

for the present to avoid an interview with Donna Tullia, and to communicate to her by letter the result of old Saracinesca's rapid journey to Aquila.

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CHAPTER XXXI.

When Donna Tullia received Saracinesca's note, explaining the existence of a second Giovanni, his pedigree and present circumstances, she almost fainted with disappointment. It seemed to her that she had compromised herself before the world, that all Rome knew the ridiculous part she had played in Del Ferice's comedy, and that her shame would never be forgotten. Suddenly she saw how she had been led away by her hatred of Giovanni into believing blindly in a foolish tale which ought not to have deceived a child. So soon as she learned the existence of a second Giovanni Saracinesca, it seemed to her that she must have been mad not to foresee such an explanation from the first. She had been duped, she had been made a cat's-paw, she had been abominably deceived by Del Ferice, who had made use of this worthless bribe in order to extort from her a promise of marriage. She felt very ill, as very vain people often do when they feel that they have been made ridiculous. She lay upon the sofa in her little boudoir, where everything was in the worst possible taste—from the gaudy velvet carpet and satin furniture to the gilt clock on the chimney-piece—and she turned red and pale and red again, and wished she were dead, or in Paris, or anywhere save in Rome. If she went out she might meet one of the Saracinesca at any turn of the street, or even Corona herself. How they would bow and smile sweetly at her, enjoying her discomfiture with the polite superiority of people who cannot be hurt!

And she herself—she could not tell what she should

do. She had announced her engagement to Del Ferice, but she could not marry him. She had been entrapped into making him a promise, into swearing a terrible oath; but the Church did not consider such oaths binding. She would go to Padre Filippo and ask his advice.

But then, if she went to Padre Filippo, she would have to confess all she had done, and she was not prepared to do that. A few weeks would pass, and that time would be sufficient to mellow and smooth the remembrance of her revengeful projects into a less questionable shape. No—she could not confess all that just yet. Surely such an oath was not binding; at all events, she could not marry Del Ferice, whether she broke her promise or not. In the first place, she would send for him and vent her anger upon him while it was hot.

Accordingly, in the space of three-quarters of an hour, Ugo appeared, smiling, smooth and persuasive as usual. Donna Tullia assumed a fine attitude of disdain as she heard his step outside the door. She intended to impress him with a full and sudden view of her just anger. He did not seem much moved, and came forward as usual to take her hand and kiss it. But she folded her arms and stared at him with all the contempt she could concentrate in the gaze of her blue eyes. It was a good comedy. Del Ferice, who had noticed as soon as he entered the room that something was wrong, and had already half-guessed the cause, affected to spring back in horror when she refused to give her hand. His pale face expressed sufficiently well a mixture of indignation and sorrow at the harsh treatment he received. Still Donna Tullia's cold eye rested upon him in a fixed stare.

"What is this? What have I done?" asked Del Ferice in low tones.

"Can you ask? Wretch! Read that, and understand what you have done," answered Donna Tullia, making a step forward and thrusting Saracinesca's letter in his face.

Del Ferice had already seen the handwriting, and knew



what the contents were likely to be. He took the letter in one hand, and without looking at it, still faced the angry woman. His brows contracted into a heavy frown, and his half-closed eyes gazed menacingly at her.

"It will be an evil day for any man who comes between you and me," he said, in tragic tones.

Donna Tullia laughed harshly, and again drew herself up, watching his face, and expecting to witness his utter confusion. But she was no match for the actor whom she had promised to marry. Del Ferice began to read, and as he read, his frown relaxed; gradually an ugly smile, intended to represent fiendish cunning, stole over his features, and when he had finished, he uttered a cry of triumph.

"Ha!" he said, "I guessed it! I hoped it—and it is true! He is found at last! The very man—the real Saracinesca! It is only a matter of time——"

Donna Tullia now stared in unfeigned surprise. Instead of crushing him to the ground as she had expected, the letter seemed to fill him with boundless delight. He paced the room in wild excitement, chattering like a madman. In spite of herself, however, her own spirits rose, and her anger against Del Ferice softened. All was perhaps not lost—who could fathom the intricacy of his great schemes? Surely he was not the man to fall a victim to his own machinations.

"Will you please explain your extraordinary satisfaction at this news?" said Madame Mayer. Between her late anger, her revived hopes, and her newly roused curiosity, she was in a terrible state of suspense.

"Explain?" he cried. "Explain what, most adorable of women? Does it not explain itself? Have we not found the Marchese di San Giacinto, the real Saracinesca? Is not that enough?"

"I do not understand——"

Del Ferice was now by her side. He seemed hardly able to control himself for joy. As a matter of fact he was acting, and acting a desperate part too, suggested on

the spur of the moment by the risk he ran of losing this woman and her fortune on the very eve of marriage. Now he seized her hand, and drawing her arm through his, led her quickly backwards and forwards, talking fast and earnestly. It would not do to hesitate, for by a moment's appearance of uncertainty all would be lost.

"No; of course you cannot understand the vast importance of this discovery. I must explain. I must enter into historic details, and I am so much overcome by this extraordinary turn of fortune that I can hardly speak. Remove all doubt from your mind, my dear lady, for we have already triumphed. This innkeeper, this Giovanni Saracinesca, this Marchese di San Giacinto, is the lawful and right Prince Saracinesca, the head of the house——"

"What!" screamed Donna Tullia, stopping short, and gripping his arm as in a vice.

"Indeed he is. I suspected it when I first found the signature at Aquila; but the man was gone, with his newly married wife, no one knew whither; and I could not find him, search as I might. He is now returned, and what is more, as this letter says, with all his papers proving his identity. This is how the matter lies. Listen, Tullia *mia*. The old Leone Saracinesca who last bore the title of Marquis——"

"The one mentioned here?" asked Donna Tullia, breathlessly.

"Yes—the one who took service under Murat, under Napoleon. Well, it is perfectly well known that he laid claim to the Roman title, and with perfect justice. Two generations before that, there had been an amicable arrangement—amicable, but totally illegal—whereby the elder brother, who was an unmarried invalid, transferred the Roman estates to his younger brother, who was married and had children, and, in exchange, took the Neapolitan estates and title, which had just fallen back to the main branch by the death of a childless Marchese di San Giacinto. Late in life this old recluse invalid married, contrary to all expectation—certainly contrary to his own



previous intentions. However, a child was born—a boy. The old man found himself deprived by his own act of his principality, and the succession turned from his son to the son of his younger brother. He began a negotiation for again obtaining possession of the Roman title—at least so the family tradition goes—but his brother, who was firmly established in Rome, refused to listen to his demands. At this juncture the old man died, being legally, observe, still the head of the family of Saracinesca; his son should have succeeded him. But his wife, the young daughter of an obscure Neapolitan nobleman, was not more than eighteen years of age, and the child was only six months old. People married young in those days. She entered some kind of protest, which, however, was of no avail; and the boy grew up to be called the Marchese di San Giacinto. He learned the story of his birth from his mother, and protested in his turn. He ruined himself in trying to push his suit in the Neapolitan courts; and finally, in the days of Napoleon's success, he took service under Murat, receiving the solemn promise of the Emperor that he should be reinstated in his title. But the Emperor forgot his promise, or did not find it convenient to keep it, having perhaps reasons of his own for not quarrelling with Pius the Seventh, who protected the Roman Saracinesca. Then came 1815, the downfall of the Empire, the restoration of Ferdinand IV. in Naples, the confiscation of property from all who had joined the Emperor, and the consequent complete ruin of San Giacinto's hopes. He was supposed to have been killed, or to have made away with himself. Saracinesca himself acknowledges that his grandson is alive, and possesses all the family papers. Saracinesca himself has discovered, seen, and conversed with the lawful head of his race, who, by the blessing of heaven and the assistance of the courts, will before long turn him out of house and home, and reign in his stead in all the glories of the Palazzo Saracinesca, Prince of Rome, of the Holy Roman Empire, grandee of Spain of the first class, and all the rest of it. Do you wonder

I rejoice, now that I am sure of putting an innkeeper over my enemy's head? Fancy the humiliation of old Saracinesca, of Giovanni, who will have to take his wife's title for the sake of respectability, of the Astrardente herself, when she finds she has married the penniless son of a penniless pretender!"

Del Ferice knew enough of the Saracinesca's family history to know that something like what he had so fluently detailed to Donna Tullia had actually occurred, and he knew well enough that she would not remember every detail of his rapidly told tale. Hating the family as he did, he had diligently sought out all information about them which he could obtain without gaining access to their private archives. His ready wit helped him to string the whole into a singularly plausible story. So plausible, indeed, that it entirely upset all Donna Tullia's determination to be angry at Del Ferice, and filled her with something of the enthusiasm he showed. For himself he hoped that there was enough in his story to do some palpable injury to the Saracinesca; but his more immediate object was not to lose Donna Tullia by letting her feel any disappointment at the discovery recently made by the old Prince. Donna Tullia listened with breathless interest until he had finished.

"What a man you are, Ugo! How you turn defeat into victory! Is it all really true? Do you think we can do it?"

"If I were to die this instant," Del Ferice asseverated, solemnly raising his hand, "it is all perfectly true, so help me God!"

He hoped, for many reasons, that he was not perjuring himself.

"What shall we do, then?" asked Madame Mayer.

"Let them marry first, and then we shall be sure of humiliating them both," he answered. Unconsciously he repeated the very determination which Giovanni had formed against him the night before. "Meanwhile, you and I can consult the lawyers and see how this



thing can best be accomplished quickly and surely," he added.

"You will have to send for the innkeeper——"

"I will go and see him. It will not be hard to persuade him to claim his lawful rights."

Del Ferice remained some time in conversation with Donna Tullia. The magnitude of the scheme fascinated her, and instead of thinking of breaking her promise to Ugo as she had intended doing, she so far fell under his influence as to name the wedding-day,—Easter Monday, they agreed, would exactly suit them and their plans. Indeed the idea of refusing to fulfil her engagement had been but the result of a transitory fit of anger; if she had had any fear of making a misalliance in marrying Del Ferice, the way in which the world received the news of the engagement removed all such apprehension from her mind. Del Ferice was already treated with increased respect—the very servants began to call him "Eccellenza," a distinction to which he neither had, nor could ever have, any kind of claim, but which pleased Donna Tullia's vain soul. The position which Ugo had obtained for himself by an assiduous attention to the social claims and prejudices of social lights and oracles, was suddenly assured to him, and rendered tenfold more brilliant by the news of his alliance with Donna Tullia. He excited no jealousies either; for Donna Tullia's peculiarities were of a kind which seemed to have interfered from the first with her matrimonial projects. As a young girl, a relation of the Saracinesca, whom she now so bitterly hated, she should have been regarded as marriageable by any of the young Roman nobles, from Valdarno down. But she had only a small dowry, and she was said to be extravagant—two objections then not so easily overcome as now. Moreover, she was considered to be somewhat flighty; and the social jury decided that when she was married, she would be excellent company, but would make a very poor wife. Almost before they had finished discussing her, however, she had found a husband, in the shape of the wealthy

foreign contractor, Mayer, who wanted a wife from a good Roman house, and cared not at all for money. She treated him very well, but was speedily delivered from all her cares by his untimely death. Then, of all her fellow-citizens, none was found save the eccentric old Saracinesca, who believed that she would do for his son; wherein it appeared that Giovanni's father was the man of all others who least understood Giovanni's inclinations. But this match fell to the ground, owing to Giovanni's attachment to Corona, and Madame Mayer was left with the prospect of remaining a widow for the rest of her life, or of marrying a poor man. She chose the latter alternative, and fate threw into her way the cleverest poor man in Rome, as though desiring to compensate her for not having married one of the greatest nobles, in the person of Giovanni. Though she was always a centre of attraction, no one of those she most attracted wanted to marry her, and all expressed their unqualified approval of her ultimate choice. One said she was very generous to marry a penniless gentleman; another remarked that she showed wisdom in choosing a man who was in the way of making himself a good position under the Italian Government; a third observed that he was delighted, because he could enjoy her society without being suspected of wanting to marry her; and all agreed in praising her, and in treating Del Ferice with the respect due to a man highly favored by fortune.

Donna Tullia named the wedding-day, and her affianced husband departed in high spirits with himself, with her, and with his scheme. He felt still a little excited, and wanted to be alone. He hardly realised the magnitude of the plot he had undertaken, and needed time to reflect upon it; but with the true instinct of an intriguing genius he recognised at once that his new plan was the thing he had sought for long and ardently, and that it was worth all his other plans put together. Accordingly he went home, and proceeded to devote himself to the study of the question, sending a note to a friend of his—a young lawyer



of doubtful reputation, but of brilliant parts, whom he at once selected as his chief counsellor in the important affair he had undertaken.

Before long he heard that the marriage of Don Giovanni Saracinesca to the Duchessa d'Astrardente was to take place the next week, in the chapel of the Palazzo Saracinesca. At least popular report said that the ceremony was to take place there; and that it was to be performed with great privacy was sufficiently evident from the fact that no invitations appeared to have been issued. Society did not fail to comment upon such exclusiveness, and it commented unfavourably, for it felt that it was being deprived of a long-anticipated spectacle. This state of things lasted for two days, when, upon the Sunday morning precisely a week before the wedding, all Rome was surprised by receiving an imposing invitation, setting forth that the marriage would be solemnised in the Basilica of the Santi Apostoli, and that it would be followed by a state reception at the Palazzo Saracinesca. It was soon known that the ceremony would be performed by the Cardinal Archpriest of St Peter's, that the united choirs of St Peter's and of the Sistine Chapel would sing the High Mass, and that the whole occasion would be one of unprecedented solemnity and magnificence. This was the programme published by the 'Osservatore Romano,' and that newspaper proceeded to pronounce a eulogy of some length and considerable eloquence upon the happy pair. Rome was fairly taken off its feet; and although some malcontents were found, who said it was improper that Corona's marriage should be celebrated with such pomp so soon after her husband's death, the general verdict was that the whole proceeding was eminently proper and becoming to so important an event. So soon as every one had been invited, no one seemed to think it remarkable that the invitations should have been issued so late. It was not generally known that in the short time which elapsed between the naming of the day and the issuing of the cards, there had been several interviews between old Saracinesca and Cardinal Antonelli;

that the former had explained Corona's natural wish that the marriage should be private, and that the latter had urged many reasons why so great an event ought to be public; that Saracinesca had said he did not care at all, and was only expressing the views of his son and of the bride; that the Cardinal had repeatedly asseverated that he wished to please everybody; that Corona had refused to be pleased by a public ceremony; and that, finally, the Cardinal, seeing himself hard pressed, had persuaded his Holiness himself to express a wish that the marriage should take place in the most solemn and public manner; wherefore Corona had reluctantly yielded the point, and the matter was arranged. The fact was that the Cardinal wished to make a sort of demonstration of the solidarity of the Roman nobility: it suited his aims to enter into every detail which could add to the importance of the Roman Court, and which could help to impress upon the foreign Ministers the belief that in all matters the Romans as one man would stand by each other and by the Vatican. No one knew better than he how the spectacle of a religious solemnity, at which the whole nobility would attend in a body, must strike the mind of a stranger in Rome; for in Roman ceremonies of that day there was a pomp and magnificence surpassing that found in any other Court of Europe. The whole marriage would become an event of which he could make an impressive use, and he was determined not to forego any advantages which might arise from it; for he was a man who of all men well understood the value of details in maintaining prestige.

But to the two principal actors in the day's doings the affair was an unmitigated annoyance, and even their own great and true happiness could not lighten the excessive fatigue of the pompous ceremony and of the still more pompous reception which followed it. To describe that day would be to make out a catalogue of gorgeous equipages, gorgeous costumes, gorgeous decorations. Many pages would not suffice to enumerate the cardinals, the dignitaries, the ambassadors, the great nobles, whose mag-



nificent coaches drove up in long file through the Piazza dei Santi Apostoli to the door of the Basilica. The columns of the 'Osservatore Romano' were full of it for a week afterwards. There was no end to the descriptions of the costumes, from the white satin and diamonds of the bride to the festal uniforms of the Cardinal Archpriest's retinue. Not a personage of importance was overlooked in the newspaper account, not a diplomatist, not an officer of Zouaves. And society read the praise of itself, and found it much more interesting than the praise of the bride and bridegroom; and only one or two people were offended because the paper had made a mistake in naming the colours of the hammer-cloths upon their coaches: so that the affair was a great success.

But when at last the sun was low and the guests had departed from the Palazzo Saracinesca, Corona and Giovanni got into their travelling carriage under the great dark archway, and sighed a sigh of infinite relief. The old Prince put his arms tenderly around his new daughter and kissed her; and for the second time in the course of this history, it is to be recorded that two tears stole silently down his brown cheeks to his grey beard. Then he embraced Giovanni, whose face was pale and earnest.

"This is not the end of our living together, *padre mio*," he said. "We shall expect you before long at Saracinesca."

"Yes, my boy," returned the old man; "I will come and see you after Easter. But do not stay if it is too cold; I have a little business to attend to in Rome before I join you," he added, with a grim smile.

"I know," replied Giovanni, a savage light in his black eyes. "If you need help, send to me, or come yourself."

"No fear of that, Giovannino; I have got a terrible helper. Now, be off. The guards are growing impatient."

"Good-bye. God bless you, *padre mio*!"

"God bless you both!" So they drove off, and left old Saracinesca standing bareheaded and alone under the dim

archway of his ancestral palace. The great carriage rolled out, and the guard of mounted gendarmes, which the Cardinal had insisted upon sending with the young couple, half out of compliment, half for safety, fell in behind, and trotted down the narrow street, with a deafening clatter of hoofs and clang of scabbards.

But Giovanni held Corona's hand in his, and both were silent for a time. Then they rolled under the low vault of the Porta San Lorenzo and out into the evening sunlight of the Campagna beyond.

"God be praised that it has come at last!" said Giovanni.

"Yes, it has come," answered Corona, her strong white fingers closing upon his brown hand almost convulsively; "and, come what may, you are mine, Giovanni, until we die!"

There was something fierce in the way those two loved each other; for they had fought many fights before they were united, and had overcome themselves, each alone, before they had overcome other obstacles together.

Relays of horses awaited them on their way, and relays of mounted guards. Late that night they reached Saracinesca, all ablaze with torches and lanterns; and the young men took the horses from the coach and yoked themselves to it with ropes, and dragged the cumbrous carriage up the last hill with furious speed, shouting and singing like madmen in the cool mountain air. Up the steep they rushed, and under the grand old gateway, made as bright as day with flaming torches; and then there went up a shout that struck the old vaults like a wild chord of fierce music, and Corona knew that her journey was ended.

So it was that Giovanni Saracinesca brought home his bride.