

UNDER PRESSURE



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BY

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CHAPTER XII

IN breaking off Donna Lavinia's engagement, her parents had done what they firmly believed to be their duty. But it was not without a wrench that they saw the enchanting dream of riches and un hoped-for worldly advantages suddenly vanish when almost within their daughter's grasp. The attraction had been there. In the wealth and position they regretted to-day, lay the very reasons which had made this marriage seem sufficiently advantageous to outweigh the taunts of friends and enemies, the universal hue and cry raised by their own party, their inexpressible annoyance at having anything to do with people professing such principles as did the deceased Marchese Casale and his son, and their repugnance for the future

friends and associates of the newly-married couple. The grief and bitter disappointment of the two most concerned in the matter had no weight in the balance, nor had ever had any. And in this they were perfectly consistent. They had desired the marriage because Don Uberto Casale at that moment was considered one of the best matches in Rome. He was not only a noble and nearly connected with all the great Roman families, but had also been rich enough to marry a girl with a very small fortune ; and such a happy coincidence was so rare in Rome that they had been deeply grateful to Providence for their unexpected good luck. But matters were changed now. Uberto was poor and had lost caste by his connection with business. The Astalli found that the loss must outweigh the profit. The marriage was out of the question, and they forthwith declared that the past must be wiped out and the *statu quo ante* restored without delay.

They were sorry in their own fashion to see Lavinia looking pale and careworn. They realised her grief from an objective point of view, but it was not their fault if they could not realise