by your own judgment, which is much better than mine. One must risk something, of course, but there is no use in going into danger."

"Nevertheless, I should enjoy a big venture immensely."

"There is no reason why you should not try one, when the moment comes, my dear. I suppose that a few months will decide whether there is to be a crisis or not. In the meantime you might take something moderate, neither so small as the last, nor so large as you would like. You will get more experience, risk less and be better prepared for a crash if it comes, or to take advantage of anything favourable if business grows safer."

Orsino was silent for a moment.

"You are very wise, mother," he said. "I will take your advice."

Corona had indeed acted as wisely as she could. The only flaw in her reasoning was her assertion that a few months would decide the fate of Roman affairs. If it were possible to predict a crisis even within a few months, speculation would be a less precarious business than it is.

Orsino and his mother might have talked longer and perhaps to better purpose, but they were interrupted by the entrance of a servant, bearing a note. Corona instinctively put out her hand to receive it.

"For Don Orsino," said the man, stopping before him.

Orsino took the letter, looked at it and turned it over.

"I think it is from Madame d'Aranjuez," he remarked, without emotion. "May I read it?"

"There is no answer, Eccellenza," said the servant, whose curiosity was satisfied.

"Read it, of course," said Corona, looking at him.

She was surprised that Madame d'Aranjuez should write to him, but she was still more astonished to see the indifference with which he opened the missive. She had imagined that he was more or less in love with Maria Consuelo.

"I fancy it is the other way," she thought. "The woman wants to marry him. I might have suspected it."

Orsino read the note, and tossed it into the fire without volunteering any information.

"I will take your advice, mother," he said, continuing the former conversation, as though nothing had happened.

But the subject seemed to be exhausted, and before long Orsino made an excuse to his mother and went out.

CHAPTER XV.

There was nothing in the note burnt by Orsino which he might not have shown to his mother, since he had already told her the name of the writer. It contained the simple statement that Maria Consuelo was about to leave Rome, and expressed the hope that she might see Orsino before her departure as she had a small request to make of him, in the nature of a commission. She hoped he would forgive her for putting him to so much inconvenience.

Though he betrayed no emotion in reading the few lines, he was in reality annoyed by them, and he wished that he might be prevented from obeying the summons. Maria Consuelo had virtually dropped the acquaintance, and had refused repeatedly and in a marked way to receive him. And now, at the last moment, when she needed something of him, she chose to recall him by a direct invitation. There was nothing to be done but to yield, and it was characteristic of Orsino that, having submitted to necessity, he did not put off the inevitable moment, but went to her at once.

The days were longer now than they had been during the time when he had visited her every day, and the lamp was not yet on the table when Orsino entered the

small sitting-room. Maria Consuelo was standing by the window, looking out into the street, and her right hand rested against the pane while her fingers tapped it softly but impatiently. She turned quickly as he entered, but the light was behind her and he could hardly see her face. She came towards him and held out her hand.

"It is very kind of you to have come so soon," she said, as she took her old accustomed place by the table.

Nothing was changed, excepting that the two or three new books at her elbow were not the same ones which had been there two months earlier. In one of them was thrust the silver paper-cutter with the jewelled handle, which Orsino had never missed. He wondered whether there were any reason for the unvarying sameness of these details.

"Of course I came," he said. "And as there was time to-day, I came at once."

He spoke rather coldly, still resenting her former behaviour and expecting that she would immediately say what she wanted of him. He would promise to execute the commission, whatever it might be, and after ten minutes of conversation he would take his leave. There was a short pause, during which he looked at her. She did not seem well. Her face was pale and her eyes were deep with shadows. Even her auburn hair had lost something of its gloss. Yet she did not look older than before, a fact which proved her to be even younger than Orsino had imagined. Saving the look of fatigue and suffering in her face, Maria Consuelo had changed less than Orsino during the winter, and she realised the fact at a glance. A determined purpose, hard work, the constant exertion of energy and will, and possibly, too, the giving up to a great extent of gambling and strong drinks, had told in Orsino's face and manner as a course of training tells upon a lazy athlete. The bold black eyes had a more quiet glance, the well-marked features had acquired strength and repose, the lean jaw was

firmer and seemed more square. Even physically, Orsino had improved, though the change was undefinable. Young as he was, something of the power of mature manhood was already coming over his youth.

"You must have thought me very—rude," said Maria Consuelo, breaking the silence and speaking with a slight hesitation which Orsino had never noticed before.

"It is not for me to complain, Madame," he answered. "You had every right——"

He stopped short, for he was reluctant to admit that she had been justified in her behaviour towards him.

"Thanks," she said, with an attempt to laugh. "It is pleasant to find magnanimous people now and then. I do not want you to think that I was capricious. That is all."

"I certainly do not think that. You were most consistent. I called three times and always got the same answer."

He fancied that he heard her sigh, but she tried to laugh again.

"I am not imaginative," she answered. "I daresay you found that out long go. You have much more imagination than I."

"It is possible, Madame—but you have not cared to develop it."

"What do you mean?"

"What does it matter? Do you remember what you said when I bade you good-night at the window of your carriage after Del Ferice's dinner? You said that you were not angry with me. I was foolish enough to imagine that you were in earnest. I came again and again, but you would not see me. You did not encourage my illusion."

"Because I would not receive you? How do you know what happened to me? How can you judge of my life? By your own? There is a vast difference."

"Yes, indeed!" exclaimed Orsino almost impatiently. "I know what you are going to say. It will be flattering

to me of course. The unattached young man is dangerous to the reputation. The foreign lady is travelling alone. There is the foundation of a vaudeville in that!"

"If you must be unjust, at least do not be brutal," said Maria Consuelo in a low voice, and she turned her face away from him.

"I am evidently placed in the world to offend you, Madame. Will you believe that I am sorry for it, though I only dimly comprehend my fault? What did I say? That you were wise in breaking off my visits, because you are alone here, and because I am young, unmarried and unfortunately a little conspicuous in my native city. Is it brutal to suggest that a young and beautiful woman has a right not to be compromised? Can we not talk freely for half an hour, as we used to talk, and then say good-bye and part good friends until you come to Rome again?"

"I wish we could!" There was an accent of sincerity in the tone which pleased Orsino.

"Then begin by forgiving me all my sins, and put them down to ignorance, want of tact, the inexperience of youth or a naturally weak understanding. But do not call me brutal on such slight provocation."

"We shall never agree for a long time," answered Maria Consuelo thoughtfully.

"Why not?"

"Because, as I told you, there is too great a difference between our lives. Do not answer me as you did before, for I am right. I began by admitting that I was rude. If that is not enough I will say more—I will even ask you to forgive me—can I do more?"

She spoke so earnestly that Orsino was surprised and almost touched. Her manner now was even less comprehensible than her repeated refusals to see him had been.

"You have done far too much already," he said gravely. "It is mine to ask your forgiveness for much that I have done and said. I only wish that I understood you better."

"I am glad you do not," replied Maria Consuelo, with a sigh which this time was not to be mistaken. "There is a sadness which it is better not to understand," she added softly.

"Unless one can help to drive it away." He, too, spoke gently, his voice being attracted to the pitch and tone of hers.

"You cannot do that—and if you could, you would not."

"Who can tell?"

The charm which he had formerly felt so keenly in her presence but which he had of late so completely forgotten, was beginning to return and he submitted to it with a sense of satisfaction which he had not anticipated. Though the twilight was coming on, his eyes had become accustomed to the dimness in the room and he saw every change in her pale, expressive face. She leaned back in her chair with eyes half closed.

"I like to think that you would, if you knew how," she said presently.

"Do you not know that I would?"

She glanced quickly at him, and then, instead of answering, rose from her seat and called to her maid through one of the doors, telling her to bring the lamp. She sat down again, but being conscious that they were liable to interruption, neither of the two spoke. Maria Consuelo's fingers played with the silver knife, drawing it out of the book in which it lay and pushing it back again. At last she took it up and looked closely at the jewelled monogram on the handle.

The maid entered, set the shaded lamp upon the table and glanced sharply at Orsino. He could not help noticing the look. In a moment she was gone, and the door closed behind her. Maria Consuelo looked over her shoulder to see that it had not been left ajar.

"She is a very extraordinary person, that elderly maid of mine," she said.

"So I should imagine from her face."

"Yes. She looked at you as she passed and I saw that you noticed it. She is my protector. I never have travelled without her and she watches over me—as a cat watches a mouse."

The little laugh that accompanied the words was not one of satisfaction, and the shade of annoyance did not escape Orsino.

"I suppose she is one of those people to whose ways one submits because one cannot live without them," he observed.

"Yes. That is it. That is exactly it," repeated Maria Consuelo. "And she is very strongly attached to me," she added after an instant's hesitation. "I do not think she will ever leave me. In fact we are attached to each other."

She laughed again as though amused by her own way of stating the relation, and drew the paper-cutter through her hand two or three times. Orsino's eyes were oddly fascinated by the flash of the jewels.

"I would like to know the history of that knife," he said, almost thoughtlessly.

Maria Consuelo started and looked at him, paler even than before. The question seemed to be a very unexpected one.

"Why?" she asked quickly.

"I always see it on the table or in your hand," answered Orsino. "It is associated with you—I think of it when I think of you. I always fancy that it has a story."

"You are right. It was given to me by a person who loved me."

"I see—I was indiscreet."

"No—you do not see, my friend. If you did you—you would understand many things, and perhaps it is better that you should not know them."

"Your sadness? Should I understand that, too?"

"No. Not that."

A slight colour rose in her face, and she stretched out

her hand to arrange the shade of the lamp, with a gesture long familiar to him.

"We shall end by misunderstanding each other," she continued in a harder tone. "Perhaps it will be my fault. I wish you knew much more about me than you do, but without the necessity of telling you the story. But that is impossible. This paper-cutter—for instance, could tell the tale better than I, for it made people see things which I did not see."

"After it was yours?"

"Yes. After it was mine."

"It pleases you to be very mysterious," said Orsino with a smile.

"Oh no! It does not please me at all," she answered, turning her face away again. "And least of all with you—my friend."

"Why least with me?"

"Because you are the first to misunderstand. You cannot help it. I do not blame you."

"If you would let me be your friend, as you call me, it would be better for us both."

He spoke as he had assuredly not meant to speak when he had entered the room, and with a feeling that surprised himself far more than his hearer. Maria Consuelo turned sharply upon him.

"Have you acted like a friend towards me?" she asked.

"I have tried to," he answered, with more presence of mind than truth.

Her tawny eyes suddenly lightened.

"That is not true. Be truthful! How have you acted, how have you spoken with me? Are you ashamed to answer?"

Orsino raised his head rather haughtily, and met her glance, wondering whether any man had ever been forced into such a strange position before. But though her eyes were bright, their look was neither cold nor defiant.

"You know the answer," he said. "I spoke and acted as though I loved you, Madame, but since you dismissed

me so very summarily, I do not see why you wish me to say so."

"And you, Don Orsino, have you ever been loved—loved in earnest—by any woman?"

"That is a very strange question, Madame."

"I am discreet. You may answer it safely."

"I have no doubt of that."

"But you will not? No—that is your right. But it would be kind of you—I should be grateful if you would tell me—has any woman ever loved you dearly?"

Orsino laughed, almost in spite of himself. He had little false pride.

"It is humiliating, Madame. But since you ask the question and require a categorical answer, I will make my confession. I have never been loved. But you will observe, as an extenuating circumstance, that I am young. I do not give up all hope."

"No—you need not," said Maria Consuelo in a low voice, and again she moved the shade of the lamp.

Though Orsino was by no means fatuous, he must have been blind if he had not seen by this time that Madame d'Aranjuez was doing her best to make him speak as he had formerly spoken to her, and to force him into a declaration of love. He saw it, indeed, and wondered; but although he felt her charm upon him, from time to time, he resolved that nothing should induce him to relax even so far as he had done already more than once during the interview. She had placed him in a foolish position once before, and he would not expose himself to being made ridiculous again, in her eyes or his. He could not discover what intention she had in trying to lead him back to her, but he attributed it to her vanity. She regretted, perhaps, having rebuked him so soon, or perhaps she had imagined that he would have made further and more determined efforts to see her. Possibly, too, she really wished to ask a service of him, and wished to assure herself that she could depend upon him by previously extracting an avowal of his devotion. It

was clear that one of the two had mistaken the other's character or mood, though it was impossible to say which was the one deceived.

The silence which followed lasted some time, and threatened to become awkward. Maria Consuelo could not or would not speak and Orsino did not know what to say. He thought of inquiring what the commission might be with which, according to her note, she had wished to entrust him. But an instant's reflection told him that the question would be tactless. If she had invented the idea as an excuse for seeing him, to mention it would be to force her hand, as card-players say, and he had no intention of doing that. Even if she really had something to ask of him, he had no right to change the subject so suddenly. He bethought him of a better question.

"You wrote me that you were going away," he said quietly. "But you will come back next winter, will you not, Madame?"

"I do not know," she answered, vaguely. Then she started a little, as though understanding his words. "What am I saying!" she exclaimed. "Of course I shall come back."

"Have you been drinking from the Trevi fountain by moonlight, like those mad English?" he asked, with a smile.

"It is not necessary. I know that I shall come back—if I am alive."

"How you say that! You are as strong as I——"

"Stronger, perhaps. But then—who knows! The weak ones sometimes last the longest."

Orsino thought she was growing very sentimental, though as he looked at her he was struck again by the look of suffering in her eyes. Whatever weakness she felt was visible there, there was nothing in the full, firm little hand, in the strong and easy pose of the head, in the softly coloured ear half hidden by her hair, that could suggest a coming danger to her splendid health.

"Let us take it for granted that you will come back to us," said Orsino cheerfully.

"Very well, we will take it for granted. What then?"

The question was so sudden and direct that Orsino fancied there ought to be an evident answer to it.

"What then?" he repeated, after a moment's hesitation. "I suppose you will live in these same rooms again, and with your permission, a certain Orsino Saracinesca will visit you from time to time, and be rude, and be sent away into exile for his sins. And Madame d'Aranjuez will go a great deal to Madame Del Ferice's and to other ultra-White houses, which will prevent the said Orsino from meeting her in society. She will also be more beautiful than ever, and the daily papers will describe a certain number of gowns which she will bring with her from Paris, or Vienna, or London, or whatever great capital is the chosen official residence of her great dressmaker. And the world will not otherwise change very materially in the course of eight months."

Orsino laughed lightly, not at his own speech, which he had constructed rather clumsily under the spur of necessity, but in the hope that she would laugh, too, and begin to talk more carelessly. But Maria Consuelo was evidently not inclined for anything but the most serious view of the world, past, present and future.

"Yes," she answered gravely. "I daresay you are right. One comes, one shows one's clothes, and one goes away again—and that is all. It would be very much the same if one did not come. It is a great mistake to think oneself necessary to any one. Only things are necessary —food, money and something to talk about."

"You might add friends to the list," said Orsino, who was afraid of being called brutal again if he did not make some mild remonstrance to such a sweeping assertion.

"Friends are included under the head of 'something to talk about,'" answered Maria Consuelo.

"That is an encouraging view."

"Like all views one gets by experience."

"You grow more and more bitter."

"Does the world grow sweeter as one grows older?"

"Neither you nor I have lived long enough to know," answered Orsino.

"Facts make life long—not years."

"So long as they leave no sign of age, what does it matter?"

"I do not care for that sort of flattery."

"Because it is not flattery at all. You know the truth too well. I am not ingenious enough to flatter you, Madame. Perfection is not flattered when it is called perfect."

"It is at all events impossible to exaggerate better than you can," answered Maria Consuelo, laughing at last at the overwhelming compliment. "Where did you learn that?"

"At your feet, Madame. The contemplation of great masterpieces enlarges the intelligence and deepens the power of expression."

"And I am a masterpiece—of what? Of art? Of caprice? Of consistency?"

"Of nature," answered Orsino promptly.

Again Maria Consuelo laughed a little, at the mere quickness of the answer. Orsino was delighted with himself, for he fancied he was leading her rapidly away from the dangerous ground upon which she had been trying to force him. But her next words showed him that he had not yet succeeded.

"Who will make me laugh during all these months!" she exclaimed with a little sadness.

Orsino thought she was strangely obstinate, and wondered what she would say next.

"Dear me, Madame," he said, "if you are so kind as to laugh at my poor wit, you will not have to seek far to find some one to amuse you better!"

He knew how to put on an expression of perfect simplicity when he pleased, and Maria Consuelo looked at him, trying to be sure whether he were in earnest or not. But his face baffled her.

"You are too modest," she said.

"Do you think it is a defect? Shall I cultivate a little more assurance of manner?" he asked, very innocently.

"Not to-day. Your first attempt might lead you into extremes."

"There is not the slightest fear of that, Madame," he answered with some emphasis.

She coloured a little and her closed lips smiled in a way he had often noticed before. He congratulated himself upon these signs of approaching ill-temper, which promised an escape from his difficulty. To take leave of her suddenly was to abandon the field, and that he would not do. She had determined to force him into a confession of devotion, and he was equally determined not to satisfy her. He had tried to lead her off her track with frivolous talk and had failed. He would try and irritate her instead, but without incurring the charge of rudeness. Why she was making such an attack upon him, was beyond his understanding, but he resented it, and made up his mind neither to fly nor yield. If he had been a hundredth part as cynical as he liked to fancy himself, he would have acted very differently. But he was young enough to have been wounded by his former dismissal, though he hardly knew it, and to seek almost instinctively to revenge his wrongs. He did not find it easy. He would not have believed that such a woman as Maria Consuelo could so far forget her pride as to go begging for a declaration of love.

"I suppose you will take Gouache's portrait away with you," he observed, changing the subject with a directness which he fancied would increase her annoyance.

"What makes you think so?" she asked, rather drily.

"I thought it a natural question."

"I cannot imagine what I should do with it. I shall leave it with him."

"You will let him send it to the Salon in Paris, of course?"

"If he likes. You seem interested in the fate of the picture."

"A little. I wondered why you did not have it here, as it has been finished so long."

"Instead of that hideous mirror, you mean? There would be less variety. I should always see myself in the same dress."

"No—on the opposite wall. You might compare truth with fiction in that way."

"To the advantage of Gouache's fiction, you would say. You were more complimentary a little while ago."

"You imagine more rudeness than even I am capable of inventing."

"That is saying much. Why did you change the subject just now?"

"Because I saw that you were annoyed at something. Besides, we were talking about myself, if I remember rightly."

"Have you never heard that a man should always talk to a woman about himself or herself?"

"No. I never heard that. Shall we talk of you, then, Madame?"

"Do you care to talk of me?" asked Maria Consuelo.

Another direct attack, Orsino thought.

"I would rather hear you talk of yourself," he answered without the least hesitation.

"If I were to tell you my thoughts about myself at the present moment, they would surprise you very much."

"Agreeably or disagreeably?"

"I do not know. Are you vain?"

"As a peacock!" replied Orsino quickly.

"Ah—then what I am thinking would not interest you."

"Why not?"

"Because if it is not flattering it would wound you, and if it is flattering it would disappoint you—by falling short of your ideal of yourself."

"Yet I confess that I would like to know what you

think of me, though I would much rather hear what you think of yourself."

"On one condition, I will tell you."

"What is that?"

"That you will give me your word to give me your own opinion of me afterwards."

"The adjectives are ready, Madame, I give you my word."

"You give it so easily! How can I believe you?"

"It is so easy to give in such a case, when one has nothing disagreeable to say."

"Then you think me agreeable?"

"Eminently!"

"And charming?"

"Perfectly!"

"And beautiful?"

"How can you doubt it?"

"And in all other respects exactly like all the women in society to whom you repeat the same commonplaces every day of your life?"

The feint had been dexterous and the thrust was sudden, straight and unexpected.

"Madame!" exclaimed Orsino in the deprecatory tone of a man taken by surprise.

"You see—you have nothing to say!" She laughed a little bitterly.

"You take too much for granted," he said, recovering himself. "You suppose that because I agree with you upon one point after another, I agree with you in the conclusion. You do not even wait to hear my answer, and you tell me that I am checkmated when I have a dozen moves from which to choose. Besides, you have directly infringed the conditions. You have fired before the signal and an arbitration would go against you. You have done fifty things contrary to agreement, and you accuse me of being dumb in my own defence. There is not much justice in that. You promise to tell me a certain secret on condition that I will tell you another.

Then, without saying a word on your own part you stone me with quick questions and cry victory because I protest. You begin before I have had so much as——"

"For heaven's sake stop!" cried Maria Consuelo, interrupting a speech which threatened to go on for twenty minutes. "You talk of chess, duelling and stoning to death, in one sentence—I am utterly confused! You upset all my ideas!"

"Considering how you have disturbed mine, it is a fair revenge. And since we both admit that we have disturbed that balance upon which alone depends all possibility of conversation, I think that I can do nothing more graceful—pardon me, nothing less ungraceful—than wish you a pleasant journey, which I do with all my heart, Madame."

Thereupon Orsino rose and took his hat.

"Sit down. Do not go yet," said Maria Consuelo, growing a shade paler, and speaking with an evident effort.

"Ah—true!" exclaimed Orsino. "We were forgetting the little commission you spoke of in your note. I am entirely at your service."

Maria Consuelo looked at him quickly and her lips trembled.

"Never mind that," she said unsteadily. "I will not trouble you. But I do not want you to go away as—as you were going. I feel as though we had been quarrelling. Perhaps we have. But let us say we are good friends—if we only say it."

Orsino was touched and disturbed. Her face was very white and her hand trembled visibly as she held it out. He took it in his own without hesitation.

"If you care for my friendship, you shall have no better friend in the world than I," he said, simply and naturally.

"Thank you—good-bye. I shall leave to-morrow."

The words were almost broken, as though she were losing control of her voice. As he closed the door behind

him, the sound of a wild and passionate sob came to him through the panel. He stood still, listening and hesitating. The truth which would have long been clear to an older or a vainer man, flashed upon him suddenly. She loved him very much, and he no longer cared for her. That was the reason why she had behaved so strangely, throwing her pride and dignity to the winds in her desperate attempt to get from him a single kind and affectionate word—from him, who had poured into her ear so many words of love but two months earlier, and from whom to draw a bare admission of friendship to-day she had almost shed tears.

To go back into the room would be madness; since he did not love her, it would almost be an insult. He bent his head and walked slowly down the corridor. He had not gone far, when he was confronted by a small dark figure that stopped the way. He recognised Maria Consuelo's elderly maid.

"I beg your pardon, Signore Principe," said the little black-eyed woman. "You will allow me to say a few words? I thank you, Eccellenza. It is about my Signora, in there, of whom I have charge."

"Of whom you have charge?" repeated Orsino, not understanding her.

"Yes—precisely. Of course, I am only her maid. You understand that. But I have charge of her though she does not know it. The poor Signora has had terrible trouble during the last few years, and at times—you understand? She is a little—yes—here." She tapped her forehead. "She is better now. But in my position I sometimes think it wiser to warn some friend of hers—in strict confidence. It sometimes saves some little unnecessary complication, and I was ordered to do so by the doctors we last consulted in Paris. You will forgive me, Eccellenza, I am sure."

Orsino stared at the woman for some seconds in blank astonishment. She smiled in a placid, self-confident way.

"You mean that Madame d'Aranjuez is—mentally deranged, and that you are her keeper? It is a little hard to believe, I confess."

"Would you like to see my certificates, Signor Principe? Or the written directions of the doctors? I am sure you are discreet."

"I have no right to see anything of the kind," answered Orsino coldly. "Of course, if you are acting under instructions it is no concern of mine."

He would have gone forward, but she suddenly produced a small bit of note-paper, neatly folded, and offered it to him.

"I thought you might like to know where we are until we return," she said, continuing to speak in a very low voice. "It is the address."

Orsino made an impatient gesture. He was on the point of refusing the information which he had not taken the trouble to ask of Maria Consuelo herself. But he changed his mind and felt in his pocket for something to give the woman. It seemed the easiest and simplest way of getting rid of her. The only note he had, chanced to be one of greater value than necessary.

"A thousand thanks, Eccellenza!" whispered the maid, overcome by what she took for an intentional piece of generosity.

Orsino left the hotel as quickly as he could.

"For improbable situations, commend me to the nineteenth century and the society in which we live!" he said to himself as he emerged into the street.

CHAPTER XVI.

It was long before Orsino saw Maria Consuelo again, but the circumstances of his last meeting with her constantly recurred to his mind during the following months. It is one of the chief characteristics of Rome that it seems