CHAPTER XX.

It was to be foreseen that Orsino and Maria Consuelo would see each other more often and more intimately now than ever before. Apart from the strong mutual attraction which drew them nearer and nearer together, there were many new circumstances which rendered Orsino's help almost indispensable to his friend. The details of her installation in the apartment she had chosen were many, there was much to be thought of and there were enormous numbers of things to be bought, almost each needing judgment and discrimination in the choice. Had the two needed reasonable excuses for meeting very often they had them ready to their hand. But neither of them were under any illusion, and neither cared to affect that peculiar form of self-forgiveness which finds good reasons always for doing what is always pleasant. Orsino, indeed, never pressed his services and was careful not to be seen too often in public with Maria Consuelo by the few acquaintances who were in town. Nor did Madame d'Aranjuez actually ask his help at every turn, any more than she made any difficulty about accepting it. There was a tacit understanding between them which did away with all necessity for inventing excuses on the one hand, or for the affectation of fearing to inconvenience Orsino on the other. During some time, however, the subjects which both knew to be dangerous were avoided, with an unspoken mutual consent for which Maria Consuelo was more grateful than for all the trouble Orsino was giving himself on her account. She fancied, perhaps, that he had at last accepted the situation, and his society gave her too much happiness to allow of her asking whether his discretion would or could last long.

It was an anomalous relation which bound them together, as is often the case at some period during the development of a passion, and most often when the absence of obstacles makes the growth of affection slow and regular. It was a period during which a new kind of intimacy began to exist, as far removed from the half-serious, half-jesting intercourse of earlier days as it was from the ultimate happiness to which all those who love look forward with equal trust, although few ever come near it and fewer still can ever reach it quite. It was outwardly a sort of frank comradeship which took a vast deal for granted on both sides for the mere sake of escaping analysis, a condition in which each understood all that the other said, while neither quite knew what was in the other's heart, a state in which both were pleased to dwell for a time, as though preferring to prolong a sure if imperfect happiness rather than risk one moment of it for the hope of winning a life-long joy. It was a time during which mere friendship reached an artificially perfect beauty, like a summer fruit grown under glass in winter, which in thoroughly unnatural conditions attains a development almost impossible even where unhelped nature is most kind. Both knew, perhaps, that it could not last, but neither wished it checked, and neither liked to think of the moment when it must either begin to wither by degrees, or be suddenly absorbed into a greater and more dangerous growth.

At that time they were able to talk fluently upon the nature of the human heart and the durability of great affections. They propounded the problems of the world and discussed them between the selection of a carpet and the purchase of a table. They were ready at any moment to turn from the deepest conversation to the consideration of the merest detail, conscious that they could instantly take up the thread of their talk. They could separate the major proposition from the minor, and the deduction from both, by a lively argument concerning the durability of a stuff or the fitness of a piece of furniture, and they came back each time with renewed and refreshed interest to the consideration of matters little less grave than the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to

come. That their conclusions were not always logical nor even very sensible has little to do with the matter. On the contrary, the discovery of a flaw in their own reasoning was itself a reason for opening the question again at their next meeting.

At first their conversation was of general things, including the desirability of glory for its own sake, the immortality of the soul and the principles of architecture. Orsino was often amazed to find himself talking, and, as he fancied, talking well, upon subjects of which he had hitherto supposed with some justice that he knew nothing. By and by they fell upon literature and dissected the modern novel with the keen zest of young people who seek to learn the future secrets of their own lives from vivid descriptions of the lives of others. Their knowledge of the modern novel was not so limited as their acquaintance with many other things less amusing, if more profitable, and they worked the vein with lively energy and mutual satisfaction.

Then, as always, came the important move. They began to talk of love. The interest ceased to be objective or in any way vicarious and was transferred directly to themselves.

These steps are not, I think, to be ever thought of as stages in the development of character in man or woman. They are phases in the intercourse of man and woman. Clever people know them well and know how to produce them at will. The end may or may not be love, but an end of some sort is inevitable. According to the persons concerned, according to circumstances, according to the amount of available time, the progression from general subjects to the discussion of love, with self-application of the conclusions, more or less sincere, may occupy an hour, a month or a year. Love is the one subject which ultimately attracts those not too old to talk about it, and those who consider that they have reached such an age are few.

In the case of Orsino and Maria Consuelo, neither of

the two was making any effort to lead up to a certain definite result, for both felt a real dread of reaching that point which is ever afterwards remembered as the last moment of hardly sustained friendship and the first of something stronger and too often less happy. Orsino was inexperienced, but Maria Consuelo was quite conscious of the tendency in a fixed direction. Whether she had made up her mind, or not, she tried as skilfully as she could to retard the movement, for she was very happy in the present and probably feared the first stirring of her own ardently passionate nature.

As for Orsino, indeed, his inexperience was relative. He was anxious to believe that he was only her friend, and pretended to his own conscience that he could not explain the frequency with which the words "I love you" presented themselves. The desire to speak them was neither a permanent impulse of which he was always conscious nor a sudden strong emotion like a temptation, giving warning of itself by a few heart-beats before it reached its strength. The words came to his lips so naturally and unexpectedly that he often wondered how he saved himself from pronouncing them. It was impossible for him to foresee when they would crave utterance. At last he began to fancy that they rang in his mind without a reason and without a wish on his part to speak them, as a perfectly indifferent tune will ring in the ear for days so that one cannot get rid of it.

Maria Consuelo had not intended to spend September and October altogether in Rome. She had supposed that it would be enough to choose her apartment and give orders to some person about the furnishing of it to her taste, and that after that she might go to the seaside until the heat should be over, coming up to the city from time to time as occasion required. But she seemed to have changed her mind. She did not even suggest the possibility of going away.

She generally saw Orsino in the afternoon. He found no difficulty in making time to see her, whenever he could

be useful, but his own business naturally occupied all the earlier part of the day. As a rule, therefore, he called between half-past four and five, and so soon as it was cool enough they went together to the Palazzo Barberini to see what progress the upholsterers were making and to consider matters of taste. The great half-furnished rooms with the big windows overlooking the little garden before the palace were pleasant to sit in and wander in during the hot September afternoons. The pair were not often quite alone, even for a quarter of an hour, the place being full of workmen who came and went, passed and repassed, as their occupations required, often asking for orders and probably needing more supervision than Maria Consuelo bestowed upon them.

On a certain evening late in September the two were together in the large drawing-room. Maria Consuelo was tired and was leaning back in a deep seat, her hands folded upon her knee, watching Orsino as he slowly paced the carpet, crossing and recrossing in his short walk, his face constantly turned towards her. It was excessively hot. The air was sultry with thunder, and though it was past five o'clock the windows were still closely shut to keep out the heat. A clear, soft light filled the room, not reflected from a burning pavement, but from grass and plashing water.

They had been talking of a chimneypiece which Maria Consuelo wished to have placed in the hall. The style of what she wanted suggested the sixteenth century, Henry Second of France, Diana of Poitiers and the durability of the affections. The transition from fireplaces to true love had been accomplished with comparative ease, the result of daily practice and experience. It is worth noting, for the benefit of the young, that furniture is an excellent subject for conversation for that very reason, nothing being simpler than to go in three minutes from a table to an epoch, from an epoch to an historical person and from that person to his or her love story. A young man would do well to associate the life of some famous

lover or celebrated and unhappy beauty with each style of woodwork and upholstery. It is always convenient. But if he has not the necessary preliminary knowledge he may resort to a stratagem.

"What a comfortable chair!" says he, as he deposits his hat on the floor and sits down.

"Do you like comfortable chairs?"

"Of course. Fancy what life was in the days of stiff wooden seats, when you had to carry a cushion about with you. You know that sort of thing—twelfth century, Francesca da Rimini and all that."

"Poor Francesca!"

If she does not say "Poor Francesca!" as she probably will, you can say it yourself, very feelingly and in a different tone, after a short pause. The one kiss which cost two lives makes the story particularly useful. And then the ice is broken. If Paolo and Francesca had not been murdered, would they have loved each other for ever? As nobody knows what they would have done, you can assert that they would have been faithful or not, according to your taste, humour or personal intentions. Then you can talk about the husband, whose very hasty conduct contributed so materially to the shortness of the story. If you wish to be thought jealous, you say he was quite right; if you desire to seem generous, you say with equal conviction that he was quite wrong. And so forth. Get to generalities as soon as possible in order to apply them to your own case.

Orsino and Maria Consuelo were the guileless victims of furniture, neither of them being acquainted with the method just set forth for the instruction of the innocent. They fell into their own trap and wondered how they had got from mantelpieces to hearts in such an incredibly short time.

"It is quite possible to love twice," Orsino was saying.

"That depends upon what you mean by love," answered Maria Consuelo, watching him with half-closed eyes.

Orsino laughed.

"What I mean by love? I suppose I mean very much what other people mean by it—or a little more," he added, and the slight change in his voice pleased her.

"Do you think that any two understand the same thing when they speak of love?" she asked.

"We two might," he answered, resuming his indifferent tone. "After all, we have talked so much together during the last month that we ought to understand each other."

"Yes," said Maria Consuelo. "And I think we do," she added thoughtfully.

"Then why should we think differently about the same thing? But I am not going to try and define love. It is not easily defined, and I am not clever enough." He laughed again. "There are many illnesses which I cannot define—but I know that one may have them twice."

"There are others which one can only have once—dangerous ones, too."

"I know it. But that has nothing to do with the argument."

"I think it has—if this is an argument at all."

"No. Love is not enough like an illness—it is quite the contrary. It is a recovery from an unnatural state—that of not loving. One may fall into that state and recover from it more than once."

"What a sophism!"

"Why do you say that? Do you think that not to love is the normal condition of mankind?"

Maria Consuelo was silent, still watching him.

"You have nothing to say," he continued, stopping and standing before her. "There is nothing to be said. A man or woman who does not love is in an abnormal state. When he or she falls in love it is a recovery. One may recover so long as the heart has enough vitality. Admit it—for you must. It proves that any properly constituted person may love twice, at least."

"There is an idea of faithlessness in it, nevertheless," said Maria Consuelo, thoughtfully. "Or if it is not faithless, it is fickle. It is not the same to oneself to love twice. One respects oneself less."

"I cannot believe that."

"We all ought to believe it. Take a case as an instance. A woman loves a man with all her heart, to the point of sacrificing very much for him. He loves her in the same way. In spite of the strongest opposition, they agree to be married. On the very day of the marriage he is taken from her—for ever—loving her as he has always loved her, and as he would always have loved her had he lived. What would such a woman feel, if she found herself forgetting such a love as that after two or three years, for another man? Do you think she would respect herself more or less? Do you think she would have the right to call herself a faithful woman?"

Orsino was silent for a moment, seeing that she meant herself by the example. She, indeed, had only told him that her husband had been killed, but Spicca had once said of her that she had been married to a man who had never been her husband.

"A memory is one thing—real life is quite another," said Orsino at last, resuming his walk.

"And to be faithful cannot possibly mean to be faithless," answered Maria Consuelo in a low voice.

She rose and went to one of the windows. She must have wished to hide her face, for the outer blinds and the glass casement were both shut and she could see nothing but the green light that struck the painted wood. Orsino went to her side.

"Shall I open the window?" he asked in a constrained voice.

"No—not yet. I thought I could see out."

Still she stood where she was, her face almost touching the pane, one small white hand resting upon the glass, the fingers moving restlessly.

"You meant yourself, just now," said Orsino softly.

She neither spoke nor moved, but her face grew pale. Then he fancied that there was a hardly perceptible

movement of her head, the merest shade of an inclination. He leaned a little towards her, resting against the marble sill of the window.

"And you meant something more——" he began to say. Then he stopped short.

His heart was beating hard and the hot blood throbbed in his temples, his lips closed tightly and his breathing was audible.

Maria Consuelo turned her head, glanced at him quickly and instantly looked back at the smooth glass before her and at the green light on the shutters without. He was scarcely conscious that she had moved. In love, as in a storm at sea, matters grow very grave in a few moments.

"You meant that you might still——" Again he stopped. The words would not come.

He fancied that she would not speak. She could not, any more than she could have left his side at that moment. The air was very sultry even in the cool, closed room. The green light on the shutters darkened suddenly. Then a far distant peal of thunder rolled its echoes slowly over the city. Still neither moved from the window.

"If you could——" Orsino's voice was low and soft, but there was something strangely overwrought in the nervous quality of it. It was not hesitation any longer that made him stop.

"Could you love me?" he asked. He thought he spoke aloud. When he had spoken, he knew that he had whispered the words.

His face was colourless. He heard a short, sharp breath, drawn like a gasp. The small white hand fell from the window and gripped his own with sudden, violent strength. Neither spoke. Another peal of thunder, nearer and louder, shook the air. Then Orsino heard the quick-drawn breath again, and the white hand went nervously to the fastening of the window. Orsino opened the casement and thrust back the blinds. There was a vivid flash, more thunder, and a gust of stifling wind.

Maria Consuelo leaned far out, looking up, and a few great drops of rain began to fall.

The storm burst and the cold rain poured down furiously, wetting the two white faces at the window. Maria Consuelo drew back a little, and Orsino leaned against the open casement, watching her. It was as though the single pressure of their hands had crushed out the power of speech for a time.

For weeks they had talked daily together during many hours. They could not foresee that at the great moment there would be nothing left for them to say. The rain fell in torrents and the gusty wind rose and buffeted the face of the great palace with roaring strength, to sink very suddenly an instant later in the steadily rushing noise of the water, springing up again without warning, rising and falling, falling and rising, like a great sobbing breath. The wind and the rain seemed to be speaking for the two who listened to it.

Orsino watched Maria Consuelo's face, not scrutinising it, nor realising very much whether it were beautiful or not, nor trying to read the thoughts that were half expressed in it—not thinking at all, indeed, but only loving it wholly and in every part for the sake of the woman herself, as he had never dreamed of loving any one or anything.

At last Maria Consuelo turned very slowly and looked into his eyes. The passionate sadness faded out of the features, the faint colour rose again, the full lips relaxed, the smile that came was full of a happiness that seemed almost divine.

"I cannot help it," she said.

"Can I?"

"Truly?"

Her hand was lying on the marble ledge. Orsino laid his own upon it, and both trembled a little. She understood more than any word could have told her.

"For how long?" she asked.

"For all our lives now, and for all our life hereafter."

He raised her hand to his lips, bending his head, and then he drew her from the window, and they walked slowly up and down the great room.

"It is very strange," she said presently, in a low voice.

"That I should love you?"

"Yes. Where were we an hour ago? What is become of that old time—that was an hour ago?"

"I have forgotten, dear—that was in the other life."

"The other life! Yes—how unhappy I was—there, by that window, a hundred years ago!"

She laughed softly, and Orsino smiled as he looked down at her.

"Are you happy now?"

"Do not ask me—how could I tell you?"

"Say it to yourself, love—I shall see it in your dear face."

"Am I not saying it?"

Then they were silent again, walking side by side, their arms locked and pressing one another.

It began to dawn upon Orsino that a great change had come into his life, and he thought of the consequences of what he was doing. He had not said that he was happy, but in the first moment he had felt it more than she. The future, however, would not be like the present, and could not be a perpetual continuation of it. Orsino was not at all of a romantic disposition, and the practical side of things was always sure to present itself to his mind very early in any affair. It was a part of his nature and by no means hindered him from feeling deeply and loving sincerely. But it shortened his moments of happiness.

"Do you know what this means to you and me?" he asked, after a time.

Maria Consuelo started very slightly and looked up at him.

"Let us think of to-morrow—to-morrow," she said. Her voice trembled a little.

"Is it so hard to think of?" asked Orsino, fearing lest he had displeased her.

"Very hard," she answered, in a low voice.

"Not for me. Why should it be? If anything can make to-day more complete, it is to think that to-morrow will be more perfect, and the next day still more, and so on, each day better than the one before it."

Maria Consuelo shook her head.

"Do not speak of it," she said.

"Will you not love me to-morrow?" Orsino asked. The light in his face told how little earnestly he asked the question, but she turned upon him quickly.

"Do you doubt yourself, that you should doubt me?" There was a ring of terror in the words that startled him as he heard them.

"Beloved—no—how can you think I meant it?"

"Then do not say it." She shivered a little, and bent down her head.

"No—I will not. But—dear—do you know where we are?"

"Where we are?" she repeated, not understanding.

"Yes—where we are. This was to have been your home this year."

"Was to have been?" A frightened look came into her face.

"It will not be, now. Your home is not in this house."

Again she shook her head, turning her face away.

"It must be," she said.

Orsino was surprised beyond expression by the answer.

"Either you do not know what you are saying, or you do not mean it, dear," he said. "Or else you will not understand me."

"I understand you too well."

Orsino made her stop and took both her hands, looking down into her eyes.

"You will marry me," he said.

"I cannot marry you," she answered.

Her face grew even paler than it had been when they had stood at the window, and so full of pain and sadness that it hurt Orsino to look at it. But the words she

spoke, in her clear, distinct tones, struck him like a blow unawares. He knew that she loved him, for her love was in every look and gesture, without attempt at concealment. He believed her to be a good woman. He was certain that her husband was dead. He could not understand, and he grew suddenly angry. An older man would have done worse, or a man less in earnest.

"You must have a reason to give me—and a good one," he said gravely.

"I have."

She turned slowly away and began to walk alone. He followed her.

"You must tell it," he said.

"Tell it? Yes, I will tell it to you. It is a solemn promise before God, given to a man who died in my arms —to my husband. Would you have me break such a vow?"

"Yes." Orsino drew a long breath. The objection seemed insignificant enough compared with the pain it had cost him before it had been explained.

"Such promises are not binding," he continued, after a moment's pause. "Such a promise is made hastily, rashly, without a thought of the consequences. You have no right to keep it."

"No right? Orsino, what are you saying! Is not an oath an oath, however it is taken? Is not a vow made ten times more sacred when the one for whom it was taken is gone? Is there any difference between my promise and that made before the altar by a woman who gives up the world? Should I be any better, if I broke mine, than the nun who broke hers?"

"You cannot be in earnest?" exclaimed Orsino in a low voice.

Maria Consuelo did not answer. She went towards the window and looked at the splashing rain. Orsino stood where he was, watching her. Suddenly she came back and stood before him.

"We must undo this," she said.

"What do you mean?" He understood well enough.

"You know. We must not love each other. We must undo to-day and forget it."

"If you can talk so lightly of forgetting, you have little to remember," answered Orsino almost roughly.

"You have no right to say that."

"I have the right of a man who loves you."

"The right to be unjust?"

"I am not unjust." His tone softened again. "I know what it means, to say that I love you—it is my life, this love. I have known it a long time. It has been on my lips to say it for weeks, and since it has been said, it cannot be unsaid. A moment ago you told me not to doubt you. I do not. And now you say that we must not love each other, as though we had a choice to make—and why? Because you once made a rash promise——"

"Hush!" interrupted Maria Consuelo. "You must not——"

"I must and will. You made a promise, as though you had a right at such a moment to dispose of all your life —I do not speak of mine—as though you could know what the world held for you, and could renounce it all beforehand. I tell you you had no right to make such an oath, and a vow taken without the right to take it is no vow at all——"

"It is—it is! I cannot break it!"

"If you love me you will. But you say we are to forget. Forget! It is so easy to say. How shall we do it?"

"I will go away——"

"If you have the heart to go away, then go. But I will follow you. The world is very small, they say—it will not be hard for me to find you, wherever you are."

"If I beg you—if I ask it as the only kindness, the only act of friendship, the only proof of your love—you will not come—you will not do that——"

"I will, if it costs your soul and mine."

"Orsino! You do not mean it—you see how unhappy I am, how I am trying to do right, how hard it is!"

"I see that you are trying to ruin both our lives. I will not let you. Besides, you do not mean it."

Maria Consuelo looked into his eyes and her own grew deep and dark. Then as though she felt herself yielding, she turned away and sat down in a chair that stood apart from the rest. Orsino followed her, and tried to take her hand, bending down to meet her downcast glance.

"You do not mean it, Consuelo," he said earnestly. "You do not mean one hundredth part of what you say."

She drew her fingers from his, and turned her head sideways against the back of the chair so that she could not see him. He still bent over her, whispering into her ear.

"You cannot go," he said. "You will not try to forget—for neither you nor I can—nor ought, cost what it might. You will not destroy what is so much to us—you would not, if you could. Look at me, love—do not turn away. Let me see it all in your eyes, all the truth of it and of every word I say."

Still she turned her face from him. But she breathed quickly with parted lips and the colour rose slowly in her pale cheeks.

"It must be sweet to be loved as I love you, dear," he said, bending still lower and closer to her. "It must be some happiness to know that you are so loved. Is there so much joy in your life that you can despise this? There is none in mine, without you, nor ever can be unless we are always together—always, dear, always, always."

She moved a little, and the drooping lids lifted almost imperceptibly.

"Do not tempt me, dear one," she said in a faint voice. "Let me go—let me go."

Orsino's dark face was close to hers now, and she could see his bright eyes. Once she tried to look away, and could not. Again she tried, lifting her head from the cushioned chair. But his arm went round her neck and her cheek rested upon his shoulder.

"Go, love," he said softly, pressing her more closely. "Go—let us not love each other. It is so easy not to love."

She looked up into his eyes again with a sudden shiver, and they both grew very pale. For ten seconds neither spoke nor moved. Then their lips met.

CHAPTER XXI.

When Orsino was alone that night, he asked himself more than one question which he did not find it easy to answer. He could define, indeed, the relation in which he now stood to Maria Consuelo, for though she had ultimately refused to speak the words of a promise, he no longer doubted that she meant to be his wife and that her scruples were overcome for ever. This was, undeniably, the most important point in the whole affair, so far as his own satisfaction was concerned, but there were others of the gravest import to be considered and elucidated before he could even weigh the probabilities of future happiness.

He had not lost his head on the present occasion, as he had formerly done when his passion had been anything but sincere. He was perfectly conscious that Maria Consuelo was now the principal person concerned in his life and that the moment would inevitably have come, sooner or later, in which he must have told her so as he had done on this day. He had not yielded to a sudden impulse, but to a steady and growing pressure from which there had been no means of escape, and which he had not sought to elude. He was not in one of those moods of half-senseless, exuberant spirits, such as had come upon him more than once during the winter after he had been an hour in her society and had said or done some-