the old school, who evidently despised majorities and modern political science as a whole, who for the sake of his own interests desired no change from the Government under which he lived, and who would surely be the first to draw the sword for the temporal power, and the last to sheathe it. His calm judgment concerning the fallacy of holding a hopeless position would vanish like smoke if his fiery blood were once roused. He was so honest a man that even Del Ferice could not suspect him of parading views he did not hold; and Ugo then and there abandoned all idea of bringing him into political trouble and disgrace, though he by no means gave up all hope of being able to ruin him in some other way.

"I agree with you there at least," said Saracinesca. "The only improvements worth having are certainly not to be found in Europe. Donna Tullia is calling us. We had better join that harmless flock of lambs, and give over speculating on the advantages of allying ourselves with a pack of wolves who will eat us up, house and home, bag and baggage."

So the whole party climbed again to their seats upon the drag, and Valdarno drove them back into Rome by the Porta San Giovanni.

CHAPTER VI.

Corona d'Astrardente had been educated in a convent—that is to say, she had been brought up in the strict practice of her religion; and during the five years which had elapsed since she had come out into the world, she had found no cause for forsaking the habits she had acquired in her girlhood. Some people find religion a burden; others regard it as an indifferently useless institution, in which they desire no share, and concerning which they never trouble themselves; others, again, look upon it as the mainstay of their lives.

It is natural to suppose that the mode of thought and the habits acquired by young girls in a religious institution will not disappear without a trace when they first go into the world, and it may even be expected that some memory of the early disposition thus cultivated will cling to them throughout their lives. But the multifarious interests of social existence do much to shake that young edifice of faith. The driving strength of stormy passions of all kinds undermines the walls of the fabric, and when at last the bolt of adversity strikes full upon the keystone of the arch, upon the self of man or woman, weakened and loosened by the tempests of years, the whole palace of the soul falls in, a hopeless wreck, wherein not even the memory of outline can be traced, nor the faint shadow of a beauty which is destroyed for ever.

But there are some whose interests in this world are not strong enough to shake their faith in the next; whose passions do not get the mastery, and whose self is sheltered from danger by something more than the feeble defence of an accomplished egotism. Corona was one of these, for her lot had not been happy, nor her path strewn with roses.

She was a friendless woman, destined to suffer much, and her suffering was the more intense that she seemed always upon the point of finding friends in the world where she played so conspicuous a part. There can be little happiness when a whole life has been placed upon a false foundation, even though so dire a mistake may have been committed willingly and from a sense of duty and obligation, such as drove Corona to marry old Astrardente. Consolation is not satisfaction; and though, when she reflected on what she had done, she knew that from her point of view she had done her best, she knew also that she had closed upon herself the gates of the earthly paradise, and that for her the prospect of happiness had been removed from the now to the hereafter—the dim and shadowy glass in which we love to see any reflection save that of our present lives. And to her, thus living in submission to the consequences of her choice, that faith in things better which

had inspired her to sacrifice was the chief remaining source of consolation. There was a good man to whom she went for advice, as she had gone to him ever since she could remember. When she found herself in trouble she never hesitated. Padre Filippo was to her the living proof of the possibility of human goodness, as faith is to us all the evidence of things not seen.

Corona was in trouble now—in a trouble so new that she hardly understood it, so terrible and yet so vague that she felt her peril imminent. She did not hesitate, therefore, nor change her mind upon the morning following the day of the meet, but drove to the church of the Capuchins in the Piazza Barberini, and went up the broad steps with a beating heart, not knowing how she should tell what she meant to tell, yet knowing that there was for her no hope of peace unless she told it quickly, and got that advice and direction she so earnestly craved.

Padre Filippo had been a man of the world in his time—a man of great cultivation, full of refined tastes and understanding of tastes in others, gentle and courteous in his manners, and very kind of heart. No one knew whence he came. He spoke Italian correctly and with a keen scholarly use of words, but his slight accent betrayed his foreign birth. He had been a Capuchin monk for many years, perhaps for more than half his lifetime, and Corona could remember him from her childhood, for he had been a friend of her father's; but he had not been consulted about her marriage,—she even remembered that, though she had earnestly desired to see him before the wedding-day, her father had told her that he had left Rome for a time. For the old gentleman was in terrible earnest about the match, so that in his heart he feared lest Corona might waver and ask Padre Filippo's advice; and he knew the good monk too well to think that he would give his countenance to such a sacrifice as was contemplated in marrying the young girl to old Astrardente. Corona had known this later, but had hardly realised the selfishness of her father, nor indeed had desired to realise

it. It was sufficient that he had died satisfied in seeing her married to a great noble, and that she had been able, in his last days, to relieve him from the distress of debt and embarrassment which had doubtless contributed to shorten his life.

The proud woman who had thus once humbled herself for an object she thought good, had never referred to her action again. She had never spoken of her position to Padre Filippo, so that the monk wondered and admired her steadfastness. If she suffered, it was in silence, without comment and without complaint, and so she would have suffered to the end. But it had been ordered otherwise. For months she had known that the interest she felt in Giovanni Saracinesca was increasing: she had choked it down, had done all in her power to prove herself indifferent to him; but at last the crisis had come. When he spoke to her of his marriage, she had felt—she knew now that it was so—that she loved him. The very word, as she repeated it to herself, rang like an awful, almost incomprehensible, accusation of evil in her ears. One moment she stood at the top of the steps outside the church, looking down at the bare straggling trees below, and upward to the grey sky, against which the lofty eaves of the Palazzo Barberini stood out sharply defined. The weather had changed again, and a soft southerly wind was blowing the spray of the fountain half across the piazza. Corona paused, her graceful figure half leaning against the stone doorpost of the church, her hand upon the heavy leathern curtain in the act to lift it; and as she stood there, a desperate temptation assailed her. It seemed desperate to her—to many another woman it would have appeared only the natural course to pursue—to turn her back upon the church, to put off the hard moment of confession, to go down again into the city, and to say to herself that there was no harm in seeing Don Giovanni, provided she never let him speak of love. Why should he speak of it? Had she any reason to suppose there was danger to her in anything he meant to say?

Had he ever, by word or deed, betrayed that interest in her which she knew in herself was love for him? Had he ever?—ah yes! It was only the night before last that he had asked her advice, had besought her to advise him not to marry another, had suffered his arm to tremble when she laid her hand upon it. In the quick remembrance that he too had shown some feeling, there was a sudden burst of joy such as Corona had never felt, and a moment later she knew it and was afraid. It was true, then. At the very time when she was most oppressed with the sense of her fault in loving him, there was an inward rejoicing in her heart at the bare thought that she loved him. Could a woman fall lower, she asked herself—lower than to delight in what she knew to be most bad? And yet it was such a poor little thrill of pleasure after all; but it was the first she had ever known. To turn away and reflect for a few days would be so easy! It would be so sweet to think of it, even though the excuse for thinking of Giovanni should be a good determination to root him from her life. It would be so sweet to drive again alone among the trees that very afternoon, and to weigh the salvation of her soul in the balance of her heart: her heart would know how to turn the scales, surely enough. Corona stood still, holding the curtain in her hand. She was a brave woman, but she turned pale—not hesitating, she said to herself, but pausing. Then, suddenly, a great scorn of herself arose in her. Was it worthy of her even to pause in doing right? The nobility of her courage cried loudly to her to go in and do the thing most worthy: her hand lifted the heavy leathern apron, and she entered the church.

The air within was heavy and moist, and the grey light fell coldly through the tall windows. Corona shuddered, and drew her furs more closely about her as she passed up the aisle to the door of the sacristy. She found the monk she sought, and she made her confession.

"Padre mio," she said at last, when the good man thought she had finished—"Padre mio, I am a very miserable woman." She hid her dark face in her ungloved hands, and one by one the crystal tears welled from her eyes and trickled down upon her small fingers and upon the worn black wood of the confessional.

"My daughter," said the good monk, "I will pray for you, others will pray for you—but before all things, you must pray for yourself. And let me advise you, my child, that as we are all led into temptation, we must not think that because we have been in temptation we have sinned hopelessly; nor, if we have fought against the thing that tempts us, should we at once imagine that we have overcome it, and have done altogether right. If there were no evil in ourselves, there could be no temptation from without, for nothing evil could seem pleasant. But with you I cannot find that you have done any great wrong as yet. You must take courage. We are all in the world, and do what we may, we cannot disregard it. The sin you see is real, but it is yet not very near you since you so abhor it; and if you pray that you may hate it, it will go further from you till you may hope not even to understand how it could once have been so near. Take courage—take comfort. Do not be morbid. Resist temptation, but do not analyse it nor yourself too closely; for it is one of the chief signs of evil in us that when we dwell too much upon ourselves and upon our temptations, we ourselves seem good in our own eyes, and our temptations not unpleasant, because the very resisting of them seems to make us appear better than we are."

But the tears still flowed from Corona's eyes in the dark corner of the church, and she could not be comforted.

"Padre mio," she repeated, "I am very unhappy. I have not a friend in the world to whom I can speak. I have never seen my life before as I see it now. God forgive me, I have never loved my husband. I never knew what it meant to love. I was a mere child, a very innocent child, when I was married to him. I would have sought your advice, but they told me you were away, and I thought I was doing right in obeying my father."

Padre Filippo sighed. He had long known and understood why Corona had not been allowed to come to him at the most important moment of her life.

"My husband is very kind to me," she continued in broken tones. "He loves me in his way, but I do not love him. That of itself is a great sin. It seems to me as though I saw but one half of life, and saw it from the window of a prison; and yet I am not imprisoned. I would that I were, for I should never have seen another man. I should never have heard his voice, nor seen his face, nor—nor loved him, as I do love him," she sobbed.

"Hush, my daughter," said the old monk, very gently. "You told me you had never spoken of love; that you were interested in him, indeed, but that you did not know——"

"I know—I know now," cried Corona, losing all control as the passionate tears flowed down. "I could not say it—it seemed so dreadful—I love him with my whole self! I can never get it out—it burns me. O God, I am so wretched!"

Padre Filippo was silent for a while. It was a terrible case. He could not remember in all his experience to have known one more sad to contemplate, though his business was with the sins and the sorrows of the world. The beautiful woman kneeling outside his confessional was innocent—as innocent as a child, brave and faithful. She had sacrificed her whole life for her father, who had been little worthy of such devotion; she had borne for years the suffering of being tied to an old man whom she could not help despising, however honestly she tried to conceal the fact from herself, however effectually she hid it from others. It was a wonder the disaster had not occurred before: it showed how loyal and true a woman she was, that, living in the very centre and midst of the world, admired and assailed by many, she should never in five years have so much as thought of any man beside her husband. A woman made for love and happiness, in the glory of beauty and youth, capable

of such unfaltering determination in her loyalty, so good, so noble, so generous,—it seemed unspeakably pathetic to hear her weeping her heart out, and confessing that, after so many struggles and efforts and sacrifices, she had at last met the common fate of all humanity, and was become subject to love. What might have been her happiness was turned to dishonour; what should have been the pride of her young life was made a reproach.

She would not fall. The grey-haired monk believed that, in his great knowledge of mankind. But she would suffer terribly, and it might be that others would suffer also. It was the consequence of an irretrievable error in the beginning, when it had seemed to the young girl just leaving the convent that the best protection against the world of evil into which she was to go would be the unconditional sacrifice of herself.

Padre Filippo was silent. He hoped that the passionate outburst of grief and self-reproach would pass, though he himself could find little enough to say. It was all too natural. What was he, he thought, that he should explain away nature, and bid a friendless woman defy a power that has more than once overset the reckoning of the world? He could bid her pray for help and strength, but he found it hard to argue the case with her; for he had to allow that his beautiful penitent was, after all, only experiencing what it might have been foretold that she must feel, and that, as far as he could see, she was struggling bravely against the dangers of her situation.

Corona cried bitterly as she knelt there. It was a great relief to give way for a time to the whole violence of what she felt. It may be that in her tears there was a subtle instinctive knowledge that she was weeping for her love as well as for her sin in loving, but her grief was none the less real. She did not understand herself. She did not know, as Padre Filippo knew, that her woman's heart was breaking for sympathy rather than for religious counsel. She knew many women, but her noble pride would not have let her even contemplate the pos-

sibility of confiding in any one of them, even if she could have done so in the certainty of not being herself betrayed and of not betraying the man she loved. She had been accustomed to come to her confessor for counsel, and she now came to him with her troubles and craved sympathy for them, in the knowledge that Padre Filippo could never know the name of the man who had disturbed her peace.

But the monk understood well enough, and his kind heart comprehended hers and felt for her.

"My daughter," he said at last, when she seemed to have grown more calm, "it would be an inestimable advantage if this man could go away for a time, but that is probably not to be expected. Meanwhile, you must not listen to him if he speaks——"

"It is not that," interrupted Corona—"it is not that. He never speaks of love. Oh, I really believe he does not love me at all!" But in her heart she felt that he must love her; and her hand, as it lay upon the hard wood of the confessional, seemed still to feel his trembling arm.

"That is so much the better, my child," said the monk, quietly. "For if he does not love you, your temptations will not grow stronger."

"And yet, perhaps—he may——" murmured Corona, feeling that it would be wrong even to conceal her faintest suspicions at such a time.

"Let there be no perhaps," answered Padre Filippo, almost sternly. "Let it never enter your mind that he might love you. Think that even from the worldly point there is small dignity in a woman who exhibits love for a man who has never mentioned love to her. You have no reason to suppose you are loved save that you desire to be. Let there be no perhaps."

The monk's keen insight into character had given him an unexpected weapon in Corona's defence. He knew how of all things a proud woman hates to know that where she has placed her heart there is no response, and that if she fails to awaken an affection akin to her own, what has been

love may be turned to loathing, or at least to indifference. The strong character of the Duchessa d'Astrardente responded to his touch as he expected. Her tears ceased to flow, and her scorn rose haughtily against herself.

"It is true. I am despicable," she said, suddenly. "You have shown me myself. There shall be no perhaps. I loathe myself for thinking of it. Pray for me, lest I fall so low again."

A few minutes later Corona left the confessional and went and kneeled in the body of the church to collect her thoughts. She was in a very different frame of mind from that in which she had left home an hour ago. She hardly knew whether she felt herself a better woman, but she was sure that she was stronger. There was no desire left in her to meditate sadly upon her sorrow—to go over and over in her thoughts the feelings she experienced, the fears she felt, the half-formulated hope that Giovanni might love her after all. There was left only a haughty determination to have done with her folly quickly and surely, and to try and forget it for ever. The confessor's words had produced their effect. Henceforth she would never stoop so low again. She was ready to go out into the world now, and she felt no fear. It was more from habit than for the sake of saying a prayer that she knelt in the church after her confession, for she felt very strong. She rose to her feet presently, and moved towards the door: she had not gone half the length of the church when she came face to face with Donna Tullia Mayer.

It was a strange coincidence. The ladies of Rome frequently go to the church of the Capuchins, as Corona had done, to seek the aid and counsel of Padre Filippo, but Corona had never met Donna Tullia there. Madame Mayer did not profess to be very devout. As a matter of fact, she had not found it convenient to go to confession during the Christmas season, and she had been intending to make up for the deficiency for some time past; but it is improbable that she would have decided upon fulfilling her

religious obligations before Lent if she had not chanced to see the Duchessa d'Astrardente's carriage standing at the foot of the church steps.

Donna Tullia had risen early because she was going to sit for her portrait to a young artist who lived in the neighbourhood of the Piazza Barberini, and as she passed in her brougham she caught sight of the Duchessa's liveries. The artist could wait half an hour: the opportunity was admirable. She was alone, and would not only do her duty in going to confession, but would have a chance of seeing how Corona looked when she had been at her devotions. It might also be possible to judge from Padre Filippo's manner whether the interview had been an interesting one. The Astrardente was so very devout that she probably had difficulty in inventing sins to confess. One might perhaps tell from her face whether she had felt any emotion. At all events the opportunity should not be lost. Besides, if Donna Tullia found that she herself was really not in a proper frame of mind for religious exercises, she could easily spend a few moments in the church and then proceed upon her way. She stopped her carriage and went in. She had just entered when she was aware of the tall figure of Corona d'Astrardente coming towards her, magnificent in the simplicity of her furs, a short veil just covering half her face, and an unwonted colour in her dark cheeks.

Corona was surprised at meeting Madame Mayer, but she did not show it. She nodded with a sufficiently pleasant smile, and would have passed on. This would not have suited Donna Tullia's intentions, however, for she meant to have a good look at her friend. It was not for nothing that she had made up her mind to go to confession at a moment's notice. She therefore stopped the Duchessa, and insisted upon shaking hands.

"What an extraordinary coincidence!" she exclaimed. "You must have been to see Padre Filippo too?"

"Yes," answered Corona. "You will find him in the sacristy." She noticed that Madame Mayer regarded her

with great interest. Indeed she could hardly be aware how unlike her usual self she appeared. There were dark rings beneath her eyes, and her eyes themselves seemed to emit a strange light; while an unwonted colour illuminated her olive cheeks, and her voice had a curiously excited tone. Madame Mayer stared at her so hard that she noticed it.

"Why do you look at me like that?" asked the Duchessa, with a smile.

"I was wondering what in the world you could find to confess," replied Donna Tullia, sweetly. "You are so immensely good, you see; everybody wonders at you."

Corona's eyes flashed darkly. She suspected that Madame Mayer noticed something unusual in her appearance, and had made the awkward speech to conceal her curiosity. She was annoyed at the meeting, still more at being detained in conversation within the church.

"It is very kind of you to invest me with such virtues," she answered. "I assure you I am not half so good as you suppose. Good-bye—I must be going home."

"Stay!" exclaimed Donna Tullia; "I can go to confession another time. Will not you come with me to Gouache's studio? I am going to sit. It is such a bore to go alone."

"Thank you very much," said Corona, civilly. "I am afraid I cannot go. My husband expects me at home. I wish you a good sitting."

"Well, good-bye. Oh, I forgot to tell you, we had such a charming picnic yesterday. It was so fortunate—the only fine day this week. Giovanni was very amusing: he was completely *en train*, and kept us laughing the whole day. Good-bye; I do so wish you had come."

"I was very sorry," answered Corona, quietly, "but it was impossible. I am glad you all enjoyed it so much. Good-bye."

So they parted.

"How she wishes that same husband of hers would follow the example of my excellent old Mayer, of blessed

memory, and take himself out of the world to-day or to-morrow!" thought Donna Tullia, as she walked up the church.

She was sure something unusual had occurred, and she longed to fathom the mystery. But she was not altogether a bad woman, and when she had collected her thoughts she made up her mind that even by the utmost stretch of moral indulgence, she could not consider herself in a proper state to undertake so serious a matter as confession. She therefore waited a few minutes, to give time for Corona to drive away, and then turned back. She cautiously pushed aside the curtain and looked out. The Astrardente carriage was just disappearing in the distance. Donna Tullia descended the steps, got into her brougham, and proceeded to the studio of Monsieur Anastase Gouache, the portrait-painter. She had not accomplished much, save to rouse her curiosity, and that parting thrust concerning Don Giovanni had been rather ill-timed.

She drove to the door of the studio and found Del Ferice waiting for her as usual. If Corona had accompanied her, she would have expressed astonishment at finding him; but, as a matter of fact, Ugo always met her there, and helped to pass the time while she was sitting. He was very amusing, and not altogether unsympathetic to her; and moreover, he professed for her the most profound devotion—genuine, perhaps, and certainly skilfully expressed. If any one had paid much attention to Del Ferice's doings, it would have been said that he was paying court to the rich young widow. But he was never looked upon by society from the point of view of matrimonial possibility, and no one thought of attaching any importance to his doings. Nevertheless Ugo, who had been gradually rising in the social scale for many years, saw no reason why he should not win the hand of Donna Tullia as well as any one else, if only Giovanni Saracinesca could be kept out of the way; and he devoted himself with becoming assiduity to the service of the

widow, while doing his utmost to promote Giovanni's attachment for the Astrardente, which he had been the first to discover. Donna Tullia would probably have laughed to scorn the idea that Del Ferice could think of himself seriously as a suitor, but of all her admirers she found him the most constant and the most convenient.

"What are the news this morning?" she asked, as he opened her carriage-door for her before the studio.

"None, save that I am your faithful slave as ever," he answered.

"I have just seen the Astrardente," said Donna Tullia, still sitting in her seat. "I will let you guess where it was that we met."

"You met in the church of the Capuchins," replied Del Ferice promptly, with a smile of satisfaction.

"You are a sorcerer: how did you know? Did you guess it?"

"If you will look down this street from where I stand, you will perceive that I could distinctly see any carriage which turned out of the Piazza Barberini towards the Capuchins," replied Ugo. "She was there nearly an hour, and you only stayed five minutes."

"How dreadful it is to be watched like this!" exclaimed Donna Tullia, with a little laugh, half expressive of satisfaction and half of amusement at Del Ferice's devotion.

"How can I help watching you, as the earth watches the sun in its daily course?" said Ugo, with a sentimental intonation of his soft persuasive voice. Donna Tullia looked at his smooth face, and laughed again, half kindly.

"The Astrardente had been confessing her sins," she remarked.

"Again? She is always confessing."

"What do you suppose she finds to say?" asked Donna Tullia.

"That her husband is hideous, and that you are beautiful," answered Del Ferice, readily enough.

"Why?"

"Because she hates her husband and hates you."

"Why, again?"

"Because you took Giovanni Saracinesca to your picnic yesterday; because you are always taking him away from her. For the matter of that, I hate him as much as the Astrardente hates you," added Del Ferice, with an agreeable smile. Donna Tullia did not despise flattery, but Ugo made her thoughtful.

"Do you think she really cares——?" she asked.

"As surely as that he does not," replied Del Ferice.

"It would be strange," said Donna Tullia, meditatively. "I would like to know if it is true."

"You have only to watch them."

"Surely Giovanni cares more than she does," objected Madame Mayer. "Everybody says he loves her; nobody says she loves him."

"All the more reason. Popular report is always mistaken—except in regard to you."

"To me?"

"Since it ascribes to you so much that is good, it cannot be wrong," replied Del Ferice.

Donna Tullia laughed, and took his hand to descend from her carriage.

CHAPTER VII.

Monsieur Gouache's studio was on the second floor. The narrow flight of steps ended abruptly against a green door, perforated by a slit for the insertion of letters, by a shabby green cord which, being pulled, rang a feeble bell, and adorned by a visiting-card, whereon with many superfluous flourishes and ornaments of caligraphy was inscribed the name of the artist—Anastase Gouache.

The door being opened by a string, Donna Tullia and Del Ferice entered, and mounting half-a-dozen more steps, found themselves in the studio, a spacious room with a window high above the floor, half shaded by a curtain of grey cotton. In one corner an iron stove gave out loud cracking sounds, pleasant to hear on the damp winter's morning, and the flame shone red through chinks of the rusty door. A dark-green carpet in passably good condition covered the floor; three or four broad divans, spread with oriental rugs, and two very much dilapidated carved chairs with leathern seats, constituted the furniture; the walls were hung with sketches of heads and figures; half-finished portraits stood upon two easels, and others were leaning together in a corner; a couple of small tables were covered with colour-tubes, brushes, and palette-knives; mingled odours of paint, varnish, and cigarette-smoke pervaded the air; and, lastly, upon a high stool before one of the easels, his sleeves turned up to the elbow, and his feet tucked in upon a rail beneath him, sat Anastase Gouache himself.

He was a man of not more than seven-and-twenty years, with delicate pale features, and an abundance of glossy black hair. A small and very much pointed moustache shaded his upper lip, and the extremities thereof rose short and perpendicular from the corners of his well-shaped mouth. His eyes were dark and singularly expressive, his forehead low and very broad; his hands were sufficiently nervous and well knit, but white as a woman's, and the fingers tapered delicately to the tips. He wore a brown velvet coat more or less daubed with paint, and his collar was low at the throat.

He sprang from his high stool as Donna Tullia and Del Ferice entered, his palette and mahl-stick in his hand, and made a most ceremonious bow; whereat Donna Tullia laughed gaily.

"Well, Gouache," she said familiarly, "what have you been doing?"

Anastase motioned to her to come before his canvas and contemplate the portrait of herself upon which he was working. It was undeniably good—a striking figure