

"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-

thing more than usually rash. On the contrary, he was inclined to look the whole situation soberly in the face, and to doubt whether the love which dominated him might not prove a source of unhappiness to Maria Consuelo as well as to himself. At the same time he knew that it would be useless to fight against that domination, for he knew that he was now absolutely sincere.

But the difficulties to be met and overcome were many and great. He might have betrothed himself to almost any woman in society, widow or spinster, without anticipating one hundredth part of the opposition which he must now certainly encounter. He was not even angry beforehand with the prejudice which would animate his father and mother, for he admitted that it was hardly a prejudice at all, and certainly not one peculiar to them, or to their class. It would be hard to find a family, anywhere, of any respectability, no matter how modest, that would accept without question such a choice as he had made. Maria Consuelo was one of those persons about whom the world is ready to speak in disparagement, knowing that it will not be easy to find defenders for them. The world indeed, loves its own and treats them with consideration, especially in the matter of passing follies, and after it had been plain to society that Orsino had fallen under Maria Consuelo's charm, he had heard no more disagreeable remarks about her origin nor the circumstances of her widowhood. But he remembered what had been said before that, when he himself had listened indifferently enough, and he guessed that ill-natured people called her an adventuress or little better. If anything could have increased the suffering which this intuitive knowledge caused him, it was the fact that he possessed no proof of her right to rank with the best, except his own implicit faith in her, and the few words Spicca had chosen to let fall. Spicca was still thought so dangerous that people hesitated to contradict him openly, but his mere assertion, Orsino thought, though it might be accepted in appearance, was not of enough

weight to carry inward conviction with it in the minds of people who had no interest in being convinced. It was only too plain that, unless Maria Consuelo, or Spicca, or both, were willing to tell the strange story in its integrity, there were not proof enough to convince the most willing person of her right to the social position she occupied after that had once been called into question. To Orsino's mind the very fact that it had been questioned at all demonstrated sufficiently a carelessness on her own part which could only proceed from the certainty of possessing that right beyond dispute. It would doubtless have been possible for her to provide herself from the first with something in the nature of a guarantee for her identity. She could surely have had the means, through some friend of her own elsewhere, of making the acquaintance of some one in society, who would have vouched for her and silenced the carelessly spiteful talk concerning her which had gone the rounds when she first appeared. But she had seemed to be quite indifferent. She had refused Orsino's pressing offer to bring her into relations with his mother, whose influence would have been enough to straighten a reputation far more doubtful than Maria Consuelo's, and she had almost wilfully thrown herself into a sort of intimacy with the Countess Del Ferice.

But Orsino, as he thought of these matters, saw how futile such arguments must seem to his own people, and how absurdly inadequate they were to better his own state of mind, since he needed no conviction himself but sought the means of convincing others. One point alone gave him some hope. Under the existing laws the inevitable legal marriage would require the production of documents which would clear the whole story at once. On the other hand, that fact could make Orsino's position no easier with his father and mother until the papers were actually produced. People cannot easily be married secretly in Rome, where the law requires the publication of banns by posting them upon the doors of the Capitol,

and the name of Orsino Saracinesca would not be easily overlooked. Orsino was aware of course that he was not in need of his parents' consent for his marriage, but he had not been brought up in a way to look upon their acquiescence as unnecessary. He was deeply attached to them both, but especially to his mother who had been his staunch friend in his efforts to do something for himself, and to whom he naturally looked for sympathy if not for actual help. However certain he might be of the ultimate result of his marriage, the idea of being married in direct opposition to her wishes was so repugnant to him as to be almost an insurmountable barrier. He might, indeed, and probably would, conceal his engagement for some time, but solely with the intention of so preparing the evidence in favour of it as to make it immediately acceptable to his father and mother when announced.

It seemed possible that, if he could bring Maria Consuelo to see the matter as he saw it, she might at once throw aside her reticence and furnish him with the information he so greatly needed. But it would be a delicate matter to bring her to that point of view, unconscious as she must be of her equivocal position. He could not go to her and tell her that in order to announce their engagement he must be able to tell the world who and what she really was. The most he could do would be to tell her exactly what papers were necessary for her marriage and to prevail upon her to procure them as soon as possible, or to hand them to him at once if they were already in her possession. But in order to require even this much of her, it was necessary to push matters farther than they had yet gone. He had certainly pledged himself to her, and he firmly believed that she considered herself bound to him. But beyond that, nothing definite had passed.

They had been interrupted by the entrance of workmen asking for orders, and he had thought that Maria Consuelo had seemed anxious to detain the men as long as possible. That such a scene could not be immediately

renewed where it had been broken off was clear enough, but Orsino fancied that she had not wished even to attempt a renewal of it. He had taken her home in the dusk, and she had refused to let him enter the hotel with her. She said that she wished to be alone, and he had been fain to be satisfied with the pressure of her hand and the look in her eyes, which both said much while not saying half of what he longed to hear and know.

He would see her, of course, at the usual hour on the following day, and he determined to speak plainly and strongly. She could not ask him to prolong such a state of uncertainty. Considering how gradual the steps had been which had led up to what had taken place on that rainy afternoon it was not conceivable, he thought, that she would still ask for time to make up her mind. She would at least consent to some preliminary agreement upon a line of conduct for both to follow.

But impossible as the other case seemed, Orsino did not neglect it. His mind was developing with his character and was acquiring the habit of foreseeing difficulties in order to forestall them. If Maria Consuelo returned suddenly to her original point of view maintaining that the promise given to her dying husband was still binding, Orsino determined that he would go to Spicca in a last resort. Whatever the bond which united them, it was clear that Spicca possessed some kind of power over Maria Consuelo, and that he was so far acquainted with all the circumstances of her previous life as to be eminently capable of giving Orsino advice for the future.

He went to his office on the following morning with little inclination for work. It would be more just, perhaps, to say that he felt the desire to pursue his usual occupation while conscious that his mind was too much disturbed by the events of the previous afternoon to concentrate itself upon the details of accounts and plans. He found himself committing all sorts of errors of oversight quite unusual with him. Figures seemed to have lost their value and plans their meaning. With the ut-

most determination he held himself to his task, not willing to believe that his judgment and nerve could be so disturbed as to render him unfit for any serious business. But the result was contemptible as compared with the effort.

Andrea Contini, too, was inclined to take a gloomy view of things, contrary to his usual habit. A report was spreading to the effect that a certain big contractor was on the verge of bankruptcy, a man who had hitherto been considered beyond the danger of heavy loss. There had been more than one small failure of late, but no one had paid much attention to such accidents which were generally attributed to personal causes rather than to an approaching turn in the tide of speculation. But Contini chose to believe that a crisis was not far off. He possessed in a high degree that sort of caution which is valuable rather in an assistant than in a chief. Orsino was little inclined to share his architect's despondency for the present.

"You need a change of air," he said, pushing a heap of papers away from him and lighting a cigarette. "You ought to go down to Porto d'Anzio for a few days. You have been too long in the heat."

"No longer than you, Don Orsino," answered Contini, from his own table.

"You are depressed and gloomy. You have worked harder than I. You should really go out of town for a day or two."

"I do not feel the need of it."

Contini bent over his table again and a short silence followed. Orsino's mind instantly reverted to Maria Consuelo. He felt a violent desire to leave the office and go to her at once. There was no reason why he should not visit her in the morning if he pleased. At the worst, she might refuse to receive him. He was thinking how she would look, and wondering whether she would smile or meet him with earnest half regretful eyes, when Contini's voice broke into his meditations again.

"You think I am despondent because I have been working too long in the heat," said the young man, rising and beginning to pace the floor before Orsino. "No. I am not that kind of man. I am never tired. I can go on for ever. But affairs in Rome will not go on for ever. I tell you that, Don Orsino. There is trouble in the air. I wish we had sold everything and could wait. It would be much better."

"All this is very vague, Contini."

"It is very clear to me. Matters are going from bad to worse. There is no doubt that Ronco has failed."

"Well, and if he has? We are not Ronco. He was involved in all sorts of other speculations. If he had stuck to land and building he would be as sound as ever."

"For another month, perhaps. Do you know why he is ruined?"

"By his own fault, as people always are. He was rash."

"No rasher than we are. I believe that the game is played out. Ronco is bankrupt because the bank with which he deals cannot discount any more bills this week."

"And why not?"

"Because the foreign banks will not take any more of all this paper that is flying about. Those small failures in the summer have produced their effect. Some of the paper was in Paris and some in Vienna. It turned out worthless, and the foreigners have taken fright. It is all a fraud, at best—or something very like it."

"What do you mean?"

"Tell me the truth, Don Orsino—have you seen a centime of all these millions which every one is dealing with? Do you believe they really exist? No. It is all paper, paper, and more paper. There is no cash in the business."

"But there is land and there are houses, which represent the millions substantially."

"Substantially! Yes—as long as the inflation lasts. After that they will represent nothing."

"You are talking nonsense, Contini. Prices may fall, and some people will lose, but you cannot destroy real estate permanently."

"Its value may be destroyed for ten or twenty years, which is practically the same thing when people have no other property. Take this block we are building. It represents a large sum. Say that in the next six months there are half a dozen failures like Ronco's and that a panic sets in. We could then neither sell the houses nor let them. What would they represent to us? Nothing. Failure—like the failure of everybody else. Do you know where the millions really are? You ought to know better than most people. They are in Casa Saracinesca and in a few other great houses which have not dabbled in all this business, and perhaps they are in the pockets of a few clever men who have got out of it all in time. They are certainly not in the firm of Andrea Contini and Company, which will assuredly be bankrupt before the winter is out."

Contini bit his cigar savagely, thrust his hands into his pockets and looked out of the window, turning his back on Orsino. The latter watched his companion in surprise, not understanding why his dismal forebodings should find such sudden and strong expression.

"I think you exaggerate very much," said Orsino. "There is always risk in such business as this. But it strikes me that the risk was greater when we had less capital."

"Capital!" exclaimed the architect contemptuously and without turning round. "Can we draw a cheque—a plain unadorned cheque and not a draft—for a hundred thousand francs to-day? Or shall we be able to draw it to-morrow? Capital! We have a lot of brick and mortar in our possession, put together more or less symmetrically according to our taste, and practically unpaid for. If we manage to sell it in time we shall get the

difference between what is paid and what we owe. That is our capital. It is problematical, to say the least of it. If we realise less than we owe we are bankrupt."

He came back suddenly to Orsino's table as he ceased speaking and his face showed that he was really disturbed. Orsino looked at him steadily for a few seconds.

"It is not only Ronco's failure that frightens you, Contini. There must be something else."

"More of the same kind. There is enough to frighten any one."

"No, there is something else. You have been talking with somebody."

"With Del Ferice's confidential clerk. Yes—it is quite true. I was with him last night."

"And what did he say? What you have been telling me, I suppose."

"Something much more disagreeable—something you would rather not hear."

"I wish to hear it."

"You should, as a matter of fact."

"Go on."

"We are completely in Del Ferice's hands."

"We are in the hands of his bank."

"What is the difference? To all intents and purposes he is our bank. The proof is that but for him we should have failed already."

Orsino looked up sharply.

"Be clear, Contini. Tell me what you mean."

"I mean this. For a month past the bank could not have discounted a hundred francs' worth of our paper. Del Ferice has taken it all and advanced the money out of his private account."

"Are you sure of what you are telling me?" Orsino asked the question in a low voice, and his brow contracted.

"One can hardly have better authority than the clerk's own statement."

"And he distinctly told you this, did he?"

"Most distinctly."

"He must have had an object in betraying such a confidence," said Orsino. "It is not likely that such a man would carelessly tell you or me a secret which is evidently meant to be kept."

He spoke quietly enough, but the tone of his voice was changed and betrayed how greatly he was moved by the news. Contini began to walk up and down again, but did not make any answer to the remark.

"How much do we owe the bank?" Orsino asked suddenly.

"Roughly, about six hundred thousand."

"How much of that paper do you think Del Ferice has taken up himself?"

"About a quarter, I fancy, from what the clerk told me."

A long silence followed, during which Orsino tried to review the situation in all its various aspects. It was clear that Del Ferice did not wish Andrea Contini and Company to fail and was putting himself to serious inconvenience in order to avert the catastrophe. Whether he wished, in so doing, to keep Orsino in his power, or whether he merely desired to escape the charge of having ruined his old enemy's son out of spite, it was hard to decide. Orsino passed over that question quickly enough. So far as any sense of humiliation was concerned he knew very well that his mother would be ready and able to pay off all his liabilities at the shortest notice. What Orsino felt most deeply was profound disappointment and utter disgust at his own folly. It seemed to him that he had been played with and flattered into the belief that he was a serious man of business, while all along he had been pushed and helped by unseen hands. There was nothing to prove that Del Ferice had not thus deceived him from the first; and, indeed, when he thought of his small beginnings early in the year and realised the dimensions which the business had now assumed, he could not help believing that Del Ferice had been at the bottom of all

his apparent success and that his own earnest and ceaseless efforts had really had but little to do with the development of his affairs. His vanity suffered terribly under the first shock.

He was bitterly disappointed. During the preceding months he had begun to feel himself independent and able to stand alone, and he had looked forward in the near future to telling his father that he had made a fortune for himself without any man's help. He had remembered every word of cold discouragement to which he had been forced to listen at the very beginning, and he had felt sure of having a success to set against each one of those words. He knew that he had not been idle and he had fancied that every hour of work had produced its permanent result, and left him with something more to show. He had seen his mother's pride in him growing day by day with his apparent success, and he had been confident of proving to her that she was not half proud enough. All that was gone in a moment. He saw, or fancied that he saw, nothing but a series of failures which had been bolstered up and inflated into seeming triumphs by a man whom his father despised and hated and whom, as a man, he himself did not respect. The disillusionment was complete.

At first it seemed to him that there was nothing to be done but to go directly to Saracinesca and tell the truth to his father and mother. Financially, when the wealth of the family was taken into consideration there was nothing very alarming in the situation. He would borrow of his father enough to clear him with Del Ferice and would sell the unfinished buildings for what they would bring. He might even induce his father to help him in finishing the work. There would be no trouble about the business question. As for Contini, he should not lose by the transaction and permanent occupation could doubtless be found for him on one of the estates if he chose to accept it.

He thought of the interview and his vanity dreaded it.

Another plan suggested itself to him. On the whole, it seemed easier to bear his dependence on Del Ferice than to confess himself beaten. There was nothing dishonourable, nothing which could be called so at least, in accepting financial accommodation from a man whose business it was to lend money on security. If Del Ferice chose to advance sums which his bank would not advance, he did it for good reasons of his own and certainly not in the intention of losing by it in the end. In case of failure Del Ferice would take the buildings for the debt and would certainly in that case get them for much less than they were worth. Orsino would be no worse off than when he had begun, he would frankly confess that though he had lost nothing he had not made a fortune, and the matter would be at an end. That would be very much easier to bear than the humiliation of confessing at the present moment that he was in Del Ferice's power and would be bankrupt but for Del Ferice's personal help. And again he repeated to himself that Del Ferice was not a man to throw money away without hope of recovery with interest. It was inconceivable, too, that Ugo should have pushed him so far merely to flatter a young man's vanity. He meant to make use of him, or to make money out of his failure. In either case Orsino would be his dupe and would not be under any obligation to him. Compared with the necessity of acknowledging the present state of his affairs to his father, the prospect of being made a tool of by Del Ferice was bearable, not to say attractive.

"What had we better do, Contini?" he asked at length.

"There is nothing to be done but to go on, I suppose, until we are ruined," replied the architect. "Even if we had the money, we should gain nothing by taking off all our bills as they fall due, instead of renewing them."

"But if the bank will not discount any more—"

"Del Ferice will, in the bank's name. When he is ready for the failure, we shall fail and he will profit by our loss."

"Do you think that is what he means to do?"

Contini looked at Orsino in surprise.

"Of course. What did you expect? You do not suppose that he means to make us a present of that paper, or to hold it indefinitely until we can make a good sale."

"And he will ultimately get possession of all the paper himself."

"Naturally. As the old bills fall due we shall renew them with him, practically, and not with the bank. He knows what he is about. He probably has some scheme for selling the whole block to the government, or to some institution, and is sure of his profit beforehand. Our failure will give him a profit of twenty-five or thirty per cent."

Orsino was strangely reassured by his partner's gloomy view. To him every word proved that he was free from any personal obligation to Del Ferice and might accept the latter's assistance without the least compunction. He did not like to remember that a man of Ugo's subtle intelligence might have something more important in view than a profit of a few hundred thousand francs, if indeed the sum should amount to that. Orsino's brow cleared and his expression changed.

"You seem to like the idea," observed Contini rather irritably.

"I would rather be ruined by Del Ferice than helped by him."

"Ruin means so little to you, Don Orsino. It means the inheritance of an enormous fortune, a princess for a wife and the choice of two or three palaces to live in."

"That is one way of putting it," answered Orsino, almost laughing. "As for yourself, my friend, I do not see that your prospects are so very bad. Do you suppose that I shall abandon you after having led you into this scrape, and after having learned to like you and understand your talent? You are very much mistaken. We have tried this together and failed, but as you rightly say I shall not be in the least ruined by the failure. Do you

know what will happen? My father will tell me that since I have gained some experience I should go and manage one of the estates and improve the buildings. Then you and I will go together."

Contini smiled suddenly and his bright eyes sparkled. He was profoundly attached to Orsino, and thought perhaps as much of the loss of his companionship as of the destruction of his material hopes in the event of a liquidation.

"If that could be, I should not care what became of the business," he said simply.

"How long do you think we shall last?" asked Orsino after a short pause.

"If business grows worse, as I think it will, we shall last until the first bill that falls due after the doors and windows are put in."

"That is precise, at least."

"It will probably take us into January, or perhaps February."

"But suppose that Del Ferice himself gets into trouble between now and then. If he cannot discount any more, what will happen?"

"We shall fail a little sooner. But you need not be afraid of that. Del Ferice knows what he is about better than we do, better than his confidential clerk, much better than most men of business in Rome. If he fails, he will fail intentionally and at the right moment."

"And do you not think that there is even a remote possibility of an improvement in business, so that nobody will fail at all?"

"No," answered Contini thoughtfully. "I do not think so. It is a paper system and it will go to pieces."

"Why have you not said the same thing before? You must have had this opinion a long time."

"I did not believe that Ronco could fail. An accident opens the eyes."

Orsino had almost decided to let matters go on but he found some difficulty in actually making up his mind. In

spite of Contini's assurances he could not get rid of the idea that he was under an obligation to Del Ferice. Once, at least, he thought of going directly to Ugo and asking for a clear explanation of the whole affair. But Ugo was not in town, as he knew, and the impossibility of going at once made it improbable that Orsino would go at all. It would not have been a very wise move, for Del Ferice could easily deny the story, seeing that the paper was all in the bank's name, and he would probably have visited the indiscretion upon the unfortunate clerk.

In the long silence which followed, Orsino relapsed into his former despondency. After all, whether he confessed his failure or not, he had undeniably failed and been played upon from the first, and he admitted it to himself without attempting to spare his vanity, and his self-contempt was great and painful. The fact that he had grown from a boy to a man during his experience did not make it easier to bear such wounds, which are felt more keenly by the strong than by the weak when they are real.

As the day wore on the longing to see Maria Consuelo grew upon him until he felt that he had never before wished to be with her as he wished it now. He had no intention of telling her his trouble but he needed the assurance of an ever ready sympathy which he so often saw in her eyes, and which was always there for him when he asked it. When there is love there is reliance, whether expressed or not, and where there is reliance, be it ever so slender, there is comfort for many ills of body, mind and soul.

CHAPTER XXII.

Orsino felt suddenly relieved when he had left his office in the afternoon. Contini's gloomy mood was contagious, and so long as Orsino was with him it was impossible not to share the architect's view of affairs. Alone, however,