son, the present Giovanni Saracinesca. This Giovanni received a better education than his father had before him, improved his farm, began to sell wine and oil for exportation, travelled as far as Aquila, and met Felice Baldi, the daughter of a man of some wealth, who has since established an inn here. Giovanni loved her. I married them. He went back to Naples, sold his farm for a good price last year, and returned to Aquila. He manages his father-in-law's inn, which is the second largest here, and drives a good business, having put his own capital into the enterprise. They have two children, the second one of which was born three weeks ago, and they are perfectly happy."

Saracinesca looked thoughtfully at Don Paolo, the old curate.

"Has this man any papers to prove the truth of this very singular story?" he inquired at last.

"*Altro!* That was all his grandfather left—a heap of parchments. They seem to be in order—he showed them to me when I married him."

"Why does he make no claim to have the attainder of his grandfather reversed?"

The curate shrugged his shoulders and spread out the palms of his hands, smiling incredulously.

"The lands, he says, have fallen into the hands of certain patriots. There is no chance of getting them back. It is of little use to be a Marchese without property. What he possesses is a modest competence; it is wealth, even, in his present position. For a nobleman it would

be nothing. Besides, he is half a peasant by blood and tradition."

"He is not the only nobleman in that position," laughed Saracinesca. "But are you aware——"

He stopped short. He was going to say that if he himself and his son both died, the innkeeper of Aquila would become Prince Saracinesca. The idea shocked him, and he kept it to himself.

"After all," he continued, "the man is of my blood by direct descent. I would like to see him."

"Nothing easier. If you will come with me, I will present him to your Excellency," said the priest. "Do you still wish to see the documents?"

"It is useless. The mystery is solved. Let us go and see this new-found relation of mine."

Don Paolo wrapped his cloak around him, and ushering his guest from the room, led the way down-stairs. He carried a bit of wax taper, which he held low to the steps, frequently stopping and warning the Prince to be careful. It was night when they went out. The air was sharp and cold, and Saracinesca buttoned his greatcoat to his throat as he strode by the side of the old priest. The two walked on in silence for ten minutes, keeping straight down the Corso Vittorio Emmanuele. At last the curate stopped before a clean, new house, from the windows of which the bright light streamed into the street. Don Paolo motioned to the Prince to enter, and followed him in. A man in a white apron, with his arms full of plates, who was probably servant, butler, boots, and factotum to the establishment, came out of the dining-room, which was to the left of the entrance, and which, to judge by the noise, seemed to be full of people. He looked at the curate, and then at the Prince.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Don Paolo *mio*," he said, supposing the priest had brought a customer—"very sorry; there is not a bed in the house."

"That is no matter, Giacchino," answered the curate. "We want to see Sor Giovanni for a moment." The man

disappeared, and a moment later Sor Giovanni himself came down the passage.

"*Favorisca*, dear Don Paolo, come in." And he bowed to the Prince as he opened the door which led into a small sitting-room reserved for the innkeeper's family.

When they had entered, Saracinesca looked at his son's namesake. He saw before him a man whose face and figure he long remembered with an instinctive dislike. Giovanni the innkeeper was of a powerful build. Two generations of peasant blood had given renewed strength to the old race. He was large, with large bones, vast breadth of shoulder, and massive joints; lean withal, and brown of face, his high cheek-bones making his cheeks look hollow; clean shaved, his hair straight and black and neatly combed; piercing black eyes near together, the heavy eyebrows joining together in the midst of his forehead; thin and cruel lips, now parted in a smile and showing a formidable set of short, white, even teeth; a prominent square jaw, and a broad, strong nose, rather unnaturally pointed,—altogether a striking face, one that would be noticed in a crowd for its strength, but strangely cunning in expression, and not without ferocity. Years afterwards Saracinesca remembered his first meeting with Giovanni the innkeeper, and did not wonder that his first impulse had been to dislike the man. At present, however, he looked at him with considerable curiosity, and if he disliked him at first sight, he told himself that it was beneath him to show antipathy for an innkeeper.

"Sor Giovanni," said the curate, "this gentleman is desirous of making your acquaintance."

Giovanni, whose manners were above his station, bowed politely, and looked inquiringly at his visitor.

"Signor Saracinesca," said the Prince, "I am Leone Saracinesca of Rome. I have just heard of your existence. We have long believed your family to be extinct—I am delighted to find it still represented, and by one who seems likely to perpetuate the name."

The innkeeper fixed his piercing eyes on the speaker's face, and looked long before he answered.

"So you are Prince Saracinesca," he said, gravely.

"And you are the Marchese di San Giacinto," said the Prince, in the same tone, holding out his hand frankly.

"Pardon me,—I am Giovanni Saracinesca, the innkeeper of Aquila," returned the other. But he took the Prince's hand. Then they all sat down.

"As you please," said the Prince. "The title is none the less yours. If you had signed yourself with it when you married, you would have saved me a vast deal of trouble; but on the other hand, I should not have been so fortunate as to meet you."

"I do not understand," said Giovanni.

The Prince told his story in as few words as possible.

"Amazing! extraordinary! what a chance!" ejaculated the curate, nodding his old head from time to time while the Prince spoke, as though he had not heard it all before. The innkeeper said nothing until old Saracinesca had finished.

"I see how it was managed," he said at last. "When that gentleman was making inquiries, I was away. I had taken my wife back to Salerno, and my wife's father had not yet established himself in Aquila. Signor Del—what is his name?"

"Del Ferice."

"Del Ferice, exactly. He thought we had disappeared, and were not likely to come back. Or else he is a fool."

"He is not a fool," said Saracinesca. "He thought he was safe. It is all very clear now. Well, Signor Marchese, or Signor Saracinesca, I am very glad to have made your acquaintance. You have cleared up a very important question by returning to Aquila. It will always give me the greatest pleasure to serve you in any way I can."

"A thousand thanks. Anything I can do for you during your stay—"

"You are very kind. I will hire horses and return to

Terni to-night. My business in Rome is urgent. There is some suspense there in my absence."

"You will drink a glass before going?" asked Giovanni; and without waiting for an answer, he strode from the room.

"And what does your Excellency think of your relation?" asked the curate, when he was alone with the Prince.

"A terrible-looking fellow! But——" The Prince made a face and a gesture indicating a question in regard to the innkeeper's character.

"Oh, do not be afraid," answered the priest. "He is the most honest man alive."

"Of course," returned the Prince, politely, "you have had many occasions of ascertaining that."

Giovanni, the innkeeper, returned with a bottle of wine and three glasses, which he placed upon the table, and proceeded to fill.

"By the by," said the Prince, "in the excitement I forgot to inquire for your Signora. She is well, I hope?"

"Thank you—she is very well," replied Giovanni, shortly.

"A boy, I have no doubt?"

"A splendid boy," answered the curate. "Sor Giovanni has a little girl, too. He is a very happy man."

"Your health," said the innkeeper, holding up his glass to the light.

"And yours," returned the Prince.

"And of all the Saracinesca family," said the curate, sipping his wine slowly. He rarely got a glass of old *Laerima*, and he enjoyed it thoroughly.

"And now," said the Prince, "I must be off. Many thanks for your hospitality. I shall always remember with pleasure the day when I met an unknown relation."

"The *Albergo di Napoli* will not forget that Prince Saracinesca has been its guest," replied Giovanni politely, a smile upon his thin lips. He shook hands with both

his guests, and ushered them out to the door with a courteous bow. Before they had gone twenty yards in the street, the Prince looked back and caught a last glimpse of Giovanni's towering figure, standing upon the steps with the bright light falling upon it from within. He remembered that impression long.

At the door of his own inn he took leave of the good curate with many expressions of thanks, and with many invitations to the Palazzo Saracinesca, in case the old man ever visited Rome.

"I have never seen Rome, your Excellency," answered the priest, rather sadly. "I am an old man—I shall never see it now."

So they parted, and the Prince had a solitary supper of pigeons and salad in the great dusky hall of the Locanda del Sole, while his horses were being got ready for the long night-journey.

The meeting and the whole clearing up of the curious difficulty had produced a profound impression upon the old Prince. He had not the slightest doubt but that the story of the curate was perfectly accurate. It was all so very probable, too. In the wild times between 1806 and 1815 the last of the Neapolitan branch of the Saracinesca had disappeared, and the rich and powerful Roman princes of the name had been quite willing to believe the Marchesi di San Giacinto extinct. They had not even troubled themselves to claim the title, for they possessed more than fifty of their own, and there was no chance of recovering the San Giacinto estate, already mortgaged, and more than half squandered at the time of the confiscation. That the rough soldier of fortune should have hidden himself in his native country after the return of Ferdinand, his lawful king, against whom he had fought, was natural enough; as it was also natural that, with his rough nature, he should accommodate himself to a peasant's life, and marry a peasant's only daughter, with her broad acres of orange and olive and vine land; for peasants in the far south were often rich, and their daughters

were generally beautiful—a very different race from the starved tenants of the Roman Campagna.

The Prince decided that the story was perfectly true, and he reflected somewhat bitterly that unless his son had heirs after him, this herculean innkeeper of Aquila was the lawful successor to his own title, and to all the Saracinesca lands. He determined that Giovanni's marriage should not be delayed another day, and with his usual impetuosity he hastened back to Rome, hardly remembering that he had spent the previous night and all that day upon the road, and that he had another twenty-four hours of travel before him.

At dawn his carriage stopped at a little town not far from the papal frontier. Just as the vehicle was starting, a large man, muffled in a huge cloak, from the folds of which protruded the long brown barrel of a rifle, put his head into the window. The Prince started and grasped his revolver, which lay beside him on the seat.

"Good morning, Prince," said the man. "I hope you have slept well."

"Sor Giovanni!" exclaimed the old gentleman. "Where did you drop from?"

"The roads are not very safe," returned the innkeeper. "So I thought it best to accompany you. Good-bye—*buon viaggio!*"

Before the Prince could answer, the carriage rolled off, the horses springing forward at a gallop. Saracinesca put his head out of the window, but his namesake had disappeared, and he rolled on towards Terni, wondering at the innkeeper's anxiety for his safety.

CHAPTER XXX.

Even old Saracinesca's iron strength was in need of rest when, at the end of forty-eight hours, he again entered his son's rooms, and threw himself upon the great divan.

"How is Corona?" was his first question.