

CHAPTER IX.

Orsino's twenty-first birthday fell in the latter part of January, when the Roman season was at its height, but as the young man's majority did not bring him any of those sudden changes in position which make epochs in the lives of fatherless sons, the event was considered as a family matter and no great social celebration of it was contemplated. It chanced, too, that the day of the week was the one appropriated by the Montevarchi for their weekly dance, with which it would have been a mistake to interfere. The old Prince Saracinesca, however, insisted that a score of old friends should be asked to dinner, to drink the health of his eldest grandson, and this was accordingly done.

Orsino always looked back to that banquet as one of the dullest at which he ever assisted. The friends were literally old, and their conversation was not brilliant. Each one on arriving addressed to him a few congratulatory and moral sentiments, clothed in rounded periods and twanging of Cicero in his most sermonising mood. Each drank his especial health at the end of the dinner in a teaspoonful of old "vin santo," and each made a stiff compliment to Corona on her youthful appearance. The men were almost all *grandees* of Spain of the first class and wore their ribbons by common consent, which lent the assembly an imposing appearance; but several of them were of a somnolent disposition and nodded after dinner, which did not contribute to prolong the effect produced. Orsino thought their stories and anecdotes very long-winded and pointless, and even the old prince himself seemed oppressed by the solemnity of the affair, and rarely laughed. Corona, with serene good humour did her best to make conversation, and a shade of animation occasionally appeared at her end of the table; but Sant' Ilario was bored to the verge of

extinction and talked of nothing but archæology and the trial of the Cenci, wondering inwardly why he chose such exceedingly dry subjects. As for Orsino, the two old princesses between whom he was placed paid very little attention to him, and talked across him about the merits of their respective confessors and directors. He frivolously asked them whether they ever went to the theatre, to which they replied very coldly that they went to their boxes when the piece was not on the Index and when there was no ballet. Orsino understood why he never saw them at the opera, and relapsed into silence. The butler, a son of the legendary Pasquale of earlier days, did his best to cheer the youngest of his masters with a great variety of wines; but Orsino would not be comforted either by very dry champagne or very mellow claret. But he vowed a bitter revenge and swore to dance till three in the morning at the Montevarchi's and finish the night with a rousing *baccarat* at the club, which projects he began to put into execution as soon as was practicable.

In due time the guests departed, solemnly renewing their expressions of good wishes, and the Saracinesca household was left to itself. The old prince stood before the fire in the state drawing-room, rubbing his hands and shaking his head. Giovanni and Corona sat on opposite sides of the fireplace, looking at each other and somewhat inclined to laugh. Orsino was intently studying a piece of historical tapestry which had never interested him before.

The silence lasted some time. Then old Saracinesca raised his head and gave vent to his feelings, with all his old energy.

"What a museum!" he exclaimed. "I would not have believed that I should live to dine in my own house with a party of stranded figure-heads, set up in rows around my table! The paint is all worn off and the brains are all worn out and there is nothing left but a cracked old block of wood with a ribbon around its neck. You will

be just like them, Giovanni, in a few years, for you will be just like me—we all turn into the same shape at seventy, and if we live a dozen years longer it is because Providence designs to make us an awful example to the young.”

“I hope you do not call yourself a figure-head,” said Giovanni.

“They are calling me by worse names at this very minute as they drive home. ‘That old Methuselah of a Saracinesca, how has he the face to go on living?’ That is the way they talk. ‘People ought to die decently when other people have had enough of them, instead of sitting up at the table like death’s-heads to grin at their grandchildren and great-grandchildren!’ They talk like that, Giovanni. I have known some of those old monuments for sixty years and more—since they were babies and I was of Orsino’s age. Do you suppose I do not know how they talk? You always take me for a good, confiding old fellow, Giovanni. But then, you never understood human nature.”

Giovanni laughed and Corona smiled. Orsino turned round to enjoy the rare delight of seeing the old gentleman rouse himself in a fit of temper.

“If you were ever confiding it was because you were too good,” said Giovanni affectionately.

“Yes—good and confiding—that is it! You always did agree with me as to my own faults. Is it not true, Corona? Can you not take my part against that graceless husband of yours? He is always abusing me—as though I were his property, or his guest. Orsino, my boy, go away—we are all quarrelling here like a pack of wolves, and you ought to respect your elders. Here is your father calling me by bad names——”

“I said you were too good,” observed Giovanni.

“Yes—good and confiding! If you can find anything worse to say, say it—and may you live to hear that good-for-nothing Orsino call you good and confiding when you are eighty-two years old. And Corona is laughing at me. It is insufferable. You used to be a good girl,

Corona—but you are so proud of having four sons that there is no possibility of talking to you any longer. It is a pity that you have not brought them up better. Look at Orsino. He is laughing too.”

“Certainly not at you, grandfather,” the young man hastened to say.

“Then you must be laughing at your father or your mother, or both, since there is no one else here to laugh at. You are concocting sharp speeches for your abominable tongue. I know it. I can see it in your eyes. That is the way you have brought up your children, Giovanni. I congratulate you. Upon my word, I congratulate you with all my heart! Not that I ever expected anything better. You addled your own brains with curious foreign ideas on your travels—the greater fool I for letting you run about the world when you were young. I ought to have locked you up in Saracinesca, on bread and water, until you understood the world well enough to profit by it. I wish I had.”

None of the three could help laughing at this extraordinary speech. Orsino recovered his gravity first, by the help of the historical tapestry. The old gentleman noticed the fact.

“Come here, Orsino, my boy,” he said. “I want to talk to you.”

Orsino came forward. The old prince laid a hand on his shoulder and looked up into his face.

“You are twenty-one years old to-day,” he said, “and we are all quarrelling in honour of the event. You ought to be flattered that we should take so much trouble to make the evening pass pleasantly for you, but you probably have not the discrimination to see what your amusement costs us.”

His grey beard shook a little, his rugged features twitched, and then a broad good-humoured smile lit up the old face.

“We are quarrelsome people,” he continued in his most cheerful and hearty tone. “When Giovanni and I

were young—we were young together, you know—we quarrelled every day as regularly as we ate and drank. I believe it was very good for us. We generally made it up before night—for the sake of beginning again with a clear conscience. Anything served us—the weather, the soup, the colour of a horse.”

“You must have led an extremely lively life,” observed Orsino, considerably amused.

“It was very well for us, Orsino. But it will not do for you. You are not so much like your father, as he was like me at your age. We fought with the same weapons, but you two would not, if you fought at all. We fenced for our own amusement and we kept the buttons on the foils. You have neither my really angelic temper nor your father’s stony coolness—he is laughing again—no matter, he knows it is true. You have a diabolical tongue. Do not quarrel with your father for amusement, Orsino. His calmness will exasperate you as it does me, but you will not laugh at the right moment as I have done all my life. You will bear malice and grow sullen and permanently disagreeable. And do not say all the cutting things you think of, because with your disposition you will get into serious trouble. If you have really good cause for being angry, it is better to strike than to speak, and in such cases I strongly advise you to strike first. Now go and amuse yourself, for you must have had enough of our company. I do not think of any other advice to give you on your coming of age.”

Thereupon he laughed again and pushed his grandson away, evidently delighted with the lecture he had given him. Orsino was quick to profit by the permission and was soon in the Montevarchi ballroom, doing his best to forget the lugubrious feast in his own honour at which he had lately assisted.

He was not altogether successful, however. He had looked forward to the day for many months as one of rejoicing as well as of emancipation, and he had been grievously disappointed. There was something of ill

augury, he thought, in the appalling dulness of the guests, for they had congratulated him upon his entry into a life exactly similar to their own. Indeed, the more precisely similar it proved to be, the more he would be respected when he reached their advanced age. The future unfolded to him was not gay. He was to live forty, fifty or even sixty years in the same round of traditions and hampered by the same net of prejudices. He might have his romance, as his father had had before him, but there was nothing beyond that. His father seemed perfectly satisfied with his own unruffled existence and far from desirous of any change. The feudalism of it all was still real in fact, though abolished in theory, and the old prince was as much a great feudal lord as ever, whose interests were almost tribal in their narrowness, almost sordid in their detail, and altogether uninteresting to his presumptive heir in the third generation. What was the peasant of Aquaviva, for instance, to Orsino? Yet Sant’ Ilario and old Saracinesca took a lively interest in his doings and in the doings of four or five hundred of his kind, whom they knew by name and spoke of as belongings, much as they would have spoken of books in the library. To collect rents from peasants and to ascertain in person whether their houses needed repair was not a career. Orsino thought enviously of San Giacinto’s two sons, leading what seemed to him a life of comparative activity and excitement in the Italian army, and having the prospect of distinction by their own merits. He thought of San Giacinto himself, of his ceaseless energy and of the great position he was building up. San Giacinto was a Saracinesca as well as Orsino, bearing the same name and perhaps not less respected than the rest by the world at large, though he had sullied his hands with finance. Even Del Ferice’s position would have been above criticism, but for certain passages in his earlier life not immediately connected with his present occupation. And as if such instances were not enough there were, to Orsino’s certain knowl-

edge, half a dozen men of his father's rank even now deeply engaged in the speculations of the day. Montevarchi was one of them, and neither he nor the others made any secret of their doings.

"Surely," thought Orsino, "I have as good a head as any of them, except, perhaps, San Giacinto."

And he grew more and more discontented with his lot, and more and more angry at himself for submitting to be bound hand and foot and sacrificed upon the altar of feudalism. Everything had disappointed and irritated him on that day, the weariness of the dinner, the sight of his parents' placid felicity, the advice his grandfather had given him—good of its kind, but lamentably insufficient, to say the least of it. He was rapidly approaching that state of mind in which young men do the most unexpected things for the mere pleasure of surprising their relations.

He grew tired of the ball, because Madame d'Aranjuez was not there. He longed to dance with her and he wished that he were at liberty to frequent the houses to which she was asked. But as yet she saw only the Whites and had not made the acquaintance of a single Grey family, in spite of his entreaties. He could not tell whether she had any fixed reason in making her choice, or whether as yet it had been the result of chance, but he discovered that he was bored wherever he went because she was not present. At supper-time on this particular evening, he entered into a conspiracy with certain choice spirits to leave the party and adjourn to the club and cards.

The sight of the tables revived him and he drew a long breath as he sat down with a cigarette in his mouth and a glass at his elbow. It seemed as though the day were beginning at last.

Orsino was no more a born gambler than he was disposed to be a hard drinker. He loved excitement in any shape, and being so constituted as to bear it better than most men, he took it greedily in whatever form it

was offered to him. He neither played nor drank every day, but when he did either he was inclined to play more than other people and to consume more strong liquor. Yet his judgment was not remarkable, nor his head much stronger than the heads of his companions. Great gamblers do not drink, and great drinkers are not good players, though they are sometimes amazingly lucky when in their cups.

It is of no use to deny the enormous influence of brandy and games of chance on the men of the present day, but there is little profit in describing such scenes as take place nightly in many clubs all over Europe. Something might be gained, indeed, if we could trace the causes which have made gambling especially the vice of our generation, for that discovery might show us some means of influencing the next. But I do not believe that this is possible. The times have undoubtedly grown more dull, as civilisation has made them more alike, but there is, I think, no truth in the common statement that vice is bred of idleness. The really idle man is a poor creature, incapable of strong sins. It is far more often the man of superior gifts, with faculties overwrought and nerves strained above concert pitch by excessive mental exertion, who turns to vicious excitement for the sake of rest, as a duller man falls asleep. Men whose lives are spent amidst the vicissitudes, surprises and disappointments of the money market are assuredly less idle than country gentlemen; the busy lawyer has less time to spare than the equally gifted fellow of a college; the skilled mechanic works infinitely harder, taking the average of the whole year, than the agricultural labourer; the life of a sailor on an ordinary merchant ship is one of rest, ease and safety compared with that of the collier. Yet there can hardly be a doubt as to which individual in each example is the one to seek relaxation in excitement, innocent or the reverse, instead of in sleep. The operator in the stock market, the barrister, the mechanic, the miner, in every case the men whose faculties are the

more severely strained, are those who seek strong emotions in their daily leisure, and who are the more inclined to extend that leisure at the expense of bodily rest. It may be objected that the worst vice is found in the highest grades of society, that is to say, among men who have no settled occupation. I answer that, in the first place, this is not a known fact, but a matter of speculation, and that the conclusion is principally drawn from the circumstance that the evil deeds of such persons, when they become known, are very severely criticised by those whose criticism has the most weight, namely by the equals of the sinners in question—as well as by writers of fiction whose opinions may or may not be worth considering. For one Zola, historian of the Rougon-Macquart family, there are a hundred would-be Zolas, censors of a higher class, less unpleasantly fond of accurate detail, perhaps, but as merciless in intention. But even if the case against society be proved, which is possible, I do not think that society can truly be called idle, because many of those who compose it have no settled occupation. The social day is a long one. Society would not accept the eight hours' system demanded by the labour unions. Society not uncommonly works at a high pressure for twelve, fourteen and even sixteen hours at a stretch. The mental strain, though not of the most intellectual order, is incomparably more severe than that required for success in many lucrative professions or crafts. The general absence of a distinct aim sharpens the faculties in the keen pursuit of details, and lends an importance to trifles which overburdens at every turn the responsibility borne by the nerves. Lazy people are not favourites in drawing-rooms, and still less at the dinner-table. Consider also that the average man of the world, and many women, daily sustain an amount of bodily fatigue equal perhaps to that borne by many mechanics and craftsmen and much greater than that required in the liberal professions, and that, too, under far less favourable conditions. Recapitulate all these

points. Add together the physical effort, the mental activity, the nervous strain. Take the sum and compare it with that got by a similar process from other conditions of existence. I think there can be little doubt of the verdict. The force exerted is wasted, if you please, but it is enormously great, and more than sufficient to prove that those who daily exert it are by no means idle. Besides, none of the inevitable outward and visible results of idleness are apparent in the ordinary society man or woman. On the contrary, most of them exhibit the peculiar and unmistakable signs of physical exhaustion, chief of which is cerebral anæmia. They are over-trained and overworked. In the language of training they are "stale."

Men like Orsino Saracinesca are not vicious at his age, though they may become so. Vice begins when the excitement ceases to be a matter of taste and turns into a necessity. Orsino gambled because it amused him when no other amusement was obtainable, and he drank while he played because it made the amusement seem more amusing. He was far too young and healthy and strong to feel an irresistible longing for anything not natural.

On the present occasion he cared very little, at first, whether he won or lost, and as often happens to a man in that mood he won a considerable sum during the first hour. The sight of the notes before him strengthened an idea which had crossed his mind more than once of late, and the stimulants he drank suddenly fixed it into a purpose. It was true that he did not command any sum of money which could be dignified by the name of capital, but he generally had enough in his pocket to play with, and to-night he had rather more than usual. It struck him that if he could win a few thousands by a run of luck, he would have more than enough to try his fortune in the building speculations of which Del Ferice had talked. The scheme took shape and at once lent a passionate interest to his play.

Orsino had no system and generally left everything to

chance, but he had no sooner determined that he must win than he improvised a method, and began to play carefully. Of course he lost, and as he saw his heap of notes diminishing, he filled his glass more and more often. By two o'clock he had but five hundred francs left, his face was deadly pale, the lights dazzled him and his hands moved uncertainly. He held the bank and he knew that if he lost on the card he must borrow money, which he did not wish to do.

He dealt himself a five of spades, and glanced at the stakes. They were considerable. A last sensation of caution prevented him from taking another card. The table turned up a six and he lost.

"Lend me some money, Filippo," he said to the man nearest him, who immediately counted out a number of notes.

Orsino paid with the money and the bank passed. He emptied his glass and lit a cigarette. At each succeeding deal he staked a small sum and lost it, till the bank came to him again. Once more he held a five. The other men saw that he was losing and put up all they could. Orsino hesitated. Some one observed justly that he probably held a five again. The lights swam indistinctly before him and he drew another card. It was a four. Orsino laughed nervously as he gathered the notes and paid back what he had borrowed.

He did not remember clearly what happened afterwards. The faces of the cards grew less distinct and the lights more dazzling. He played blindly and won almost without interruption until the other men dropped off one by one, having lost as much as they cared to part with at one sitting. At four o'clock in the morning Orsino went home in a cab, having about fifteen thousand francs in his pockets. The men he had played with were mostly young fellows like himself, having a limited allowance of pocket money, and Orsino's winnings were very large under the circumstances.

The night air cooled his head and he laughed gaily to

himself as he drove through the deserted streets. His hand was steady enough now, and the gas lamps did not move disagreeably before his eyes. But he had reached the stage of excitement in which a fixed idea takes hold of the brain, and if it had been possible he would undoubtedly have gone as he was, in evening dress, with his winnings in his pocket, to rouse Del Ferice, or San Giacinto, or any one else who could put him in the way of risking his money on a building lot. He reluctantly resigned himself to the necessity of going to bed, and slept as one sleeps at twenty-one until nearly eleven o'clock on the following morning.

While he dressed he recalled the circumstances of the previous night and was surprised to find that his idea was as fixed as ever. He counted the money. There was five times as much as the Del Ferice's carpenter, tobaccoist and mason had been able to scrape together amongst them. He had therefore, according to his simple calculation, just five times as good a chance of succeeding as they. And they had been successful. His plan fascinated him, and he looked forward to the constant interest and occupation with a delight which was creditable to his character. He would be busy and the magic word "business" rang in his ears. It was speculation, no doubt, but he did not look upon it as a form of gambling; if he had done so, he would not have cared for it on two consecutive days. It was something much better in his eyes. It was to do something, to be some one, to strike out of the everlastingly dull road which lay before him and which ended in the vanishing point of an insignificant old age.

He had not the very faintest conception of what that business was with which he aspired to occupy himself. He was totally ignorant of the methods of dealing with money, and he no more knew what a draft at three months meant than he could have explained the construction of the watch he carried in his pocket. Of the first principles of building he knew, if possible, even

less and he did not know whether land in the city were worth a franc or a thousand francs by the square foot. But he said to himself that those things were mere details, and that he could learn all he needed of them in a fortnight. Courage and judgment, Del Ferice had said, were the chief requisites for success. Courage he possessed, and he believed himself cool. He would avail himself of the judgment of others until he could judge for himself.

He knew very well what his father would think of the whole plan, but he had no intention of concealing his project. Since yesterday, he was of age and was therefore his own master to the extent of his own small resources. His father had not the power to keep him from entering upon any honourable undertaking, though he might justly refuse to be responsible for the consequences. At the worst, thought Orsino, those consequences might be the loss of the money he had in hand. Since he had nothing else to risk, he had nothing else to lose. That is the light in which most inexperienced people regard speculation. Orsino therefore went to his father and unfolded his scheme, without mentioning Del Ferice.

Sant' Ilario listened rather impatiently and laughed when Orsino had finished. He did not mean to be unkind, and if he had dreamed of the effect his manner would produce, he would have been more careful. But he did not understand his son, as he himself had been understood by his own father.

"This is all nonsense, my boy," he answered. "It is a mere passing fancy. What do you know of business or architecture, or of a dozen other matters which you ought to understand thoroughly before attempting anything like what you propose?"

Orsino was silent, and looked out of the window, though he was evidently listening.

"You say you want an occupation. This is not one. Banking is an occupation, and architecture is a career,

but what we call affairs in Rome are neither one nor the other. If you want to be a banker you must go into a bank and do clerk's work for years. If you mean to follow architecture as a profession you must spend four or five years in study at the very least."

"San Giacinto has not done that," observed Orsino coldly.

"San Giacinto has a very much better head on his shoulders than you, or I, or almost any other man in Rome. He has known how to make use of other men's talents, and he had a rather more practical education than I would have cared to give you. If he were not one of the most honest men alive he would certainly have turned out one of the greatest scoundrels."

"I do not see what that has to do with it," said Orsino.

"Not much, I confess. But his early life made him understand men as you and I cannot understand them, and need not, for that matter."

"Then you object to my trying this?"

"I do nothing of the kind. When I object to the doing of anything I prevent it, by fair words or by force. I am not inclined for a pitched battle with you, Orsino, and I might not get the better of you after all. I will be perfectly neutral. I will have nothing to do with this business. If I believed in it, I would give you all the capital you could need, but I shall not diminish your allowance in order to hinder you from throwing it away. If you want more money for your amusements or luxuries, say so. I am not fond of counting small expenses, and I have not brought you up to count them either. Do not gamble at cards any more than you can help, but if you lose and must borrow, borrow of me. When I think you are going too far, I will tell you so. But do not count upon me for any help in this scheme of yours. You will not get it. If you find yourself in a commercial scrape, find your own way out of it. If you want better advice than mine, go to San Giacinto. He will give you a practical man's view of the case."

"You are frank, at all events," said Orsino, turning from the window and facing his father.

"Most of us are in this house," answered Sant' Ilario. "That will make it all the harder for you to deal with the scoundrels who call themselves men of business."

"I mean to try this, father," said the young man. "I will go and see San Giacinto, as you suggest, and I will ask his opinion. But if he discourages me I will try my luck all the same. I cannot lead this life any longer. I want an occupation and I will make one for myself."

"It is not an occupation that you want, Orsino. It is another excitement. That is all. If you want an occupation, study, learn something, find out what work means. Or go to Saracinesca and build houses for the peasants—you will do no harm there, at all events. Go and drain that land in Lombardy—I can do nothing with it and would sell it if I could. But that is not what you want. You want an excitement for the hours of the morning. Very well. You will probably find more of it than you like. Try it, that is all I have to say."

Like many very just men Giovanni could state a case with alarming unfairness when thoroughly convinced that he was right. Orsino stood still for a moment and then walked towards the door without another word. His father called him back.

"What is it?" asked Orsino coldly.

Sant' Ilario held out his hand with a kindly look in his eyes.

"I do not want you to think that I am angry, my boy. There is to be no ill feeling between us about this."

"None whatever," said the young man, though without much alacrity, as he shook hands with his father. "I see you are not angry. You do not understand me, that is all."

He went out, more disappointed with the result of the interview than he had expected, though he had not looked forward to receiving any encouragement. He had known very well what his father's views were but

he had not foreseen that he would be so much irritated by the expression of them. His determination hardened and he resolved that nothing should hinder him. But he was both willing and ready to consult San Giacinto, and went to the latter's house immediately on leaving Sant' Ilario's study.

As for Giovanni, he was dimly conscious that he had made a mistake, though he did not care to acknowledge it. He was a good horseman and he was aware that he would have used a very different method with a restive colt. But few men are wise enough to see that there is only one universal principle to follow in the exertion of strength, moral or physical; and instead of seeking analogies out of actions familiar to them as a means of accomplishing the unfamiliar, they try to discover new theories of motion at every turn and are led farther and farther from the right line by their own desire to reach the end quickly.

"At all events," thought Sant' Ilario, "the boy's new hobby will take him to places where he is not likely to meet that woman."

And with this discourteous reflection upon Madame d'Aranjuez he consoled himself. He did not think it necessary to tell Corona of Orsino's intentions, simply because he did not believe that they would lead to anything serious, and there was no use in disturbing her unnecessarily with visions of future annoyance. If Orsino chose to speak of it to her, he was at liberty to do so.

CHAPTER X.

Orsino went directly to San Giacinto's house, and found him in the room which he used for working and in which he received the many persons whom he was often obliged to see on business. The giant was alone and was seated behind a broad polished table, occupied in writing.