extreme satisfaction at having talked well with Maria Consuelo, which in reality dominated every other sensation just then. He was well enough accustomed to consideration, though his only taste of society had been enjoyed during the winter vacations of the last two years. He was not the greatest match in the Roman matrimonial market for nothing, and he was perfectly well aware of his advantages in this respect. He possessed that keen, business-like appreciation of his value as a marriageable man which seems to characterise the young generation of to-day, and he was not mistaken in his estimate. It was made sufficiently clear to him at every turn that he had but to ask in order to receive. But he had not the slightest intention of marrying at one and twenty as several of his old school-fellows were doing, and he was sensible enough to foresee that his position as a desirable son-in-law would soon cause him more annoyance than amusement.

Madame d'Aranjuez was doubtless aware that she could not marry him if she wished to do so. She was several years older than he—he admitted the fact rather reluctantly—she was a widow, and she seemed to have no particular social position. These were excellent reasons against matrimony, but they were also equally excellent reasons for being pleased with himself at having produced a favourable impression on her.

He walked rapidly along the crowded street, glancing carelessly at the people who passed and at the brilliantly lighted windows of the shops. He passed the door of the club, where he was already becoming known for rather reckless play, and he quite forgot that a number of men were probably spending an hour at the tables before dinner, a fact which would hardly have escaped his memory if he had not been more than usually occupied with pleasant thoughts. He did not need the excitement of baccarat nor the stimulus of brandy and soda, for his brain was already both excited and stimulated, though he was not at once aware of it. But it became clear to him when he suddenly found himself standing before the steps of the Capitol in the gloomy square of the Ara Cœli, wondering what in the world had brought him so far out of his way.

"What a fool I am!" he exclaimed impatiently, as he turned back and walked in the direction of his home. "And yet she told me that I would make a good actor. They say that an actor should never be carried away by his part."

At dinner that evening he was alternately talkative and very silent.

"Where have you been to-day, Orsino?" asked his father, looking at him curiously.

"I spent half an hour with Madame d'Aranjuez, and then went for a walk," answered Orsino with sudden indifference.

"What is she like?" asked Corona.

"Clever—at least in Rome." There was an odd, nervous sharpness about the answer.

Old Saracinesca raised his keen eyes without lifting his head and looked hard at his grandson. He was a little bent in his great old age.

"The boy is in love!" he exclaimed abruptly, and a laugh that was still deep and ringing followed the words. Orsino recovered his self-possession and smiled carelessly.

Corona was thoughtful during the remainder of the meal.

CHAPTER VII.

The Princess Sant' Ilario's early life had been deeply stirred by the great makers of human character, sorrow and happiness. She had suffered profoundly, she had borne her trials with a rare courage, and her reward, if one may call it so, had been very great. She had seen the world and known it well, and the knowledge had not

been forgotten in the peaceful prosperity of later years. Gifted with a beauty not equalled, perhaps, in those times, endowed with a strong and passionate nature under a singularly cold and calm outward manner, she had been saved from many dangers by the rarest of commonplace qualities, common sense. She had never passed for an intellectual person, she had never been very brilliant in conversation, she had even been thought old-fashioned in her prejudices concerning the books she read. But her judgment had rarely failed her at critical moments. Once only, she remembered having committed a great mistake, of which the sudden and unexpected consequences had almost wrecked her life. But in that case she had suffered her heart to lead her, an innocent girl's good name had been at stake, and she had rashly taken a responsibility too heavy for love itself to bear. Those days were long past now; twenty years separated Corona, the mother of four tall sons, from the Corona who had risked all to save poor little Faustina Montevarchi.

But even she knew that a state of such perpetual and unclouded happiness could hardly last a lifetime, and she had forced herself, almost laughing at the thought, to look forward to the day when Orsino must cease to be a boy and must face the world of strong loves and hates through which most men have to pass, and which all men must have known in order to be men indeed.

The people whose lives are full of the most romantic incidents, are not generally, I think, people of romantic disposition. Romance, like power, will come uncalled for, and those who seek it most, are often those who find it least. And the reason is simple enough. The man of heart is not perpetually burrowing in his surroundings for affections upon which his heart may feed, any more than the very strong man is naturally impelled to lift every weight he sees or to fight with every man he meets. The persons whom others call romantic are rarely conscious of being so. They are generally far too much occupied with the one great thought which makes

their strongest, bravest and meanest actions seem perfectly commonplace to themselves. Corona Del Carmine, who had heroically sacrificed herself in her earliest girlhood to save her father from ruin and who a few years later had risked a priceless happiness to shield a foolish girl, had not in her whole life been conscious of a single romantic instinct. Brave, devoted, but unimaginative by nature, she had followed her heart's direction in most worldly matters.

She was amazed to find that she was becoming romantic now, in her dreams for Orsino's future. All sorts of ideas which she would have laughed at in her own youth flitted through her brain from morning till night. Her fancy built up a life for her eldest son, which she knew to be far from the possibility of realisation, but which had for her a new and strange attraction.

She planned for him the most unimaginable happiness, of a kind which would perhaps have hardly satisfied his more modern instincts. She saw a maiden of indescribable beauty, brought up in unapproachable perfections, guarded by the all but insuperable jealousy of an ideal home. Orsino was to love this vision, and none other, from the first meeting to the term of his natural life, and was to win her in the face of difficulties such as would have made even Giovanni, the incomparable, look grave. This radiant creature was also to love Orsino, as a matter of course, with a love vastly more angelic than human, but not hastily nor thoughtlessly, lest Orsino should get her too easily and not value her as he ought. Then she saw the two betrothed, side by side on shady lawns and moonlit terraces, in a perfectly beautiful intimacy such as they would certainly never enjoy in the existing conditions of their own society. But that mattered little. The wooing, the winning and the marrying of the exquisite girl were to make up Orsino's life, and fifty or sixty years of idyllic happiness were to be the reward of their mutual devotion. Had she not spent twenty such years herself? Then why should not all the rest be possible?

The dreams came and went and she was too sensible not to laugh at them. That was not the youth of Giovanni, her husband, nor of men who even faintly resembled him in her estimation. Giovanni had wandered far, had seen much, and had undoubtedly indulged more than one passing affection, before he had been thirty years of age and had loved Corona. Giovanni would laugh too, if she told him of her vision of two young and beautiful married saints. And his laugh would be more sincere than her own. Nevertheless, her dreams haunted her, as they have haunted many a loving mother, ever since Althaea plucked from the flame the burning brand that measured Meleager's life, and smothered the sparks upon it and hid it away among her treasures.

Such things seem foolish, no doubt, in the measure of fact, in the glaring light of our day. The thought is none the less noble. The dream of an untainted love, the vision of unspotted youth and pure maiden, the glory of unbroken faith kept whole by man and wife in holy wedlock, the pride of stainless name and stainless race —these things are not less high because there is a sublimity in the strength of a great sin which may lie the closer to our sympathy, as the sinning is the nearer to our weakness.

When old Saracinesca looked up from under his bushy brows and laughed and said that his grandson was in love, he thought no more of what he said than if he had remarked that Orsino's beard was growing or that Giovanni's was turning grey. But Corona's pretty fancies received a shock from which they never recovered again, and though she did her best to call them back they lost all their reality from that hour. The plain fact that at one and twenty years the boy is a man, though a very young one, was made suddenly clear to her, and she was faced by another fact still more destructive of her ideals, namely, that a man is not to be kept from falling in love, when and where he is so inclined, by any personal influence whatsoever. She knew that well enough, and the supposition that his first young passion might be for Madame d'Aranjuez was by no means comforting. Corona immediately felt an interest in that lady which she had not felt before and which was not altogether friendly.

It seemed to her necessary in the first place to find out something definite concerning Maria Consuelo, and this was no easy matter. She communicated her wish to her husband when they were alone that evening.

"I know nothing about her," answered Giovanni. "And I do not know any one who does. After all it is of very little importance."

"What if he falls seriously in love with this woman?"

"We will send him round the world. At his age that will cure anything. When he comes back Madame d'Aranjuez will have retired to the chaos of the unknown out of which Orsino has evolved her."

"She does not look the kind of woman to disappear at the right moment," observed Corona doubtfully.

Giovanni was at that moment supremely comfortable, both in mind and body. It was late. The old prince had gone to his own quarters, the boys were in bed, and Orsino was presumably at a party or at the club. Sant' Ilario was enjoying the delight of spending an hour alone in his wife's society. They were in Corona's old boudoir, a place full of associations for them both. He did not want to be mentally disturbed. He said nothing in answer to his wife's remark. She repeated it in a different form.

"Women like her do not disappear when one does not want them," she said.

"What makes you think so?" inquired Giovanni with a man's irritating indolence when he does not mean to grasp a disagreeable idea.

"I know it," Corona answered, resting her chin upon her hand and staring at the fire.

Giovanni surrendered unconditionally.

"You are probably right, dear. You always are about people."

"Well—then you must see the importance of what I say," said Corona pushing her victory.

"Of course, of course," answered Giovanni, squinting at the flames with one eye between his outstretched fingers.

"I wish you would wake up!" exclaimed Corona, taking the hand in hers and drawing it to her. "Orsino is probably making love to Madame d'Aranjuez at this very moment."

"Then I will imitate him, and make love to you, my dear. I could not be better occupied, and you know it. You used to say I did it very well."

Corona laughed in her deep, soft voice.

"Orsino is like you. That is what frightens me. He will make love too well. Be serious, Giovanni. Think of what I am saying."

"Let us dismiss the question then, for the simple reason that there is absolutely nothing to be done. We cannot turn this good woman out of Rome, and we cannot lock Orsino up in his room. To tell a boy not to bestow his affections in a certain quarter is like ramming a charge into a gun and then expecting that it will not come out by the same way. The harder you ram it down the more noise it makes—that is all. Encourage him and he may possibly tire of it. Hinder him and he will become inconveniently heroic."

"I suppose that is true," said Corona. "Then at least find out who the woman is," she added, after a pause.

"I will try," Giovanni answered. "I will even go to the length of spending an hour a day at the club, if that will do any good—and you know how I detest clubs. But if anything whatever is known of her, it will be known there."

Giovanni kept his word and expended more energy in attempting to find out something about Madame d'Aranjuez during the next few days than he had devoted to

anything connected with society for a long time. Nearly a week elapsed before his efforts met with any success.

He was in the club one afternoon at an early hour, reading the papers, and not more than three or four other men were present. Among them were Frangipani and Montevarchi, who was formerly known as Ascanio Bellegra. There was also a certain young foreigner, a diplomatist, who, like Sant' Ilario, was reading a paper, most probably in search of an idea for the next visit on his list.

Giovanni suddenly came upon a description of a dinner and reception given by Del Ferice and his wife. The paragraph was written in the usual florid style with a fine generosity in the distribution of titles to unknown persons.

"The centre of all attraction," said the reporter, "was a most beautiful Spanish princess, Donna Maria Consuelo d'A——z d'A——a, in whose mysterious eyes are reflected the divine fires of a thousand triumphs, and who was gracefully attired in olive green brocade——"

"Oh! Is that it?" said Sant' Ilario aloud, and in the peculiar tone always used by a man who makes a discovery in a daily paper.

"What is it?" inquired Frangipani and Montevarchi in the same breath. The young diplomatist looked up with an air of interrogation.

Sant' Ilario read the paragraph aloud. All three listened as though the fate of empires depended on the facts reported.

"Just like the newspapers!" exclaimed Frangipani. "There probably is no such person. Is there, Ascanio?"

Montevarchi had always been a weak fellow, and was reported to be at present very deep in the building speculations of the day. But there was one point upon which he justly prided himself. He was a superior authority on genealogy. It was his passion and no one ever disputed his knowledge or decision. He stroked

his fair beard, looked out of the window, winked his pale blue eyes once or twice and then gave his verdict.

"There is no such person," he said gravely.

"I beg your pardon, prince," said the young diplomatist, "I have met her. She exists."

"My dear friend," answered Montevarchi, "I do not doubt the existence of the woman, as such, and I would certainly not think of disagreeing with you, even if I had the slightest ground for doing so, which, I hasten to say, I have not. Nor, of course, if she is a friend of yours, would I like to say more on the subject. But I have taken some little interest in genealogy and I have a modest library—about two thousand volumes, only—consisting solely of works on the subject, all of which I have read and many of which I have carefully annotated. I need not say that they are all at your disposal if you should desire to make any researches."

Montevarchi had much of his murdered father's manner, without the old man's strength. The young secretary of embassy was rather startled at the idea of searching through two thousand volumes in pursuit of Madame d'Aranjuez's identity. Sant' Ilario laughed.

"I only mean that I have met the lady," said the young man. "Of course you are right. I have no idea who she may really be. I have heard odd stories about her."

"Oh—have you?" asked Sant' Ilario with renewed interest.

"Yes, very odd." He paused and looked round the room to assure himself that no one else was present. "There are two distinct stories about her. The first is this. They say that she is a South American prima donna, who sang only a few months, at Rio de Janeiro and then at Buenos Ayres. An Italian who had gone out there and made a fortune married her from the stage. In coming to Europe, he unfortunately fell overboard and she inherited all his money. People say that she was the only person who witnessed the accident. The man's name was Aragno. She twisted it once and made

Aranjuez of it, and she turned it again and discovered that it spelled Aragona. That is the first story. It sounds well at all events."

"Very," said Sant' Ilario, with a laugh.

"A profoundly interesting page in genealogy, if she happens to marry somebody," observed Montevarchi, mentally noting all the facts.

"What is the other story?" asked Frangipani.

"The other story is much less concise and detailed. According to this version, she is the daughter of a certain royal personage and of a Polish countess. There is always a Polish countess in those stories! She was never married. The royal personage has had her educated in a convent and has sent her out into the wide world with a pretty fancy name of his own invention, plentifully supplied with money and regular documents referring to her union with the imaginary Aranjuez, and protected by a sort of body-guard of mutes and duennas who never appear in public. She is of course to make a great match for herself, and has come to Rome to do it. That is also a pretty tale."

"More interesting than the other," said Montevarchi. "These side lights of genealogy, these stray rivulets of royal races, if I may so poetically call them, possess an absorbing interest for the student. I will make a note of it."

"Of course, I do not vouch for the truth of a single word in either story," observed the young man. "Of the two the first is the less improbable. I have met her and talked to her and she is certainly not less than five and twenty years old. She may be more. In any case she is too old to have been just let out of a convent."

"Perhaps she has been loose for some years," observed Sant' Ilario, speaking of her as though she were a dangerous wild animal.

"We should have heard of her," objected the other. "She has the sort of personality which is noticed anywhere and which makes itself felt."

"Then you incline to the belief that she dropped the Signor Aragno quietly overboard in the neighbourhood of the equator?"

"The real story may be quite different from either of those I have told you."

"And she is a friend of poor old Donna Tullia!" exclaimed Montevarchi regretfully. "I am sorry for that. For the sake of her history I could almost have gone to the length of making her acquaintance."

"How the Del Ferice would rave if she could hear you call her poor old Donna Tullia," observed Frangipani. "I remember how she danced at the ball when I came of age!"

"That was a long time ago, Filippo," said Montevarchi thoughtfully, "a very long time ago. We were all young once, Filippo—but Donna Tullia is really only fit to fill a glass case in a museum of natural history now."

The remark was not original, and had been in circulation some time. But the three men laughed a little and Montevarchi was much pleased by their appreciation. He and Frangipani began to talk together, and Sant' Ilario took up his paper again. When the young diplomatist laid his own aside and went out, Giovanni followed him, and they left the club together.

"Have you any reason to believe that there is anything irregular about this Madame d'Aranjuez?" asked Sant' Ilario.

"No. Stories of that kind are generally inventions. She has not been presented at Court—but that means nothing here. And there is a doubt about her nationality—but no one has asked her directly about it."

"May I ask who told you the stories?"

The young man's face immediately lost all expression.

"Really—I have quite forgotten," he said. "People have been talking about her."

Sant' Ilario justly concluded that his companion's informant was a lady, and probably one in whom the diplomatist was interested. Discretion is so rare that it

can easily be traced to its causes. Giovanni left the young man and walked away in the opposite direction, inwardly meditating a piece of diplomacy quite foreign to his nature. He said to himself that he would watch the man in the world and that it would be easy to guess who the lady in question was. It would have been clear to any one but himself that he was not likely to learn anything worth knowing, by his present mode of procedure.

"Gouache," he said, entering the artist's studio a quarter of an hour later, "do you know anything about Madame d'Aranjuez?"

"That is all I know," Gouache answered, pointing to Maria Consuelo's portrait which stood finished upon an easel before him, set in an old frame. He had been touching it when Giovanni entered. "That is all I know, and I do not know that thoroughly. I wish I did. She is a wonderful subject."

Sant' Ilario gazed at the picture in silence.

"Are her eyes really like these?" he asked at length.

"Much finer."

"And her mouth?"

"Much larger," answered Gouache with a smile.

"She is bad," said Giovanni with conviction, and he thought of the Signor Aragno.

"Women are never bad," observed Gouache with a thoughtful air. "Some are less angelic than others. You need only tell them all so to assure yourself of the fact."

"I daresay. What is this person? French, Spanish—South American?"

"I have not the least idea. She is not French, at all events."

"Excuse me—does your wife know her?"

Gouache glanced quickly at his visitor's face.

"No."

Gouache was a singularly kind man, and he did his best, perhaps for reasons of his own, to convey nothing

by the monosyllable beyond the simple negation of a fact. But the effort was not altogether successful. There was an almost imperceptible shade of surprise in the tone which did not escape Giovanni. On the other hand it was perfectly clear to Gouache that Sant' Ilario's interest in the matter was connected with Orsino.

"I cannot find any one who knows anything definite," said Giovanni after a pause.

"Have you tried Spicca?" asked the artist, examining his work critically.

"No. Why Spicca?"

"He always knows everything," answered Gouache vaguely. "By the way, Saracinesca, do you not think there might be a little more light just over the left eye?"

"How should I know?"

"You ought to know. What is the use of having been brought up under the very noses of original portraits, all painted by the best masters and doubtless ordered by your ancestors at a very considerable expense—if you do not know?"

Giovanni laughed.

"My dear old friend," he said good-humouredly, "have you known us nearly five and twenty years without discovering that it is our peculiar privilege to be ignorant without reproach?"

Gouache laughed in his turn.

"You do not often make sharp remarks—but when you do!"

Giovanni left the studio very soon, and went in search of Spicca. It was no easy matter to find the peripatetic cynic on a winter's afternoon, but Gouache's remark had seemed to mean something, and Sant' Ilario saw a faint glimmer of hope in the distance. He knew Spicca's habits very well, and was aware that when the sun was low he would certainly turn into one of the many houses where he was intimate, and spend an hour over a cup of tea. The difficulty lay in ascertaining which particular fireside he would select on that afternoon. Giovanni

hastily sketched a route for himself and asked the porter at each of his friends' houses if Spicca had entered. Fortune favoured him at last. Spicca was drinking his tea with the Marchesa di San Giacinto.

Giovanni paused a moment before the gateway of the palace in which San Giacinto had inhabited a large hired apartment for many years. He did not see much of his cousin, now, on account of differences in political opinion, and he had no reason whatever for calling on Flavia, especially as formal New Year's visits had lately been exchanged. However, as San Giacinto was now a leading authority on questions of landed property in the city, it struck him that he could pretend a desire to see Flavia's husband, and make that an excuse for staying a long time, if necessary, in order to wait for him.

He found Flavia and Spicca alone together, with a small tea-table between them. The air was heavy with the smoke of cigarettes, which clung to the oriental curtains and hung in clouds about the rare palms and plants. Everything in the San Giacinto house was large, comfortable and unostentatious. There was not a chair to be seen which might not have held the giant's frame. San Giacinto was a wonderful judge of what was good. If he paid twice as much as Montevarchi for a horse, the horse turned out to be capable of four times the work. If he bought a picture at a sale, it was discovered to be by some good master and other people wondered why they had lost courage in the bidding for a trifle of a hundred francs. Nothing ever turned out badly with him, but no success had the power to shake his solid prudence. No one knew how rich he was, but those who had watched him understood that he would never let the world guess at half his fortune. He was a giant in all ways and he had shown what he could do when he had dominated Flavia during the first year of their marriage. She had at first been proud of him, but about the time when she would have wearied of another man, she discovered that she feared him in a way she certainly did

not fear the devil. Yet he had never spoken a harsh word to her in his life. But there was something positively appalling to her in his enormous strength, rarely exhibited and never without good reason, but always quietly present, as the outline of a vast mountain reflected in a placid lake. Then she discovered to her great surprise that he really loved her, which she had not expected, and at the end of three years he became aware that she loved him, which was still more astonishing. As usual, his investment had turned out well.

At the time of which I am speaking Flavia was a slight, graceful woman of forty years or thereabouts, retaining much of the brilliant prettiness which served her for beauty, and conspicuous always for her extremely bright eyes. She was of the type of women who live to a great age.

She had not expected to see Sant' Ilario, and as she gave her hand, she looked up at him with an air of inquiry. It would have been like him to say that he had come to see her husband and not herself, for he had no tact with persons whom he did not especially like. There are such people in the world.

"Will you give me a cup of tea, Flavia?" he asked, as he sat down, after shaking hands with Spicca.

"Have you at last heard that your cousin's tea is good?" inquired the latter, who was surprised by Giovanni's coming.

"I am afraid it is cold," said Flavia, looking into the teapot, as though she could discover the temperature by inspection.

"It is no matter," answered Giovanni absently.

He was wondering how he could lead the conversation to the discussion of Madame d'Aranjuez.

"You belong to the swallowers," observed Spicca, lighting a fresh cigarette. "You swallow something, no matter what, and you are satisfied."

"It is the simplest way—one is never disappointed."

"It is a pity one cannot swallow people in the same way," said Flavia with a laugh.

"Most people do," answered Spicca viciously.

"Were you at the Jubilee on the first day?" asked Giovanni, addressing Flavia.

"Of course I was—and you spoke to me."

"That is true. By the bye, I saw that excellent Donna Tullia there. I wonder whose ticket she had."

"She had the Princess Befana's," answered Spicca, who knew everything. "The old lady happened to be dying—she always dies at the beginning of the season—it used to be for economy, but it has become a habit—and so Del Ferice bought her card of her servant for his wife."

"Who was the lady who sat with her?" asked Giovanni, delighted with his own skill.

"You ought to know!" exclaimed Flavia. "We all saw Orsino take her out. That is the famous, the incomparable Madame d'Aranjuez—the most beautiful of Spanish princesses according to to-day's paper. I daresay you have seen the account of the Del Ferice party. She is no more Spanish than Alexander the Great. Is she, Spicca?"

"No, she is not Spanish," answered the latter.

"Then what in the world is she?" asked Giovanni impatiently.

"How should I know? Of course it is very disagreeable for you." It was Flavia who spoke.

"Disagreeable? How?"

"Why, about Orsino of course. Everybody says he is devoted to her."

"I wish everybody would mind his and her business," said Giovanni sharply. "Because a boy makes the acquaintance of a stranger at a studio——"

"Oh—it was at a studio? I did not know that."

"Yes, at Gouache's—I fancied your sister might have told you that," said Giovanni, growing more and more irritable, and yet not daring to change the subject, lest he should lose some valuable information. "Because Orsino makes her acquaintance accidentally, every one must say that he is in love with her."

Flavia laughed.

"My dear Giovanni," she answered. "Let us be frank. I used never to tell the truth under any circumstances, when I was a girl, but Giovanni—my Giovanni—did not like that. Do you know what he did? He used to cut off a hundred francs of my allowance for every fib I told—laughing at me all the time. At the end of the first quarter I positively had not a pair of shoes, and all my gloves had been cleaned twice. He used to keep all the fines in a special pocket-book—if you knew how hard I tried to steal it! But I could not. Then, of course, I reformed. There was nothing else to be done—that or rags—fancy! And do you know? I have grown quite used to being truthful. Besides, it is so original, that I pose with it."

Flavia paused, laughed a little, and puffed at her cigarette.

"You do not often come to see me, Giovanni," she said, "and since you are here I am going to tell you the truth about your visit. You are beside yourself with rage at Orsino's new fancy, and you want to find out all about this Madame d'Aranjuez. So you came here, because we are Whites and you saw that she had been at the Del Ferice party, and you know that we know them—and the rest is sung by the organ, as we say when high mass is over. Is that the truth, or not?"

"Approximately," said Giovanni, smiling in spite of himself.

"Does Corona cut your allowance when you tell fibs?" asked Flavia. "No? Then why say that it is only approximately true?"

"I have my reasons. And you can tell me nothing?"

"Nothing. I believe Spicca knows all about her. But he will not tell what he knows."

Spicca made no answer to this, and Giovanni determined to outstay him, or rather, to stay until he rose to go and then go with him. It was tedious work for he was not a man who could talk against time on all occasions. But he struggled bravely and Spicca at last got

up from his deep chair. They went out together, and stopped as though by common consent upon the brilliantly lighted landing of the first floor.

"Seriously, Spicca," said Giovanni, "I am afraid Orsino is falling in love with this pretty stranger. If you can tell me anything about her, please do so."

Spicca stared at the wall, hesitated a moment, and then looked straight into his companion's eyes.

"Have you any reason to suppose that I, and I especially, know anything about this lady?" he asked.

"No—except that you know everything."

"That is a fable." Spicca turned from him and began to descend the stairs.

Giovanni followed and laid a hand upon his arm.

"You will not do me this service?" he asked earnestly.

Again Spicca stopped and looked at him.

"You and I are very old friends, Giovanni," he said slowly. "I am older than you, but we have stood by each other very often—in places more slippery than these marble steps. Do not let us quarrel now, old friend. When I tell you that my omniscience exists only in the vivid imaginations of people whose tea I like, believe me, and if you wish to do me a kindness—for the sake of old times—do not help to spread the idea that I know everything."

The melancholy Spicca had never been given to talking about friendship or its mutual obligations. Indeed, Giovanni could not remember having ever heard him speak as he had just spoken. It was perfectly clear that he knew something very definite about Maria Consuelo, and he probably had no intention of deceiving Giovanni in that respect. But Spicca also knew his man, and he knew that his appeal for Giovanni's silence would not be vain.

"Very well," said Sant' Ilario.

They exchanged a few indifferent words before parting, and then Giovanni walked slowly homeward, pondering on the things he had heard that day.