

enough for that, and the blood rose slowly in his dark cheeks. He thought again of their last meeting, and of what he had heard as he shut the door after him on that day. Perhaps he would have spoken, but Maria Consuelo was sorry for what she had said, and a little ashamed of her weakness, as indeed she had some cause to be, and she immediately turned back to a former point of the conversation, not too far removed from what had last been said.

"You see," said she, "I was right to ask you whether people would talk. And I am grateful to you for telling me the truth. It is a first proof of friendship—of something better than our old relations. Will you send me your architect to-morrow, since you are so kind as to offer his help?"

After arranging for the hour of meeting Orsino rose to take his leave.

"May I come to-morrow?" he asked. "People will not talk about that," he added with a smile.

"You can ask for me. I may be out. If I am at home, I shall be glad to see you."

She spoke coldly, and Orsino saw that she was looking over his shoulder. He turned instinctively and saw that the door was open and Spicca was standing just outside, looking in and apparently waiting for a word from Maria Consuelo before entering.

CHAPTER XIX.

As Orsino had no reason whatever for avoiding Spicca he naturally waited a moment instead of leaving the room immediately. He looked at the old man with a new interest as the latter came forward. He had never seen and probably would never see again a man taking the hand of a woman whose husband he had destroyed. He

stood a little back and Spicca passed him as he met Maria Consuelo. Orsino watched the faces of both.

Madame d'Aranjuez put out her hand mechanically and with evident reluctance, and Orsino guessed that but for his own presence she would not have given it. The expression in her face changed rapidly from that which had been there when they had been alone, hardening very quickly until it reminded Orsino of a certain mask of the Medusa which had once made an impression upon his imagination. Her eyes were fixed and the pupils grew small while the singular golden yellow colour of the iris flashed disagreeably. She did not bend her head as she silently gave her hand.

Spicca, too, seemed momentarily changed. He was as pale and thin as ever, but his face softened oddly; certain lines which contributed to his usually bitter and sceptical expression disappeared, while others became visible which changed his look completely. He bowed with more deference than he affected with other women, and Orsino fancied that he would have held Maria Consuelo's hand a moment longer, if she had not withdrawn it as soon as it had touched his.

If Orsino had not already known that Spicca often saw her, he would have been amazed at the count's visit, considering what she had said of the man. As it was, he wondered what power Spicca had over her to oblige her to receive him, and he wondered in vain. The conclusion which forced itself before him was that Spicca was the person who imposed the serving woman upon Maria Consuelo. But her behaviour towards him, on the other hand, was not that of a person obliged by circumstances to submit to the caprices and dictation of another. Judging by the appearance of the two, it seemed more probable that the power was on the other side, and might be used mercilessly on occasion.

"I hope I am not disturbing your plans," said Spicca, in a tone which was almost humble, and very unlike his usual voice. "Were you going out together?"

He shook hands with Orsino, avoiding his glance, as the young man thought.

"No," answered Maria Consuelo briefly. "I was not going out."

"I am just going away," said Orsino by way of explanation, and he made as though he would take his leave.

"Do not go yet," said Maria Consuelo. Her look made the words imperative.

Spicca glanced from one to the other with a sort of submissive protest, and then all three sat down. Orsino wondered what part he was expected to play in the trio, and wished himself away in spite of the interest he felt in the situation.

Maria Consuelo began to talk in a careless tone which reminded him of his first meeting with her in Gouache's studio. She told Spicca that Orsino had promised her his architect as a guide in her search for a lodging.

"What sort of person is he?" inquired Spicca, evidently for the sake of making conversation.

"Contini is a man of business," Orsino answered. "An odd fellow, full of talent, and a musical genius. One would not expect very much of him at first, but he will do all that Madame d'Aranjuez needs."

"Otherwise you would not have recommended him, I suppose," said Spicca.

"Certainly not," replied Orsino, looking at him.

"You must know, Madame," said Spicca, "that Don Orsino is an excellent judge of men."

He emphasised the last word in a way that seemed unnecessary. Maria Consuelo had recovered all her equanimity and laughed carelessly.

"How you say that!" she exclaimed. "Is it a warning?"

"Against what?" asked Orsino.

"Probably against you," she said. "Count Spicca likes to throw out vague hints—but I will do him the credit to say that they generally mean something." She added the last words rather scornfully.

An expression of pain passed over the old man's face. But he said nothing, though it was not like him to pass by a challenge of the kind. Without in the least understanding the reason of the sensation, Orsino felt sorry for him.

"Among men, Count Spicca's opinion is worth having," he said quietly.

Maria Consuelo looked at him in some surprise. The phrase sounded like a rebuke, and her eyes betrayed her annoyance.

"How delightful it is to hear one man defend another!" she laughed.

"I fancy Count Spicca does not stand much in need of defence," replied Orsino, without changing his tone.

"He himself is the best judge of that."

Spicca raised his weary eyes to hers and looked at her for a moment, before he answered.

"Yes," he said. "I think I am the best judge. But I am not accustomed to being defended, least of all against you, Madame. The sensation is a new one."

Orsino felt himself out of place. He was more warmly attached to Spicca than he knew, and though he was at that time not far removed from loving Maria Consuelo, her tone in speaking to the old man, which said far more than her words, jarred upon him, and he could not help taking his friend's part. On the other hand the ugly truth that Spicca had caused the death of Aranjuez more than justified Maria Consuelo in her hatred. Behind all, there was evidently some good reason why Spicca came to see her, and there was some bond between the two which made it impossible for her to refuse his visits. It was clear too, that though she hated him he felt some kind of strong affection for her. In her presence he was very unlike his daily self.

Again Orsino moved and looked at her, as though asking her permission to go away. But she refused it with an imperative gesture and a look of annoyance. She evidently did not wish to be left alone with the old man.

Without paying any further attention to the latter she began to talk to Orsino. She took no trouble to conceal what she felt and the impression grew upon Orsino that Spicca would have gone away after a quarter of an hour, if he had not either possessed a sort of right to stay or if he had not had some important object in view in remaining.

"I suppose there is nothing to do in Rome at this time of year," she said.

Orsino told her that there was absolutely nothing to do. Not a theatre was open, not a friend was in town. Rome was a wilderness. Rome was an amphitheatre on a day when there was no performance, when the lions were asleep, the gladiators drinking, and the martyrs unoccupied. He tried to say something amusing and found it hard.

Spicca was very patient, but evidently determined to outstay Orsino. From time to time he made a remark, to which Maria Consuelo paid very little attention if she took any notice of it at all. Orsino could not make up his mind whether to stay or to go. The latter course would evidently displease Maria Consuelo, whereas by remaining he was clearly annoying Spicca and was perhaps causing him pain. It was a nice question, and while trying to make conversation he weighed the arguments in his mind. Strange to say he decided in favour of Spicca. The decision was to some extent an index of the state of his feelings towards Madame d'Aranjuez. If he had been quite in love with her, he would have stayed. If he had wished to make her love him, he would have stayed also. As it was, his friendship for the old count went before other considerations. At the same time he hoped to manage matters so as not to incur Maria Consuelo's displeasure. He found it harder than he had expected. After he had made up his mind, he continued to talk during three or four minutes and then made his excuse.

"I must be going," he said quietly. "I have a number of things to do before night, and I must see Contini in

order to give him time to make a list of apartments for you to see to-morrow."

He took his hat and rose. He was not prepared for Maria Consuelo's answer.

"I asked you to stay," she said, coldly and very distinctly.

Spicca did not allow his expression to change. Orsino stared at her.

"I am very sorry, Madame, but there are many reasons which oblige me to disobey you."

Maria Consuelo bit her lip and her eyes gleamed angrily. She glanced at Spicca as though hoping that he would go away with Orsino. But he did not move. It was more and more clear that he had a right to stay if he pleased. Orsino was already bowing before her. Instead of giving her hand she rose quickly and led him towards the door. He opened it and they stood together on the threshold.

"Is this the way you help me?" she asked, almost fiercely, though in a whisper.

"Why do you receive him at all?" he inquired, instead of answering.

"Because I cannot refuse."

"But you might send him away?"

She hesitated, and looked into his eyes.

"Shall I?"

"If you wish to be alone—and if you can. It is no affair of mine."

She turned swiftly, leaving Orsino standing in the loor and went to Spicca's side. He had risen when she rose and was standing at the other side of the room, vatching.

"I have a bad headache," she said coldly. "You will forgive me if I ask you to go with Don Orsino."

"A lady's invitation to leave her house, Madame, is the only one which a man cannot refuse," said Spicca gravely.

He bowed and followed Orsino out of the room, closing

the door behind him. The scene had produced a very disagreeable impression upon Orsino. Had he not known the worst part of the secret and consequently understood what good cause Maria Consuelo had for not wishing to be alone with Spicca, he would have been utterly revolted and for ever repelled by her brutality. No other word could express adequately her conduct towards the count. Even knowing what he did, he wished that she had controlled her temper better and he was more than ever sorry for Spicca. It did not even cross his mind that the latter might have intentionally provoked Aranjuez and killed him purposely. He felt somehow that Spicca was in a measure the injured party and must have been in that position from the beginning, whatever the strange story might be. As the two descended the steps together Orsino glanced at his companion's pale, drawn features and was sure that the man was to be pitied. It was almost a womanly instinct, far too delicate for such a hardy nature, and dependent perhaps upon that sudden opening of his sympathies which resulted from meeting Maria Consuelo. I think that, on the whole, in such cases, though the woman's character may be formed by intimacy with man's, with apparent results, the impression upon the man is momentarily deeper, as the woman's gentler instincts are in a way reflected in his heart.

Spicca recovered himself quickly, however. He took out his case and offered Orsino a cigarette.

"So you have renewed your acquaintance," he said quietly.

"Yes—under rather odd circumstances," answered Orsino. "I feel as though I owed you an apology, Count, and yet I do not see what there is to apologise for. I tried to go away more than once."

"You cannot possibly make excuses to me for Madame d'Aranjuez's peculiarities, my friend. Besides, I admit that she has a right to treat me as she pleases. That does not prevent me from going to see her every day."

"You must have strong reasons for bearing such treatment."

"I have," answered Spicca thoughtfully and sadly. "Very strong reasons. I will tell you one of those which brought me to-day. I wished to see you two together."

Orsino stopped in his walk, after the manner of Italians, and he looked at Spicca. He was hot tempered when provoked, and he might have resented the speech if it had come from any other man. But he spoke quietly.

"Why do you wish to see us together?" he asked.

"Because I am foolish enough to think sometimes that you suit one another, and might love one another."

Probably nothing which Spicca could have said could have surprised Orsino more than such a plain statement. He grew suspicious at once, but Spicca's look was that of a man in earnest.

"I do not think I understand you," answered Orsino. "But I think you are touching a subject which is better left alone."

"I think not," returned Spicca unmoved.

"Then let us agree to differ," said Orsino a little more warmly.

"We cannot do that. I am in a position to make you agree with me, and I will. I am responsible for that lady's happiness. I am responsible before God and man."

Something in the words made a deep impression upon Orsino. He had never heard Spicca use anything approaching to solemn language before. He knew at least one part of the meaning which showed Spicca's remorse for having killed Aranjuez, and he knew that the old man meant what he said, and meant it from his heart.

"Do you understand me now?" asked Spicca, slowly inhaling the smoke of his cigarette.

"Not altogether. If you desire the happiness of Madame d'Aranjuez why do you wish us to fall in love with each other? It strikes me that——" he stopped.

"Because I wish you would marry her."

"Marry her!" Orsino had not thought of that, and his words expressed a surprise which was not calculated to please Spicca.

The old man's weary eyes suddenly grew keen and fierce and Orsino could hardly meet their look. Spicca's nervous fingers seized the young man's tough arm and closed upon it with surprising force.

"I would advise you to think of that possibility before making any more visits," he said, his weak voice suddenly clearing. "We were talking together a few weeks ago. Do you remember what I said I would do to any man by whom harm comes to her? Yes, you remember well enough. I know what you answered, and I daresay you meant it. But I was in earnest, too."

"I think you are threatening me, Count Spicca," said Orsino, flushing slowly but meeting the other's look with unflinching coolness.

"No. I am not. And I will not let you quarrel with me, either, Orsino. I have a right to say this to you where she is concerned—a right you do not dream of. You cannot quarrel about that."

Orsino did not answer at once. He saw that Spicca was very much in earnest, and was surprised that his manner now should be less calm and collected than on the occasion of their previous conversation, when the count had taken enough wine to turn the heads of most men. He did not doubt in the least the statement Spicca made. It agreed exactly with what Maria Consuelo herself had said of him. And the statement certainly changed the face of the situation. Orsino admitted to himself that he had never before thought of marrying Madame d'Aranjuez. He had not even taken into consideration the consequences of loving her and of being loved by her in return. The moment he thought of a possible marriage as the result of such a mutual attachment, he realised the enormous difficulties which stood in the way of such a union, and his first impulse was to give up visiting her

altogether. What Spicca said was at once reasonable and unreasonable. Maria Consuelo's husband was dead, and she doubtless expected to marry again. Orsino had no right to stand in the way of others who might present themselves as suitors. But it was beyond belief that Spicca should expect Orsino to marry her himself, knowing Rome and the Romans as he did.

The two had been standing still in the shade. Orsino began to walk forward again before he spoke. Something in his own reflexions shocked him. He did not like to think that an impassable social barrier existed between Maria Consuelo and himself. Yet, in his total ignorance of her origin and previous life the stories which had been circulated about her recalled themselves with unpleasant distinctness. Nothing that Spicca had said when they had dined together had made the matter any clearer, though the assurance that the deceased Aranjuez had come to his end by Spicca's instrumentality sufficiently contradicted the worst, if also the least credible, point in the tales which had been repeated by the gossips early in the previous winter. All the rest belonged entirely to the category of the unknown. Yet Spicca spoke seriously of a possible marriage and had gone to the length of wishing that it might be brought about. At last Orsino spoke.

"You say that you have a right to say what you have said," he began. "In that case I think I have a right to ask a question which you ought to answer. You talk of my marrying Madame d'Aranjuez. You ought to tell me whether that is possible."

"Possible?" cried Spicca almost angrily. "What do you mean?"

"I mean this. You know us all, as you know me. You know the enormous prejudices in which we are brought up. You know perfectly well that although I am ready to laugh at some of them, there are others at which I do not laugh. Yet you refused to tell me who Madame d'Aranjuez was, when I asked you, the other

day. I do not even know her father's name, much less her mother's——"

"No," answered Spicca. "That is quite true, and I see no necessity for telling you either. But, as you say, you have some right to ask. I will tell you this much. There is nothing in the circumstances of her birth which could hinder her marriage into any honourable family. Does that satisfy you?"

Orsino saw that whether he were satisfied or not he was to get no further information for the present. He might believe Spicca's statement or not, as he pleased, but he knew that whatever the peculiarities of the melancholy old duellist's character might be, he never took the trouble to invent a falsehood and was as ready as ever to support his words. On this occasion no one could have doubted him, for there was an unusual ring of sincere feeling in what he said. Orsino could not help wondering what the tie between him and Madame d'Aranjuez could be, for it evidently had the power to make Spicca submit without complaint to something worse than ordinary unkindness and to make him defend on all occasions the name and character of the woman who treated him so harshly. It must be a very close bond, Orsino thought. Spicca acted very much like a man who loves very sincerely and quite hopelessly. There was something very sad in the idea that he perhaps loved Maria Consuelo, at his age, broken down as he was, and old before his time. The contrast between them was so great that it must have been grotesque if it had not been pathetic.

Little more passed between the two men on that day, before they separated. To Spicca, Orsino seemed indifferent, and the older man's reticence after his sudden outburst did not tend to prolong the meeting.

Orsino went in search of Contini and explained what was needed of him. He was to make a brief list of desirable apartments to let and was to accompany Madame d'Aranjuez on the following morning in order to see them.

Contini was delighted and set out about the work at once. Perhaps he secretly hoped that the lady might be induced to take a part of one of the new houses, but the idea had nothing to do with his satisfaction. He was to spend several hours in the sole society of a lady, of a genuine lady who was, moreover, young and beautiful. He read the little morning paper too assiduously not to have noticed the name and pondered over the descriptions of Madame d'Aranjuez on the many occasions when she had been mentioned by the reporters during the previous year. He was too young and too thoroughly Italian not to appreciate the good fortune which now fell into his way, and he promised himself a morning of uninterrupted enjoyment. He wondered whether the lady could be induced by excessive fatigue and thirst to accept a water ice at Nazzari's, and he planned his list of apartments in such a way as to bring her to the neighbourhood of the Piazza di Spogna at an hour when the proposition might seem most agreeable and natural.

Orsino stayed in the office during the hot September morning, busying himself with the endless details of which he was now master, and thinking from time to time of Maria Consuelo. He intended to go and see her in the afternoon, and he, like Contini, planned what he should do and say. But his plans were all unsatisfactory, and once he found himself staring at the blank wall opposite his table in a state of idle abstraction long unfamiliar to him.

Soon after twelve o'clock, Contini came back, hot and radiant. Maria Consuelo had refused the water ice, but the charm of her manner had repaid the architect for the disappointment. Orsino asked whether she had decided upon any dwelling.

"She has taken the apartment in the Palazzo Barberini," answered Contini. "I suppose she will bring her family in the autumn."

"Her family? She has none. She is alone."

"Alone in that place! How rich she must be!" Con-

tini found the remains of a cigar somewhere and lighted it thoughtfully.

"I do not know whether she is rich or not," said Orsino. "I never thought about it."

He began to work at his books again, while Contini sat down and fanned himself with a bundle of papers.

"She admires you very much, Don Orsino," said the latter, after a pause. Orsino looked up sharply.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"I mean that she talked of nothing but you, and in the most flattering way."

In the oddly close intimacy which had grown up between the two men it did not seem strange that Orsino should smile at speeches which he would not have liked if they had come from any one but the poor architect.

"What did she say?" he asked with idle curiosity.

"She said it was wonderful to think what you had done. That of all the Roman princes you were the only one who had energy and character enough to throw over the old prejudices and take an occupation. That it was all the more creditable because you had done it from moral reasons and not out of necessity or love of money. And she said a great many other things of the same kind."

"Oh!" ejaculated Orsino, looking at the wall opposite.

"It is a pity she is a widow," observed Contini.

"Why?"

"She would make such a beautiful princess."

"You must be mad, Contini!" exclaimed Orsino, half-pleased and half-irritated. "Do not talk of such follies."

"All well! Forgive me," answered the architect a little humbly. "I am not you, you know, and my head is not yours—nor my name—nor my heart either."

Contini sighed, puffed at his cigar and took up some papers. He was already a little in love with Maria Consuelo, and the idea that any man might marry her if he pleased, but would not, was incomprehensible to him.

The day wore on. Orsino finished his work as thor-

oughly as though he had been a paid clerk, put everything in order and went away. Late in the afternoon he went to see Maria Consuelo. He knew that she would usually be already out at that hour, and he fancied that he was leaving something to chance in the matter of finding her, though an unacknowledged instinct told him that she would stay at home after the fatigue of the morning.

"We shall not be interrupted by Count Spicca to-day," she said, as he sat down beside her.

In spite of what he knew, the hard tone of her voice roused again in Orsino that feeling of pity for the old man which he had felt on the previous day.

"Does it not seem to you," he asked, "that if you receive him at all, you might at least conceal something of your hatred for him?"

"Why should I? Have you forgotten what I told you yesterday?"

"It would be hard to forget that, though you told me no details. But it is not easy to imagine how you can see him at all if he killed your husband deliberately in a duel."

"It is impossible to put the case more plainly!" exclaimed Maria Consuelo.

"Do I offend you?"

"No. Not exactly."

"Forgive me, if I do. If Spicca, as I suppose, was the unwilling cause of your great loss, he is much to be pitied. I am not sure that he does not deserve almost as much pity as you do."

"How can you say that—even if the rest were true?"

"Think of what he must suffer. He is devotedly attached to you."

"I know he is. You have told me that before, and I have given you the same answer. I want neither his attachment nor his devotion."

"Then refuse to see him."

"I cannot."

"We come back to the same point again," said Orsino.

"We always shall, if you talk about this. There is no other issue. Things are what they are and I cannot change them."

"Do you know," said Orsino, "that all this mystery is a very serious hindrance to friendship?"

Maria Consuelo was silent for a moment.

"Is it?" she asked presently. "Have you always thought so?"

The question was a hard one to answer.

"You have always seemed mysterious to me," answered Orsino. "Perhaps that is a great attraction. But instead of learning the truth about you, I am finding out that there are more and more secrets in your life which I must not know."

"Why should you know them?"

"Because——" Orsino checked himself, almost with a start.

He was annoyed at the words which had been so near his lips, for he had been on the point of saying "because I love you"—and he was intimately convinced that he did not love her. He could not in the least understand why the phrase was so ready to be spoken. Could it be, he asked himself, that Maria Consuelo was trying to make him say the words, and that her will, with her question, acted directly on his mind? He scouted the thought as soon as it presented itself, not only for its absurdity, but because it shocked some inner sensibility.

"What were you going to say?" asked Madame d'Aranjuez almost carelessly.

"Something that is best not said," he answered.

"Then I am glad you did not say it."

She spoke quietly and unaffectedly. It needed little divination on her part to guess what the words might have been. Even if she wished them spoken, she would not have them spoken too lightly, for she had heard his love speeches before, when they had meant very little.

Orsino suddenly turned the subject, as though he felt unsure of himself. He asked her about the result of her

search in the morning. She answered that she had determined to take the apartment in the Palazzo Barberini.

"I believe it is a very large place," observed Orsino, indifferently.

"Yes," she answered in the same tone. "I mean to receive this winter. But it will be a tiresome affair to furnish such a wilderness."

"I suppose you mean to establish yourself in Rome for several years." His face expressed a satisfaction of which he was hardly conscious himself. Maria Consuelo noticed it.

"You seem pleased," she said.

"How could I possibly not be?" he asked.

Then he was silent. All his own words seemed to him to mean too much or too little. He wished she would choose some subject of conversation and talk that he might listen. But she also was unusually silent.

He cut his visit short, very suddenly, and left her, saying that he hoped to find her at home as a general rule at that hour, quite forgetting that she would naturally be always out at the cool time towards evening.

He walked slowly homewards in the dusk, and did not remember to go to his solitary dinner until nearly nine o'clock. He was not pleased with himself, but he was involuntarily pleased by something he felt and would not have been insensible to if he had been given the choice. His old interest in Maria Consuelo was reviving, and yet was turning into something very different from what it had been.

He now boldly denied to himself that he was in love and forced himself to speculate concerning the possibilities of friendship. In his young system, it was absurd to suppose that a man could fall in love a second time with the same woman. He scoffed at himself, at the idea and at his own folly, having all the time a consciousness amounting to certainty, of something very real and serious, by no means to be laughed at, overlooked nor despised.