

"I can only assure you that I thought——"

"You need not assure me!" cried Donna Tullia, losing all self-control. "There is no excuse, nor pardon—it is the second time. Do not insult me further, by inventing untruths for your apology."

"Nevertheless——" began Giovanni, who was sincerely sorry for his great rudeness, and would gladly have attempted to explain his conduct, seeing that Donna Tullia was so justly angry.

"There is no nevertheless!" she interrupted. "You may stay where you are," she added, with a scornful glance at the Duchessa d'Astrardente. Then she laid her hand upon Del Ferice's arm, and swept angrily past, so that the train of her red silk gown brushed sharply against Corona's soft white velvet.

Giovanni remained standing a moment, with a puzzled expression upon his face.

"How could you do anything so rude?" asked Corona, very gravely. "She will never forgive you, and she will be quite right."

"I do not know how I forgot," he answered, seating himself again. "It is dreadful—unpardonable—but perhaps the consequences will be good."

CHAPTER XI.

Corona was ill at ease. In the first few moments of being alone with Giovanni the pleasure she felt outweighed all other thoughts. But as the minutes lengthened to a quarter of an hour, then to half an hour, she grew nervous, and her answers came more and more shortly. She said to herself that she should never have given him the cotillon, and she wondered how the remainder of the time would pass. The realisation of what had occurred came upon her, and the hot blood rose to

her face and ebbed away again, and rose once more. Yet she could not speak out what her pride prompted her to say, because she pitied Giovanni a little, and was willing to think for a moment that it was only compassion she felt, lest she should feel that she must send him away.

But Giovanni sat beside her, and knew that the spell was working upon him, and that there was no salvation. He had taken her unawares, though he hardly knew it, when she first entered, and he asked her suddenly for a dance. He had wondered vaguely why she had so freely consented; but, in the wild delight of being by her side, he completely lost all hold upon himself, and yielded to the exquisite charm of her presence, as a man who has struggled for a moment against a powerful opiate sinks under its influence, and involuntarily acknowledges his weakness. Strong as he was, his strength was all gone, and he knew not where he should find it.

"You will have to make her some further apology," said Corona, as Madame Mayer's red train disappeared through the doorway at the other end of the room.

"Of course—I must do something about it," said Giovanni, absently. "After all, I do not wonder—it is amazing that I should have recognised her at all. I should forget anything to-night, except that I am to dance with you."

The Duchessa looked away, and fanned herself slowly; but she sighed, and checked the deep-drawn breath as by a great effort. The waltz was over, and the dancers streamed through the intervening rooms towards the gallery in quest of fresher air and freer space. Two and two they came, quickly following each other and passing on, some filling the high seats along the walls, others hastening towards the supper-rooms beyond. A few minutes earlier Saracinesca and Corona had been almost alone in the great apartment; now they were surrounded on all sides by a chattering crowd of men and women, with flushed faces or unnaturally pale, according as the effort of dancing affected each, and the indistinguishable din of

hundreds of voices so filled the air that Giovanni and the Duchessa could hardly hear each other speak.

"This is intolerable," said Giovanni, suddenly. "You are not engaged for the last quadrille? Shall we not go away until the cotillon begins?"

Corona hesitated a moment, and was silent. She glanced once at Giovanni, and again surveyed the moving crowd.

"Yes," she said at last; "let us go away."

"You are very good," answered Giovanni in a low voice, as he offered her his arm. She looked at him inquiringly, and her face grew grave, as they slowly made their way out of the room.

At last they came to the conservatory, and went in among the great plants and the soft lights. There was no one there, and they slowly paced the broad walk that was left clear all round the glass-covered chamber, and up and down the middle. The plants were disposed so thickly as to form almost impenetrable walls of green on either side; and at one end there was an open space where a little marble fountain played, around which were disposed seats of carved wood. But Giovanni and Corona continued to walk slowly along the tiled path.

"Why did you say I was good just now?" asked Corona at last. Her voice sounded cold.

"I should not have said it, perhaps," answered Giovanni. "I say many things which I cannot help saying. I am very sorry."

"I am very sorry too," answered the Duchessa, quietly.

"Ah! if you knew, you would forgive me. If you could guess half the truth, you would forgive me."

"I would rather not guess it."

"Of course; but you have already—you know it all. Have I not told you?" Giovanni spoke in despairing tones. He was utterly weak and spellbound; he could hardly find any words at all.

"Don Giovanni," said Corona, speaking very proudly and calmly, but not unkindly, "I have known you so

long, I believe you to be so honourable a man, that I am willing to suppose that you said—what you said—in a moment of madness."

"Madness! It was madness; but it is more sweet to remember than all the other doings of my life," said Saracinesca, his tongue unloosed at last. "If it is madness to love you, I am mad past all cure. There is no healing for me now; I shall never find my senses again, for they are lost in you, and lost for ever. Drive me away, crush me, trample on me if you will; you cannot kill me nor kill my madness, for I live in you and for you, and I cannot die. That is all. I am not eloquent as other men are, to use smooth words and twist phrases. I love you——"

"You have said too much already—too much, far too much," murmured Corona, in broken tones. She had withdrawn her hand from his during his passionate speech, and stood back from him against the dark wall of green plants, her head drooping upon her breast, her fingers clasped fast together. His short rude words were terribly sweet to hear; it was fearful to think that she was alone with him, that one step would bring her to his side, that with one passionate impulse she might throw her white arms about his neck, that one faltering sigh of overwhelming love might bring her queenly head down upon his shoulder. Ah, God! how gladly she would let her tears flow and speak for her! how unutterably sweet it would be to rest for one instant in his arms, to love and be loved as she longed to be!

"You are so cold," he cried, passionately. "You cannot understand. All spoken words are not too much, are not enough to move you, to make you see that I do really worship and adore you; you, the whole of you—your glorious face, your sweet small hands, your queenly ways, the light of your eyes, and the words of your lips—all of you, body and soul, I love. I would I might die now, for you know it, even if you will not understand——"

He moved a step nearer to her, stretching out his hands

as he spoke. Corona trembled convulsively, and her lips turned white in the torture of temptation; she leaned far back against the green leaves, staring wildly at Giovanni, held as in a vice by the mighty passions of love and fear. Having yielded her ears to his words, they fascinated her horribly. He, poor man, had long lost all control of himself. His resolutions, long pondered in the solitude of Saracinesca, had vanished like unsubstantial vapours before a strong fire, and his heart and soul were ablaze.

"Do not look at me so," he said almost tenderly. "Do not look at me as though you feared me, as though you hated me. Can you not see that it is I who fear you as well as love you, who tremble at your coldness, who watch for your slightest kind look? Ah, Corona, you have made me so happy!—there is no angel in all heaven but would give up his Paradise to change for mine!"

He had taken her hand and pressed it wildly to his lips. Her eyelids drooped, and her head fell back for one moment. They stood so very near that his arm had almost stolen about her slender waist, he almost thought he was supporting her.

Suddenly, without the least warning, she drew herself up to her full height, and thrust Giovanni back to her arm's length, strongly, almost roughly.

"Never!" she said. "I am a weak woman, but not so weak as that. I am miserable, but not so miserable as to listen to you. Giovanni Saracinesca, you say you love me—God grant it is not true! but you say it. Then, have you no honour, no courage, no strength? Is there nothing of the man left in you? Is there no truth in your love, no generosity in your heart? If you so love me as you say you do, do you care so little what becomes of me as to tempt me to love you?"

She spoke very earnestly, not scornfully nor angrily, but in the certainty of strength and right, and in the strong persuasion that the headstrong man would hear and be convinced. She was weak no longer, for one desperate moment her fate had trembled in the balance, but she had

not hesitated even then; she had struggled bravely, and her brave soul had won the great battle. She had been weak the other day at the theatre, in letting herself ask the question to which she knew the answer; she had been miserably weak that very night in so abandoning herself to the influence she loved and dreaded; but at the great moment, when heaven and earth swam before her as in a wild and unreal mirage, with the voice of the man she loved ringing in her ears, speaking such words as it was an ecstasy to hear, she had been no longer weak—the reality of danger had brought forth the sincerity of her goodness, and her heart had found courage to do a great deed. She had overcome, and she knew it.

Giovanni stood back from her, and hung his head. In a moment the force of his passion was checked, and from the supreme verge of unspeakable and rapturous delight, he was cast suddenly into the depths of his own remorse. He stood silent before her, trembling and awestruck.

"You cannot understand me," she said, "I do not understand myself. But this I know, that you are not what you have seemed to-night—that there is enough manliness and nobility in you to respect a woman, and that you will hereafter prove that I am right. I pray that I may not see you any more; but if I must see you, I will trust you thus much—say that I may trust you," she added, her strong smooth voice sinking in a trembling cadence, half beseeching, and yet wholly commanding.

Saracinesca bent his heavy brows, and was silent for a moment. Then he looked up, and his eyes met hers, and seemed to gather strength from her.

"If you will let me see you sometimes, you may trust me. I would I were as noble and good as you—I am not. I will try to be. Ah, Corona!" he cried suddenly, "forgive me, forgive me! I hardly knew what I said."

"Hush!" said the Duchessa, gently; "you must not speak like that, nor call me Corona. Perhaps I am wrong to forgive you wholly, but I believe in you. I believe you will understand, and that you will be worthy of the trust I place in you."

"Indeed, Duchessa, none shall say that they have trusted me in vain," answered Giovanni very proudly—"neither man nor woman—and, least of all women, you."

"That is well," said she, with a faint shadow of a smile. "I would rather see you proud than reckless. See that you remain so—that neither by word nor deed you ever remind me that I have had anything to forgive. It is the only way in which any intercourse between us can be possible after this—this dreadful night."

Giovanni bowed his head. He was still pale, but he had regained control of himself.

"I solemnly promise that I will not recall it to your memory, and I implore your forgiveness, even though you cannot forget."

"I cannot forget," said Corona, almost under her breath. Giovanni's eyes flashed for a moment. "Shall we go back to the ball-room? I will go home soon."

As they turned to go, a loud crash, as of broken glass, with the fall of some heavy body, startled them, and made them stand still in the middle of the walk. The noisy concussion was followed by a complete silence. Corona, whose nerves had been severely tried, trembled slightly.

"It is strange," she said; "they say it always happens."

There was nothing to be seen. The thick web of plants hid the cause of the noise from view, whatever it might be. Giovanni hesitated a moment, looking about to see how he could get behind the banks of flower-pots. Then he left Corona without a word, and striding to the end of the walk, disappeared into the depths of the conservatory. He had noticed that there was a narrow entrance at the end nearest the fountain, intended probably to admit the gardener for the purpose of watering the plants. Corona could hear his quick steps; she thought she heard a low groan and a voice whispering,—but she might have been mistaken, for the place was large, and her heart was beating fast.

Giovanni had not gone far in the narrow way, which was sufficiently lighted by the soft light of the many

candles concealed in various parts of the conservatory, when he came upon the figure of a man sitting, as he had apparently fallen, across the small passage. The fragments of a heavy earthenware vase lay beyond him, with a heap of earth and roots; and the tall india-rubber plant which grew in it had fallen against the sloping glass roof and shattered several panes. As Giovanni came suddenly upon him, the man struggled to rise, and in the dim light Saracinesca recognised Del Ferice. The truth flashed upon him at once. The fellow had been listening, and had probably heard all. Giovanni instantly resolved to conceal the fact from the Duchessa, to whom the knowledge that the painful scene had been overheard would be a bitter mortification. Giovanni could undertake to silence the eavesdropper.

Quick as thought his strong brown hands gripped the throat of Ugo del Ferice, stifling his breath like a collar of iron.

"Dog!" he whispered fiercely in the wretch's ear, "if you breathe, I will kill you now! You will find me in my own house in an hour. Be silent now!" Giovanni whispered, with such a terrible grip on the fellow's throat that his eyeballs seemed starting from his head. Then he turned and went out by the way he had entered, leaving Del Ferice writhing with pain and gasping for breath. As he joined Corona, his face betrayed no emotion—he had been so pale before that he could not turn whiter in his anger—but his eyes gleamed fiercely at the thought of fight. The Duchessa stood where he had left her, still much agitated.

"It is nothing," said Giovanni, with a forced laugh, as he offered her his arm and led her quickly away. "Imagine. A great vase with one of Frangipani's favourite plants in it had been badly propped, and had fallen right through the glass, outward."

"It is strange," said Corona. "I was almost sure I heard a groan."

"It was the wind. The glass was broken, and it is a stormy night."

"That was just the way that window fell in five years ago," said Corona. "Something always happens here. I think I will go home—let us find my husband."

No one would have guessed, from Corona's face, that anything extraordinary had occurred in the half-hour she had spent in the conservatory. She walked calmly by Giovanni's side, not a trace of excitement on her pale proud face, not a sign of uneasiness in the quiet glance of her splendid eyes. She had conquered, and she knew it, never to be tempted again; she had conquered herself and she had overcome the man beside her. Giovanni glanced at her in wondering admiration.

"You are the bravest woman in the world, as I am the most contemptible of men," he said suddenly, as they entered the picture-gallery.

"I am not brave," she answered calmly, "neither are you contemptible, my friend. We have both been very near to our destruction, but it has pleased God to save us."

"By you," said Saracinesca, very solemnly. He knew that within six hours he might be lying dead upon some plot of wet grass without the city, and he grew very grave, after the manner of brave men when death is abroad.

"You have saved my soul to-night," he said earnestly. "Will you give me your blessing and whole forgiveness? Do not laugh at me, nor think me foolish. The blessing of such women as you should make men braver and better."

The gallery was again deserted. The cotillon had begun, and those who were not dancing were at supper. Corona stood still for one moment by the very chair where they had sat so long.

"I forgive you wholly. I pray that all blessings may be upon you always, in life and in death, for ever."

Giovanni bowed his head reverently. It seemed as though the woman he so loved was speaking a benediction upon his death, a last *in pace* which should follow him for all eternity.

"In life and in death, I will honour you truly and serve you faithfully for ever," he answered. As he raised his head, Corona saw that there were tears in his eyes, and she felt that there were tears in her own.

"Come," she said, and they passed on in silence.

She found her husband at last in the supper-room. He was leisurely discussing the wing of a chicken and a small glass of claret-and-water, with a gouty ambassador whose wife had insisted upon dancing the cotillon, and who was revenging himself upon a Strasbourg *pâté* and a bottle of dry champagne.

"Ah, my dear," said Astrardente, looking up from his modest fare, "you have been dancing? You have come to supper? You are very wise. I have danced a great deal myself, but I have not seen you—the room was so crowded. Here—this small table will hold us all, just a quartet."

"Thanks—I am not hungry. Will you take me home when you have finished supper? Or are you going to stay? Do not wait, Don Giovanni; I know you are busy in the cotillon. My husband will take care of me. Good night."

Giovanni bowed, and went away, glad to be alone at last. He had to be at home in half an hour according to his engagement, and he had to look about him for a friend. All Rome was at the ball; but the men upon whom he could call for such service as he required, were all dancing. Moreover, he reflected that in such a matter it was necessary to have some one especially trustworthy. It would not do to have the real cause of the duel known, and the choice of a second was a very important matter. He never doubted that Del Ferice would send some one with a challenge at the appointed time. Del Ferice was a scoundrel, doubtless; but he was quick with the foils, and had often appeared as second in affairs of honour.

Giovanni stood by the door of the ball-room, looking at the many familiar faces, and wondering how he could induce any one to leave his partner at that hour, and go

home with him. Suddenly he was aware that his father was standing beside him and eyeing him curiously.

"What is the matter, Giovannino?" inquired the old Prince. "Why are you not dancing?"

"The fact is——" began Giovanni, and then stopped suddenly. An idea struck him. He went close to his father, and spoke in a low voice.

"The fact is, that I have just taken a man by the throat and otherwise insulted him, by calling him a dog. The fellow seemed annoyed, and so I told him he might send to our house in an hour for an explanation. I cannot find a friend, because everybody is dancing this abominable cotillon. Perhaps you can help me," he added, looking at his father rather doubtfully. To his surprise and considerable relief the old Prince burst into a hearty laugh.

"Of course," he cried. "What do you take me for? Do you think I would desert my boy in a fight? Go and call my carriage, and wait for me while I pick up somebody for a witness; we can talk on the way home."

The old Prince had been a duellist in his day, and he would no more have thought of advising his son not to fight than of refusing a challenge himself. He was, moreover, exceedingly bored at the ball, and not in the least sleepy. The prospect of an exciting night was novel and delightful. He knew Giovanni's extraordinary skill, and feared nothing for him. He knew everybody in the ball-room was engaged, and he went straight to the supper-table, expecting to find some one there. Astrardente, the Duchess, and the gouty ambassador were still together, as Giovanni had left them a moment before. The Prince did not like Astrardente, but he knew the ambassador very well. He called him aside, with an apology to the Duchess.

"I want a young man immediately," said old Saracinesca, stroking his white beard with his broad brown hand. "Can you tell of any one who is not dancing?"

"There is Astrardente," answered his Excellency, with an ironical smile. "A duel?" he asked.

Saracinesca nodded.

"I am too old," said the diplomatist, thoughtfully; "but it would be infinitely amusing. I cannot give you one of my secretaries either. It always makes such a scandal. Oh, there goes the very man! Catch him before it is too late!"

Old Saracinesca glanced in the direction the ambassador indicated, and darted away. He was as active as a boy, in spite of his sixty years.

"Eh!" he cried. "Hi! you! Come here! Spicca! Stop! Excuse me—I am in a great hurry!"

Count Spicca, whom he thus addressed, paused and looked round through his single eyeglass in some surprise. He was an immensely tall and cadaverous-looking man, with a black beard and searching grey eyes.

"I really beg your pardon," said the Prince hurriedly, in a low voice, as he came up, "but I am in a great hurry—an affair of honour—will you be witness? My carriage is at the door."

"With pleasure," said Count Spicca, quietly; and without further comment he accompanied the Prince to the outer hall. Giovanni was waiting, and the Prince's footman stood at the head of the stairs. In three minutes the father and son and the melancholy Spicca were seated in the carriage, on their way to the Palazzo Saracinesca.

"Now then, Giovannino," said the Prince, as he lit a cigarette in the darkness, "tell us all about it."

"There is not much to tell," said Giovanni. "If the challenge arrives, there is nothing to be done but to fight. I took him by the throat and nearly strangled him."

"Whom?" asked Spicca, mournfully.

"Oh! it is Del Ferice," answered Giovanni, who had forgotten that he had not mentioned the name of his probable antagonist. The Prince laughed.

"Del Ferice! Who would have thought it? He is a dead man. What was it all about?"

"That is unnecessary to say here," said Giovanni, quietly. "He insulted me grossly. I half-strangled

him, and told him he was a dog. I suppose he will fight."

"Ah yes; he will probably fight," repeated Spicca, thoughtfully. "What are your weapons, Don Giovanni?" "Anything he likes."

"But the choice is yours if he challenges," returned the Count.

"As you please. Arrange all that—foils, swords, or pistols."

"You do not seem to take much interest in this affair," remarked Spicca, sadly.

"He is best with foils," said the old Prince.

"Foils or pistols, of course," said the Count. "Swords are child's play."

Satisfied that his seconds meant business, Giovanni sank back in his corner of the carriage, and was silent.

"We had better have the meeting in my villa," said his father. "If it rains, they can fight indoors. I will send for the surgeon at once."

In a few moments they reached the Palazzo Saracinesca. The Prince left word at the porter's lodge that any gentlemen who arrived were to be admitted, and all three went up-stairs. It was half-past two o'clock.

As they entered the apartments, they heard a carriage drive under the great archway below.

"Go to your rooms, Giovannino," said the old Prince. "These fellows are punctual. I will call you when they are gone. I suppose you mean business seriously?"

"I care nothing about him. I will give him any satisfaction he pleases," answered Giovanni. "It is very kind of you to undertake the matter—I am very grateful."

"I would not leave it to anybody else," muttered the old Prince, as he hurried away to meet Del Ferice's seconds.

Giovanni entered his own rooms, and went straight to his writing-table. He took a pen and a sheet of paper and began writing. His face was very grave, but his

hand was steady. For more than an hour he wrote without pausing. Then his father entered the room.

"Well?" said Giovanni, looking up.

"It is all settled," said the old gentleman, seriously. "I was afraid they might make some objection to me as a second. You know there is an old clause about near relations acting in such cases. But they declared that they considered my co-operation an honour—so that is all right. You must do your best, my boy. This rascal means to hurt you if he can. Seven o'clock is the time. We must leave here at half-past six. You can sleep two hours and a half. I will sit up and call you. Spicca has gone home to change his clothes, and is coming back immediately. Now lie down. I will see to your foils——"

"Is it foils, then?" asked Giovanni, quietly.

"Yes. They made no objection. You had better lie down."

"I will. Father, if anything should happen to me—it may, you know—you will find my keys in this drawer, and this letter, which I beg you will read. It is to yourself."

"Nonsense, my dear boy! Nothing will happen to you—you will just run him through the arm and come home to breakfast."

The old Prince spoke in his rough cheerful way; but his voice trembled, and he turned aside to hide two great tears that had fallen upon his dark cheeks and were losing themselves in his white beard.

CHAPTER XII.

Giovanni slept soundly for two hours. He was very tired with the many emotions of the night, and the arrangements for the meeting being completed, it seemed as though work were over and the pressure removed. It