

down into the socket. Profiting by the last ray of light he drank a final draught and reeled to his bed, dressed as he was. One bottle was empty, and a third of the second was gone. Arnaldo Meschini was dead drunk.

CHAPTER XXV.

Corona was not much surprised when the messenger brought her carriage and presented the order for Faustina's liberation. When Giovanni had left her she had felt that he would find means to procure the young girl's liberty, and the only thing which seemed strange to her was the fact that Giovanni did not return himself. The messenger said he had seen him with the cardinal and that Sant' Ilario had given the order to use the carriage. Beyond that, he knew nothing. Corona at once took Faustina to the Palazzo Montevarchi, and then, with a promise to come back in the course of the day, she went home to rest.

She needed repose even more than Faustina, who, after all, had slept soundly on her prison bed, trusting with childlike faith in her friend's promise that she should be free in the morning. Corona, on the contrary, had passed a wakeful night, and was almost worn out with fatigue. She remained in her room until twelve o'clock, the hour when the members of the family met at the midday breakfast. She found her father-in-law waiting for her, and at a glance she saw that he was in a savage humour. His bronzed face was paler than usual and his movements more sudden and nervous, while his dark eyes gleamed angrily beneath his bent and shaggy brows. Corona, on her part, was silent and preoccupied. In spite of the tragic events of the night, which, after all, only affected her indirectly at present, and in spite of the constant moral suffering which now played so important a part in her life, she could not but be disturbed by the tremendous loss sustained by her husband and by his father. It fell most heavily upon the latter,

who was an old man, and whose mind was not engaged by any other absorbing consideration, but the blow was a terrible one to the other also.

"Where is Giovanni?" asked Saracinesca brusquely, as they sat down to the table.

"I do not know," answered Corona. "The last I heard of him was that he was with Cardinal Antonelli. I suppose that after getting the order to release Faustina he stayed there."

"So his Eminence suffered himself to be persuaded that a little girl did not strangle that old sinner," remarked the prince.

"Apparently."

"If they had taken Flavia it would have been more natural. She would have inaugurated her reign as Princess Saracinesca by a night in the Termini. Delightful contrast! I suppose you know who did it?"

"No. Probably a servant, though they say that nothing was stolen."

"San Giacinto did it. I have thought the whole matter out, and I am convinced of it. Look at his hands. He could strangle an elephant. Not that he could have had any particular reason for liquidating his father-in-law. He is rich enough without Flavia's share, but I always thought he would kill somebody one of these days, ever since I met him at Aquila."

"Without any reason, why should he have done it?"

"My dear child, when one has no reason to give, it is very hard to say why a thing occurs. He looks like the man."

"Is it conceivable that after getting all he could desire he should endanger his happiness in such a way?"

"Perhaps not. I believe he did it. What an abominable omelet — a glass of water, Pasquale. Abominable, is it not, Corona? Perfectly uneatable. I suppose the cook has heard of our misfortunes and wants to leave."

"I fancy we are not very hungry," remarked Corona, in order to say something.

"I would like to know whether the murderer is eating his breakfast at this moment, and whether he has any appetite. It would be interesting from a psychological point of view. By the bye, all this is very like a *jettatura*."

"What?"

"Montevarchi coming to his end on the very day he had won the suit. In good old times it would have been Giovanni who would have cut his throat, after which we should have all retired to Saracinesca and prepared for a siege. Less civilised but twice as human. No doubt they will say now — even now — that we paid a man to do the work."

"But it was San Giacinto who brought the suit —"

"It was Montevarchi. I have seen my lawyer this morning. He says that Montevarchi sent the people out to Frascati to see San Giacinto and explained the whole matter to them beforehand. He discovered the clause in the deeds first. San Giacinto never even saw them until everything was ready. And on the evening of the very day when it was settled, Montevarchi is murdered. I wonder that it has not struck any one to say we did it."

"You did not oppose the suit. If you had, it would have been different."

"How could I oppose the action? It was clear from the beginning that we had no chance of winning it. The fact remains that we are turned out of our home. The sooner we leave this the better. It will only be harder to go if we stay here."

"Yes," answered Corona sadly. "It will be harder."

"I believe it is a judgment of heaven on Giovanni for his outrageous conduct," growled the prince, suddenly running away with a new idea.

"On Giovanni?" Corona was roused immediately by the mention of her husband in such a connection.

"Yes, for his behaviour to you, the young scoundrel! I ought to have disinherited him at once."

"Please do not talk in that way. I cannot let you say —"

"He is my own son, and I will say what I please," interrupted Saracinesca fiercely. "He treated you outrageously, I say. It is just like a woman to deny it and defend her husband."

"Since there is no one else to defend him, I must. He was misled, and naturally enough, considering the appearances. I did not know that you knew about it all."

"I do not know all, nor half. But I know enough. A

man who suspects such a woman as you deserves to be hanged. Besides," he added irrelevantly, but with an intuitive keenness that startled Corona, "besides, you have not forgiven him."

"Indeed I have —"

"In a Christian spirit, no doubt. I know you are good. But you do not love him as you did. It is useless to deny it. Why should you? I do not blame you, I am sure."

The prince fixed his bright eyes on her face and waited for her answer. She turned a little paler and said nothing for several moments. Then as he watched her he saw the colour mount slowly to her olive cheeks. She herself could hardly have accounted for the unwonted blush, and a man capable of more complicated reasoning than her father-in-law would have misinterpreted it. Corona had at first been angry at the thought that he could speak as he did of Giovanni, saying things she would not say to herself concerning him. Then she felt a curious sensation of shame at being discovered. It was true that she did not love her husband, or at least that she believed herself unable to love him; but she was ashamed that any one else should know it.

"Why will you persist in talking about the matter?" she asked at length. "It is between us two."

"It seems to me that it concerns me," returned Saracinesca, who was naturally pertinacious. "I am not inquisitive. I ask no questions. Giovanni has said very little about it to me. But I am not blind. He came to me one evening and said he was going to take you away to the mountains. He seemed very much disturbed, and I saw that there had been trouble between you, and that he suspected you of something. He did not say so, but I knew what he meant. If it had turned out true I think I would have — well, I would not have answered for my conduct. Of course I took his part, but you fell ill, and did not know that. When he came and told me that he had been mistaken I abused him like a thief. I have abused him ever since whenever I have had a chance. It was a vile, dastardly, foolish, ridiculous —"

"For heaven's sake!" cried Corona, interrupting him. "Pray, pray leave the question in peace! I am so unhappy!"

"So am I," answered Saracinesca bluntly. "It does not add to my happiness to know that my son has made an ass of himself. Worse than that. You do not seem to realise that I am very fond of you. If I had not been such an old man I should have fallen in love with you as well as Giovanni. Do you remember when I rode over to Astrardente, and asked you to marry him? I would have given all I am—all I was worth, I mean, to be in Giovanni's shoes when I brought back your answer. Bah! I am an old fellow and no Apollo either! But you have been a good daughter to me, Corona, and I will not let any one behave badly to you."

"And you have been good to me—so good! But you must not be angry with Giovanni. He was misled. He loved me even then."

"I wish I were as charitable as you."

"Do not call me charitable. I am anything but that. If I were I would——" She stopped short.

"Yes, I know, you would love him as you did before. Then you would not be Corona, but some one else. I know that sort of argument. But you cannot be two persons at one time. The other woman, whom you have got in your mind, and who would love Giovanni, is a weak-minded kind of creature who bears anything and everything, who will accept any sort of excuse for an insult, and will take credit to herself for being long-suffering because she has not the spirit to be justly angry. Thank heaven you are not like that. If you were, Giovanni would not have had you for a wife nor I for a daughter."

"I think it is my fault. I would do anything in the world to make it otherwise."

"You admit the fact then? Of course. It is a misfortune, and not your fault. It is one more misfortune among so many. You may forgive him, if you please. I will not. By the bye, I wonder why he does not come back. I would like to hear the news."

"The cardinal may have kept him to breakfast."

"Since seven o'clock this morning? That is impossible. Unless his Eminence has arrested him on charge of the murder." The old gentleman laughed gruffly, little guessing how near his jest lay to the truth. But Corona

looked up quickly. The mere idea of such a horrible contingency was painful to her, absurd and wildly improbable as it appeared.

"I was going to ask him to go up to Saracinesca tomorrow and see to the changes," continued the prince.

"Must it be so soon?" asked Corona regretfully. "Is it absolutely decided? Have you not yielded too easily?"

"I cannot go over all the arguments again," returned her father-in-law with some impatience. "There is no doubt about it. I expended all my coolness and civility on San Giacinto when he came to see me about it. It is of no use to complain, and we cannot draw back. I suppose I might go down on my knees to the Pope and ask his Holiness for another title—for the privilege of being called something, Principe di Cavolfiore, if you like. But I will not do it. I will die as Leone Saracinesca. You can give Giovanni your old title, if you please—it is yours to give."

"He shall have it if he wants it. What does it matter? I can be Donna Corona."

"Ay, what does it matter, provided we have peace? What does anything matter in this unutterably ridiculous world—except your happiness, poor child! Yes. Everything must be got ready. I will not stay in this house another week."

"But in a week it will be impossible to do all there is to be done!" exclaimed Corona, whose feminine mind foresaw infinite difficulties in moving.

"Possible, or impossible, it must be accomplished. I have appointed this day week for handing over the property. The lawyers said, as you say, that it would need more time. I told them that there was no time, and that if they could not do it, I would employ some one else. They talked of sitting up all night—as if I cared whether they lost their beauty sleep or not! A week from to-day everything must be settled, so that I have not in my possession a penny that does not belong to me."

"And then—what will you do?" asked Corona, who saw in spite of his vehemence how much he was affected by the prospect.

"And then? What then? Live somewhere else, I suppose, and pray for an easy death."

No one had ever heard Leone Saracinesca say before now that he desired to die, and the wish seemed so contrary to the nature of his character that Corona looked earnestly at him. His face was discomposed, and his voice had trembled. He was a brave man, and a very honourable one, but he was very far from being a philosopher. As he had said, he had expended all his calmness in that one meeting with San Giacinto when he had been persuaded of the justice of the latter's claims. Since then he had felt nothing but bitterness, and the outward expression of it was either an unreasonable irritation concerning small matters, or some passionate outburst like the present against life, against the world in which he lived, against everything. It is scarcely to be wondered at that he should have felt the loss so deeply, more deeply even than Giovanni. He had been for many years the sole head and master of his house, and had borne all the hereditary dignities that belonged to his station, some of which were of a kind that pleased his love of feudal traditions. For the money he cared little. The loss that hurt him most touched his pride, and that generous vanity which was a part of his nature, which delighted in the honour accorded to his name, to his son, to his son's wife, in the perpetuation of his race and in a certain dominating independence, that injured no one and gave himself immense satisfaction. At his age he was not to be blamed for such feelings. They proceeded in reality far more from habit than from a vain disposition, and it seemed to him that if he bore the calamity bravely he had a right to abuse his fate in his own language. But he could not always keep himself from betraying more emotion than he cared to show.

"Do not talk of death," said Corona. "Giovanni and I will make your life happy and worth living." She sighed as she spoke, in spite of herself.

"Giovanni and you!" repeated the prince gloomily. "But for his folly — what is the use of talking? I have much to do. If he comes to you this afternoon please tell him that I want him."

Corona was glad when the meal was ended, and she went back to her own room. She had promised to go and see Faustina again, but otherwise she did not know how

to occupy herself. A vague uneasiness beset her as the time passed and her husband did not come home. It was unlike him to stay away all day without warning her, though she was obliged to confess to herself that she had of late shown very little interest in his doings, and that it would not be very surprising if he began to do as he pleased without informing her of his intentions. Nevertheless she wished he would show himself before evening. The force of habit was still strong, and she missed him without quite knowing it. At last she made an effort against her apathy, and went out to pay the promised visit.

The Montevarchi household was subdued under all the outward pomp of a ponderous mourning. The gates and staircases were hung with black. In the vast antechamber the canopy was completely hidden by an enormous hatchment before which the dead prince had lain in state during the previous night and a part of the day. According to the Roman custom the body had been already removed, the regulations of the city requiring that this should be done within twenty-four hours. The great black pedestals on which the lights had been placed were still standing, and lent a ghastly and sepulchral appearance to the whole. Numbers of servants in mourning liveries stood around an immense copper brazier in a corner, talking together in low tones, their voices dying away altogether as the Princess Sant' Ilario entered the open door of the hall. The man who came forward appeared to be the person in charge of the funeral, for Corona had not seen him in the house before.

"Donna Faustina expects me," she said, continuing to walk towards the entrance to the apartments.

"Your Excellency's name?" inquired the man. Corona was surprised that he should ask, and wondered whether even the people of his class already knew the result of the suit.

"Donna Corona Saracinesca," she answered in distinct tones. The appellation sounded strange and unfamiliar.

"Donna Corona Saracinesca," the man repeated in a loud voice a second later. He had almost run into San Giacinto, who was coming out at that moment. Corona found herself face to face with her cousin.

"You — princess!" he exclaimed, putting out his hand.

In spite of the relationship he was not privileged to call her by her name. "You — why does the man announce you in that way?"

Corona took his hand and looked quietly into his face. They had not met since the decision.

"I told him to do so. I shall be known by that name in future. I have come to see Faustina." She would have passed on.

"Allow me to say," said San Giacinto, in his deep, calm voice, "that as far as I am concerned you are, and always shall be, Princess Sant' Ilario. No one can regret more than I the position in which I am placed towards you and yours, and I shall certainly do all in my power to prevent any such unnecessary changes."

"We cannot discuss that matter here," answered Corona, speaking more coldly than she meant to do.

"I trust there need be no discussion. I even hope that you will bear me no ill will."

"I bear you none. You have acted honestly and openly. You had right on your side. But neither my husband nor I will live under a borrowed name."

San Giacinto seemed hurt by her answer. He stood aside to allow her to pass, and there was something dignified in his demeanour that pleased Corona.

"The settlement is not made yet," he said gravely. "Until then the name is yours."

When she was gone he looked after her with an expression of annoyance upon his face. He understood well enough what she felt, but he was very far from wishing to let any unpleasantness arise between him and her family. Even in the position to which he had now attained he felt that there was an element of uncertainty, and he did not feel able to dispense with the good-will of his relations, merely because he was Prince Saracinesca and master of a great fortune. His early life had made him a cautious man, and he did not underestimate the value of personal influence. Moreover, he had not a bad heart, and preferred if possible to be on good terms with everybody. According to his own view he had done nothing more than claim what was legitimately his, but he did not want the enmity of those who had resigned all into his hands.

Corona went on her way and found Faustina and Flavia together. Their mother was not able to see any one. The rest of the family had gone to the country as soon as the body had been taken away, yielding without any great resistance to the entreaties of their best friends who, according to Roman custom, thought it necessary to "divert" the mourners. That is the consecrated phrase, and people of other countries may open their eyes in astonishment at the state of domestic relations as revealed by this practice. It is not an uncommon thing for the majority of the family to go away even before death has actually taken place. Speaking of a person who is dying, it is not unusual to say, "You may imagine how ill he is, for the family has left him!" The servants attend the Requiem Mass, the empty carriages follow the hearse to the gates of the city, but the family is already in the country, trying to "divert" itself.

Flavia and Faustina, however, had stayed at home, partly because the old princess was really too deeply moved and profoundly shocked to go away, and partly because San Giacinto refused to leave Rome. Faustina, too, was eccentric enough to think such haste after "diversion" altogether indecent, and she herself had been through such a series of emotions during the twenty-four hours that she found rest needful. As for Flavia, she took matters very calmly, but would have preferred very much to be with her brothers and their wives. The calamity had for the time subdued her vivacity, though it was easy to see that it had made no deep impression upon her nature. If the truth were told, she was more unpleasantly affected by thus suddenly meeting Corona than by her father's tragic death. She thought it necessary to be more than usually affectionate, not out of calculation, but rather to get rid of a disagreeable impression. She sprang forward and kissed Corona on both cheeks.

"I was longing to see you!" she said enthusiastically. "You have been so kind to Faustina. I am sure we can never thank you enough. Imagine, if she had been obliged to spend the night alone in prison! Such an abominable mistake, too. I hope that dreadful man will be sent to the galleys. Poor little Faustina! How could any one think she could do such a thing!"

Corona was not prepared for Flavia's manner, and it grated disagreeably on her sensibilities. But she said nothing, only returning her salutation with becoming cordiality before sitting down between the two sisters. Faustina looked on coldly, disgusted with such indifference. It struck her that if Corona had not accompanied her to the Termini, it would have been very hard to induce any of her own family to do so.

"And poor papa!" continued Flavia volubly. "Is it not too dreadful, too horrible? To think of any one daring! I shall never get over the impression it made on me—never. Without a priest, without any one—poor dear!"

"Heaven is very merciful," said Corona, thinking it necessary to make some such remark.

"Oh, I know," answered Flavia, with sudden seriousness. "I know. But poor papa—you see—I am afraid—"

She stopped significantly and shook her head, evidently implying that Prince Montevarchi's chances of blessedness were but slender.

"Flavia!" cried Faustina indignantly, "how can you say such things!"

"Oh, I say nothing, and besides, I daresay—you see he was sometimes very kind. It was only yesterday, for instance, that he actually promised me those earrings—you know, Faustina, the pearl drops at Civilotti's—it is true, they were not so very big after all. He really said he would give them to me as a souvenir if—oh! I forgot."

She stopped with some embarrassment, for she had been on the point of saying that the earrings were to be a remembrance if the suit were won, when she recollected that she was speaking to Corona.

"Well—it would have been very kind of him if he had," she added. "Perhaps that is something. Poor papa! One would feel more sure about it, if he had got some kind of absolution."

"I do not believe you cared for him at all!" exclaimed Faustina. Corona evidently shared this belief, for she looked very grave and was silent.

"Oh, Faustina, how unkind you are!" cried Flavia in

great astonishment and some anger. "I am sure I loved poor papa as much as any of you, and perhaps a great deal better. We were always such good friends!"

Faustina raised her eyebrows a little and looked at Corona as though to say that her sister was hopeless, and for some minutes no one spoke.

"You are quite rested now?" asked Corona at last, turning to the young girl. "Poor child! what you must have suffered!"

"It is strange, but I am not tired. I slept, you know, for I was worn out."

"Faustina's grief did not keep her awake," observed Flavia, willing to say something disagreeable.

"I only came to see how you were," said Corona, who did not care to prolong the interview. "I hope to hear that your mother is better to-morrow. I met Saracinesca as I came in, but I did not ask him."

"Your father-in-law?" asked Faustina innocently. "I did not know he had been here."

"No; your husband, my dear," answered Corona, looking at Flavia as she spoke. She was curious to see what effect the change had produced upon her. Flavia's cheeks flushed quickly, evidently with pleasure, if also with some embarrassment. But Corona was calm and unmoved as usual.

"I did not know you already called him so," said Flavia. "How strange it will be!"

"We shall soon get used to it," replied Corona, with a smile, as she rose to go. "I wish you many years of happiness with your new name. Good-bye." Faustina went with her into one of the outer rooms.

"Tell me," she said, when they were alone, "how did your husband manage it so quickly? They told me to-day that the cardinal had at first refused. I cannot understand it. I could not ask you before Flavia—she is so inquisitive!"

"I do not know—I have not seen Giovanni yet. He stayed with the cardinal when the carriage came for us. It was managed in some way, and quickly. I shall hear all about it this evening. What is it, dear?"

There were tears in Faustina's soft eyes, followed quickly by a little sob.

"I miss him dreadfully!" she exclaimed, laying her head on her friend's shoulder. "And I am so unhappy! We parted angrily, and I can never tell him how sorry I am. You do not think it could have had anything to do with it, do you?"

"Your little quarrel? No, child. What could it have changed? We do not know what happened."

"I shall never forget his face. I was dreadfully undutiful—oh! I could almost marry that man if it would do any good!"

Corona smiled sadly. The young girl's sorrow was genuine, in strange contrast to Flavia's voluble flippancy. She laid her hand affectionately on the thick chestnut hair.

"Perhaps he sees now that you should not marry against your heart."

"Oh, do you think so? I wish it were possible. I should not feel as though I were so bad if I thought he understood now. I could bear it better. I should not feel as though it were almost a duty to marry Frangi-pani."

Corona turned quickly with an expression that was almost fierce in its intensity. She took Faustina's hands in hers.

"Never do that, Faustina. Whatever comes to you, do not do that! You do not know what it is to live with a man you do not love, even if you do not hate him. It is worse than death."

Corona kissed her and left her standing by the door. Was it possible, Faustina asked, that Corona did not love her husband? Or was she speaking of her former life with old Astrardente? Of course, it must be that. Giovanni and Corona were a proverbially happy couple.

When Corona again entered her own room, there was a note lying upon the table, the one her husband had written that morning from his place of confinement. She tore the envelope open with an anxiety of which she had not believed herself capable. She had asked for him when she returned and he had not been heard of yet. The vague uneasiness she had felt at his absence suddenly increased, until she felt that unless she saw him at once she must go in search of him. She read the note

through again and again, without clearly understanding the contents.

It was evident that he had left Rome suddenly and had not cared to tell her whither he was going, since the instructions as to what she was to say were put in such a manner as to make it evident that they were only to serve as an excuse for his absence to others, and not as an explanation to herself. The note was enigmatical and might mean almost anything. At last Corona tossed the bit of paper into the fire, and tapped the thick carpet impatiently with her foot.

"How coldly he writes!" she exclaimed aloud.

The door opened and her maid appeared.

"Will your Excellency receive Monsieur Gouache?" asked the woman from the threshold.

"No! certainly not!" answered Corona, in a voice that frightened the servant. "I am not at home."

"Yes, your Excellency."

CHAPTER XXVI.

The amount of work which Arnaldo Meschini did in the twenty-four hours of the day depended almost entirely upon his inclinations. The library had always been open to the public once a week, on Mondays, and on those occasions the librarian was obliged to be present. The rest of his time was supposed to be devoted to the incessant labour connected with so important a collection of books, and, on the whole, he had done far more than was expected of him. Prince Montevarchi had never proposed to give him an assistant, and he would have rejected any such offer, since the presence of another person would have made it almost impossible for him to carry on his business of forging ancient manuscripts. The manual labour of his illicit craft was of course performed in his own room, but a second librarian could not have failed to discover that there was something wrong. Night after night he carried the precious manuscripts to his chamber, bringing them back and restoring them to