

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

People wondered that Giovanni and Corona should have chosen to retire into the country for their honeymoon, instead of travelling to France and England, and ending their wedding-trip in Switzerland. The hills were so very cold at that early season, and besides, they would be utterly alone. People could not understand why Corona did not take advantage of the termination of her widowhood to mix at once with the world, and indemnify herself for the year of mourning by a year of unusual gaiety. But there were many, on the other hand, who loudly applauded the action, which, it was maintained, showed a wise spirit of economy, and contrasted very favourably with the extravagance recently exhibited by young couples who in reality had far more cause to be careful of their money. Those who held this view belonged to the old, patriarchal class, the still flourishing remnant of the last generation, who prided themselves upon good management, good morals, and ascetic living; the class of people in whose marriage-contracts it was stipulated that the wife was to have meat twice a-day, excepting on fast days, a drive—the *trottata*, as it used to be called—daily, and two new gowns every year. Even in our times, when most of that generation are dead, these clauses are often introduced; in the first half of the century they were universal. A little earlier it used to be stipulated that the "meat" was not to be *capra*, goat's-flesh, which was considered to be food fit only for servants. But the patriarchal generation were a fine old class in spite of their economy, and they loudly applauded Giovanni's conduct.

No one, however, understood that the solitude of Saracinesca was really the greatest luxury the newly-married couple could desire. They wanted to be left alone, and they got their wish. No one had known of the preparations Giovanni had made for his wife's reception, and had any

idea of the changes in the castle reached the ears of the aforesaid patriarchs, they would probably have changed their minds in regard to Giovanni's economy. The Saracinesca were not ostentatious, but they spent their money royally in their own quiet way, and the interior of the old stronghold had undergone a complete transformation, while the ancient grey stones of the outer walls and towers frowned as gloomily as ever upon the valley. Vast halls had been decorated and furnished in a style suited to the antiquity of the fortress, small sunny rooms had been fitted up with the more refined luxury which was beginning to be appreciated in Italy twenty years ago. A great conservatory had been built out upon the southern battlement. The aqueduct had been completed successfully, and fountains now played in the courts. The old-fashioned fireplaces had been again put into use, and huge logs burned upon huge fire-dogs in the halls, shedding a ruddy glow upon the trophies of old armour, the polished floors, and the heavy curtains. Quantities of magnificent tapestry, some of which had been produced when Corona first visited the castle, were now hung upon the stairs and in the corridors. The great *baldacchino*, the canopy which Roman princes are privileged to display in their ante-chambers, was draped above the quartered arms of Saracinesca and Astrardente, and the same armorial bearings appeared in rich stained glass in the window of the grand staircase. The solidity and rare strength of the ancient stronghold seemed to grow even more imposing under the decorations and improvements of a later age, and for the first time Giovanni felt that justice had been done to the splendour of his ancestral home.

Here he and his dark bride dwelt in perfect unity and happiness, in the midst of their own lands, surrounded by their own people, and wholly devoted to each other. But though much of the day was passed in that unceasing conversation and exchange of ideas which seem to belong exclusively to happily-wedded man and wife, the hours were not wholly idle. Daily the two mounted their horses and

rode along the level stretch towards Aquaviva till they came to the turning from which Corona had first caught sight of Saracinesca. Here a broad road was already broken out; the construction was so far advanced that two miles at least were already serviceable, the gentle grade winding backwards and forwards, crossing and recrossing the old bridle-path as it descended to the valley below; and now from the furthest point completed Corona could distinguish in the dim distance the great square palace of Astrardente crowning the hills above the town. Thither the two rode daily, pushing on the work, consulting with the engineer they employed, and often looking forward to the day when for the first time their carriage should roll smoothly down from Saracinesca to Astrardente without making the vast detour which the old road followed as it skirted the mountain. There was an inexpressible pleasure in watching the growth of the work they had so long contemplated, in speculating on the advantages they would obtain by so uniting their respective villages, and in feeling that, being at last one, they were working together for the good of their people. For the men who did the work were without exception their own peasants, who were unemployed during the winter time, and who, but for the timely occupation provided for them, would have spent the cold months in that state of half-starved torpor peculiar to the indigent agricultural labourer when he has nothing to do—at that bitter season when father and mother and shivering little ones watch wistfully the ever-dwindling sack of maize, as day by day two or three handfuls are ground between the stones of the hand-mill and kneaded into a thick unwholesome dough, the only food of the poorer peasants in the winter. But now every man who could handle pickaxe and bore, and sledge-hammer and spade, was out upon the road from dawn to dark, and every Saturday night each man took home a silver scudo in his pocket; and where people are sober and do not drink their wages, a silver scudo goes a long way further than nothing. Yet many a lean and swarthy fel-

low there would have felt that he was cheated if besides his money he had not carried home daily the remembrance of that tall dark lady's face and kindly eyes and encouraging voice, and they used to watch for the coming of the "*gran principessa*" as anxiously as they expected the coming of the steward with the money-bags on a Saturday evening. Often, too, the wives and daughters of the rough workers would bring the men their dinners at noon-day, rather than let them carry away their food with them in the morning, just for the sake of catching a sight of Corona, and of her broad-shouldered manly husband. And the men worked with a right good will, for the story had gone abroad that for years to come there would be no lack of work for willing hands.

So the days sped, and were not interrupted by any incident for several weeks. One day Gouache, the artist Zouave, called at the castle. He had been quartered at Subiaco with a part of his company, but had not been sent on at once to Saracinesca as he had expected. Now, however, he had arrived with a small detachment of half-a-dozen men, with instructions to watch the pass. There was nothing extraordinary in his being sent in that direction, for Saracinesca was very near the frontier, and lay on one of the direct routes to the Serra di Sant' Antonio, which was the shortest hill-route into the kingdom of Naples; the country around was thought to be particularly liable to disturbance, and though no one had seen a brigand there for some years, the mountain-paths were supposed to be infested with robbers. As a matter of fact there was a great deal of smuggling carried on through the pass, and from time to time some political refugee found his way across the frontier at that point.

Gouache was received very well by Giovanni, and rather coldly by Corona, who knew him but slightly.

"I congratulate you," said Giovanni, noticing the stripes on the young man's sleeves; "I see that you have risen in grade."

"Yes. I hold an important command of six men. I

spend much time in studying the strategy of Condé and Napoleon. By the bye, I am here on a very important mission."

"Indeed!"

"I suppose you give yourselves the luxury of never reading the papers in this delightful retreat. The day before yesterday the Cardinal attempted to arrest our friend Del Ferice—have you heard that?"

"No—what—has he escaped?" asked Giovanni and Corona in a breath. But their tones were different. Giovanni had anticipated the news, and was disgusted at the idea that the fellow had got off. Corona was merely surprised.

"Yes. Heaven knows how—he has escaped. I am here to cut him off if he tries to get to the Serra di Sant'Antonio."

Giovanni laughed.

"He will scarcely try to come this way—under the very walls of my house," he said.

"He may do anything. He is a slippery fellow." Gouache proceeded to tell all he knew of the circumstances.

"That is very strange," said Corona, thoughtfully. Then after a pause, she added, "We are going to visit our road, Monsieur Gouache. Will you not come with us? My husband will give you a horse."

Gouache was charmed. He preferred talking to Giovanni and looking at Corona's face to returning to his six Zouaves, or patrolling the hills in search of Del Ferice. In a few minutes the three were mounted, and riding slowly along the level stretch towards the works. As they entered the new road Giovanni and Corona unconsciously fell into conversation, as usual, about what they were doing, and forgot their visitor. Gouache dropped behind, watching the pair and admiring them with true artistic appreciation. He had a Parisian's love of luxury and perfect appointments as well as an artist's love of beauty, and his eyes rested with unmitigated pleasure on the riders and their horses, losing no detail of their dress, their simple English accoutrements,

their firm seats and graceful carriage. But at a turn of the grade the two riders suddenly slipped from his field of vision, and his attention was attracted to the marvellous beauty of the landscape, as looking down the valley towards Astrardente he saw range on range of purple hills rising in a deep perspective, crowned with jagged rocks or sharply defined brown villages, ruddy in the lowering sun. He stopped his horse and sat motionless, drinking in the loveliness before him. So it is that accidents in nature make accidents in the lives of men.

But Giovanni and Corona rode slowly down the gentle incline, hardly noticing that Gouache had stopped behind, and talking of the work. As they again turned a curve of the grade Corona, who was on the inside, looked up and caught sight of Gouache's motionless figure at the opposite extremity of the gradient they had just descended. Giovanni looked straight before him, and was aware of a pale-faced Capuchin friar who with downcast eyes was toiling up the road, seemingly exhausted; a particularly weather-stained and dilapidated friar even for those wild mountains.

"Gouache is studying geography," remarked Corona.

"Another of those Capuccini!" exclaimed Giovanni, instinctively feeling in his pocket for coppers. Then with a sudden movement he seized his wife's arm. She was close to him as they rode slowly along side by side.

"Good God! Corona," he cried, "it is Del Ferice!" Corona looked quickly at the monk. His cowl was raised enough to show his features; but she would, perhaps, not have recognised his smooth shaven face had Giovanni not called her attention to it.

Del Ferice had recognised them too, and, horror-struck, he paused, trembling and uncertain what to do. He had taken the wrong turn from the main road below; unaccustomed to the dialect of the hills, he had misunderstood the peasant who had told him especially not to take the bridle-path if he wished to avoid Saracinesca. He stopped, hesitated, and then, pulling his cowl over

his face, walked steadily on. Giovanni glanced up and saw that Gouache was slowly descending the road, still absorbed in contemplating the landscape.

"Let him take his chance," muttered Saracinesca. "What should I care?"

"No—no! Save him, Giovanni,—he looks so miserable," cried Corona, with ready sympathy. She was pale with excitement.

Giovanni looked at her one moment and hesitated, but her pleading eyes were not to be refused.

"Then gallop back, darling. Tell Gouache it is cold in the valley—anything. Make him go back with you—I will save him since you wish it."

Corona wheeled her horse without a word and cantered up the hill again. The monk had continued his slow walk, and was now almost at Giovanni's saddle-bow. The latter drew rein, staring hard at the pale features under the cowl.

"If you go on you are lost," he said, in low distinct tones. "The Zouaves are waiting for you. Stop, I say!" he exclaimed, as the monk attempted to pass on. Leaping to the ground Giovanni seized his arm and held him tightly. Then Del Ferice broke down.

"You will not give me up—for the love of Christ!" he whined. "Oh, if you have any pity—let me go—I never meant to harm you—"

"Look here," said Giovanni. "I would just as soon give you up to the Holy Office as not; but my wife asked me to save you—"

"God bless her! Oh, the saints bless her! God render her kindness!" blubbered Del Ferice, who, between fear and exhaustion, was by this time half idiotic.

"Silence!" said Giovanni, sternly. "You may thank her if you ever have a chance. Come with me quietly. I will send one of the workmen round the hill with you. You must sleep at Trevi, and then get over the Serra as best you can." He ran his arm through the bridle of his horse and walked by his enemy's side.

"You will not give me up," moaned the wretched man. "For the love of heaven do not betray me—I have come so far—I am so tired."

"The wolves may make a meal of you, for all I care," returned Giovanni. "I will not. I give you my word that I will send you safely on, if you will stop this whining and behave like a man."

At that moment Del Ferice was past taking offence, but for many a year afterwards the rough words rankled in his heart. Giovanni was brutal for once; he longed to wring the fellow's neck, or to give him up to Gouache and the Zouaves. The tones of Ugo's voice reminded him of injuries not so old as to be yet forgotten. But he smothered his wrath and strode on, having promised his wife to save the wretch, much against his will. It was a quarter of an hour before they reached the works, the longest quarter of an hour Del Ferice remembered in his whole life. Neither spoke a word. Giovanni hailed a sturdy-looking fellow who was breaking stones by the roadside.

"Get up, Carluccio," he said. "This good monk has lost his way. You must take him round the mountain, above Ponza to Arcinazzo, and show him the road to Trevi. It is a long way, but the road is good enough after Ponza—it is shorter than to go round by Saracinesca, and the good friar is in a hurry."

Carluccio started up with alacrity. He greatly preferred roaming about the hills to breaking stones, provided he was paid for it. He picked up his torn jacket and threw it over one shoulder, setting his battered hat jauntily on his thick black curls.

"Give us a benediction, *padre mio*, and let us be off—*non è mica un passo*—it is a good walk to Trevi."

Del Ferice hesitated. He hardly knew what to do or say, and even if he had wished to speak he was scarcely able to control his voice. Giovanni cut the situation short by turning on his heel and mounting his horse. A moment later he was cantering up the road again, to the

considerable astonishment of the labourers, who were accustomed to see him spend at least half an hour in examining the work done. But Giovanni was in no humour to talk about roads. He had spent a horrible quarter of an hour, between his desire to see Del Ferice punished and the promise he had given his wife to save him. He felt so little sure of himself that he never once looked back, lest he should be tempted to send a second man to stop the fugitive and deliver him up to justice. He ground his teeth together, and his heart was full of bitter curses as he rode up the hill, hardly daring to reflect upon what he had done. That, in the eyes of the law, he had wittingly helped a traitor to escape, troubled his conscience little. His instinct bade him destroy Del Ferice by giving him up, and he would have saved himself a vast deal of trouble if he had followed his impulse. But the impulse really arose from a deep-rooted desire for revenge, which, having resisted, he regretted bitterly—very much as Shakespeare's murderer complained to his companion that the devil was at his elbow bidding him not murder the duke. Giovanni spared his enemy solely to please his wife, and half-a-dozen words from her had produced a result which no consideration of mercy or pity could have brought about.

Corona and Gouache had halted at the top of the road to wait for him. By an imperceptible nod, Giovanni informed his wife that Del Ferice was safe.

"I am sorry to have cut short our ride," he said, coldly. "My wife found it chilly in the valley."

Anastase looked curiously at Giovanni's pale face, and wondered whether anything was wrong. Corona herself seemed strangely agitated.

"Yes," answered Gouache, with his gentle smile; "the mountain air is still cold."

So the three rode silently back to the castle, and at the gate Gouache dismounted and left them, politely declining a rather cold invitation to come in. Giovanni and Corona went silently up the staircase together, and on

into a small apartment which in that cold season they had set apart as a sitting-room. When they were alone, Corona laid her hands upon Giovanni's shoulders and gazed long into his angry eyes. Then she threw her arms round his neck and drew him to her.

"My beloved," she cried, proudly, "you are all I thought—and more too."

"Do not say that," answered Giovanni. "I would not have lifted a finger to save that hound, but for you."

"Ah, but you did it, dear, all the same," she said, and kissed him.

On the following evening, without any warning, old Saracinesca arrived, and was warmly greeted. After dinner Giovanni told him the story of Del Ferice's escape. Thereupon the old gentleman flew into a towering rage, swearing and cursing in a most characteristic manner, but finally declaring that to arrest spies was the work of spies, and that Giovanni had behaved like a gentleman, as of course he could not help doing, seeing that he was his own son.

And so the curtain falls upon the first act. Giovanni and Corona are happily married. Del Ferice is safe across the frontier among his friends in Naples, and Donna Tullia is waiting still for news of him, in the last days of Lent, in the year 1866. To carry on the tale from this point would be to enter upon a new series of events more interesting, perhaps, than those herein detailed, and of like importance in the history of the Saracinesca family, but forming by their very nature a distinct narrative—a second act to the drama, if it may be so called. I am content if in the foregoing pages I have so far acquainted the reader with those characters which hereafter will play more important parts, as to enable him to comprehend the story of their subsequent lives, and in some measure to judge of their future by their past, regarding them as acquaintances, if not sympathetic, yet worthy of some attention.

Especially I ask for indulgence in matters political. I am not writing the history of political events, but the history of a Roman family during times of great uncertainty and agitation. If any one says that I have set up Del Ferice as a type of the Italian Liberal party, carefully constructing a villain in order to batter him to pieces with the artillery of poetic justice, I answer that I have done nothing of the kind. Del Ferice is indeed a type, but a type of a depraved class which very unjustly represented the Liberal party in Rome before 1870, and which, among those who witnessed its proceedings, drew upon the great political body which demanded the unity of Italy an opprobrium that body was very far from deserving. The honest and upright Liberals were waiting in 1866. What they did, they did from their own country, and they did it boldly. To no man of intelligence need I say that Del Ferice had no more affinity with Massimo D'Azeglio, with the great Cavour, with Cavour's great enemy Giuseppe Mazzini, or with Garibaldi, than the jackal has with the lion. Del Ferice represented the scum which remained after the revolution of 1848 had subsided. He was one of those men who were used and despised by their betters, and in using whom Cavour himself was provoked into writing "Se noi facessimo per noi quel che facciamo per l'Italia, saremmo gran bricconi"—if we did for ourselves what we do for Italy, we should be great blackguards. And that there were honourable and just men outside of Rome will sufficiently appear in the sequel to this veracious tale.

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"The novel opens with a magnificent description of the march of the Babylonian court to Belshazzar's feast, with the sudden and awful ending of the latter by the marvellous writing on the wall which Daniel is called to interpret. From that point the story moves on in a series of grand and dramatic scenes and incidents which will not fail to hold the reader fascinated and spell-bound to the end."—*Christian at Work*.

"The field of Mr. Crawford's imagination appears to be unbounded. . . . In 'Zoroaster' Mr. Crawford's winged fancy ventures a daring flight. . . . Yet 'Zoroaster' is a novel rather than a drama. It is a drama in the force of its situations and in the poetry and dignity of its language; but its men and women are not men and women of a play. By the naturalness of their conversation and behavior they seem to live and lay hold of our human sympathy more than the same characters on a stage could possibly do."—*The Times*.

"As a matter of literary art solely, we doubt if Mr. Crawford has ever before given us better work than the description of Belshazzar's feast with which the story begins, or the death-scene with which it closes."—*The Christian Union*.

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—*Boston Beacon*.

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—*Home Journal*.

