

Giovanni did not answer.

"Of course, duelling is a great sin, and is strictly forbidden by our religion," said the Prince suddenly. "But then——"

"Precisely," returned Giovanni. "We nevertheless cannot always help ourselves."

"I was going to say," continued his father, "that it is, of course, very wicked, and if one is killed in a duel, one probably goes straight into hell. But then—it was worth something to see how you sent that fellow's foil flying through the window!"

"It is a very simple trick. If you will take a foil, I will teach it to you."

"Presently, presently; when you have finished your breakfast. Tell me, why did you say, 'more broken glass'?"

Giovanni bit his lip, remembering his imprudence.

"I hardly know. I believe it suggested something to my mind. One says all sorts of foolish things in moments of excitement."

"It struck me as a very odd remark," answered the Prince, still walking about. "By the bye," he added, pausing before the writing-table, "here is that letter you wrote for me. Do you want me to read it?"

"No," said Giovanni, with a laugh. "It is of no use now. It would seem absurd, since I am alive and well. It was only a word of farewell."

The Prince laughed too, and threw the sealed letter into the fire.

"The last of the Saracinesca is not dead yet," he said. "Giovanni, what are we to say to the gossips? All Rome will be ringing with this affair before night. Of course, you must stay at home for a few days, or you will catch cold in your arm. I will go out and carry the news of our victory."

"Better to say nothing about it—better to refer people to Del Ferice, and tell them he challenged me. Come in!" cried Giovanni, in answer to a knock at the door. Pasquale, the old butler, entered the room.

"The Duca d'Astrardente has sent to inquire after the health of his Excellency Don Giovanni," said the old man, respectfully.

The elder Saracinesca paused in his walk, and broke out into a loud laugh.

"Already! You see, Giovannino," he said. "Tell him, Pasquale, that Don Giovanni caught a severe cold at the ball last night—or no—wait! What shall we say, Giovannino?"

"Tell the servant," said Giovanni, sternly, "that I am much obliged for the kind inquiry, that I am perfectly well, and that you have just seen me eating my breakfast."

Pasquale bowed and left the room.

"I suppose you do not want her to know——" said the Prince, who had suddenly recovered his gravity.

Giovanni bowed his head silently.

"Quite right, my boy," said the old man, gravely. "I do not want to know anything about it either. How the devil could they have found out?"

The question was addressed more to himself than to his son, and the latter volunteered no answer. He was grateful to his father for his considerate silence.

CHAPTER XIII.

When Astrardente saw the elder Saracinesca's face during his short interview with the diplomatist, his curiosity was immediately aroused. He perceived that there was something the matter, and he proceeded to try and ascertain the circumstances from his acquaintance. The ambassador returned to his *pâté* and his champagne with an air of amused interest, but vouchsafed no information whatever.

"What a singularly amusing fellow old Saracinesca is!" remarked Astrardente.

"When he likes to be," returned his Excellency, with his mouth full.

"On the contrary—when he least meditates it. I never knew a man better suited for a successful caricature. Indeed he is not a bad caricature of his own son, or his own son of him—I am not sure which."

The ambassador laughed a little and took a large mouthful.

"Ha! ha! very good," he mumbled as he ate. "He would appreciate that. He loves his own race. He would rather feel that he is a comic misrepresentation of the most hideous Saracinesca who ever lived, than possess all the beauty of the Astrardente and be called by another name."

The diplomatist paused for a second after this speech, and then bowed a little to the Duchessa; but the hit had touched her husband in a sensitive spot. The old dandy had been handsome once, in a certain way, and he did his best, by artificial means, to preserve some trace of his good looks. The Duchessa smiled faintly.

"I would wager," said Astrardente, sourly, "that his excited manner just now was due to one of two things—either his vanity or his money is in danger. As for the way he yelled after Spicca, it looked as though there were a duel in the air—fancy the old fellow fighting a duel! Too ridiculous!"

"A duel!" repeated Corona in a low voice.

"I do not see anything so very ridiculous in it," said the diplomatist, slowly twisting his glass of champagne in his fingers, and then sipping it. "Besides," he added deliberately, glancing at the Duchessa from the corner of his eyes, "he has a son."

Corona started very slightly.

"Why should there be a duel?" she asked.

"It was your husband who suggested the idea," returned the diplomatist.

"But you said there was nothing ridiculous in it," objected the Duchessa.

"But I did not say there was any truth in it, either," answered his Excellency with a reassuring smile. "What made you think of duelling?" he asked, turning to Astrardente.

"Spicca," said the latter. "Wherever Spicca is concerned there is a duel. He is a terrible fellow, with his death's-head and dangling bones—one of those extraordinary phenomena—bah! it makes one shiver to think of him!" The old fellow made the sign of the horns with his forefinger and little finger, hiding his thumb in the palm of his hand, as though to protect himself against the evil eye—the sinister influence invoked by the mention of Spicca. Old Astrardente was very superstitious. The ambassador laughed, and even Corona smiled a little.

"Yes," said the diplomatist, "Spicca is a living *memento mori*; he occasionally reminds men of death by killing them."

"How horrible!" exclaimed Corona.

"Ah, my dear lady, the world is full of horrible things."

"That is not a reason for making jests of them."

"It is better to make light of the inevitable," said Astrardente. "Are you ready to go home, my dear?"

"Quite—I was only waiting for you," answered Corona, who longed to be at home and alone.

"Let me know the result of old Saracinesca's warlike undertakings," said Astrardente, with a cunning smile on his painted face. "Of course, as he consulted you, he will send you word in the morning."

"You seem so anxious that there should be a duel, that I should almost be tempted to invent an account of one, lest you should be too grievously disappointed," returned the diplomatist.

"You know very well that no invention will be necessary," said the Duca, pressing him, for his curiosity was roused.

"Well—as you please to consider it. Good night," replied the ambassador. It had amused him to annoy Astrardente a little, and he left him with the pleasant

consciousness of having excited the inquisitive faculty of his friend to its highest pitch, without giving it anything to feed upon.

Men who have to do with men, rather than with things, frequently take a profound and seemingly cruel delight in playing upon the feelings and petty vanities of their fellow-creatures. The habit is as strong with them as the constant practice of conjuring becomes with a juggler; even when he is not performing, he will for hours pass coins, perform little tricks of sleight-of-hand with cards, or toss balls in the air in marvellously rapid succession, unable to lay aside his profession even for a day, because it has grown to be the only natural expression of his faculties. With men whose business it is to understand other men, it is the same. They cannot be in a man's company for a quarter of an hour without attempting to discover the peculiar weaknesses of his character—his vanities, his tastes, his vices, his curiosity, his love of money or of reputation; so that the operation of such men's minds may be compared to the process of auscultation—for their ears are always upon their neighbours' hearts—and their conversation to the percussions of a physician to ascertain the seat of disease in a pair of consumptive lungs.

But, with all his failings, Astrardente was a man of considerable acuteness of moral vision. He had made a shrewd guess at Saracinesca's business, and had further gathered from a remark dropped by his diplomatic friend, that if there was to be a duel at all, it would be fought by Giovanni. As a matter of fact, the ambassador himself knew nothing certainly concerning the matter, or it is possible that, for the sake of observing the effect of the news upon the Duchessa, he would have told the whole truth; for he had of course heard the current gossip concerning Giovanni's passion for her, and the experiment would have been too attractive and interesting to be missed. As it was, she had started at the mention of Saracinesca's son. The diplomatist only did what every

one else who came near Corona attempted to do at that time, in endeavouring to ascertain whether she herself entertained any feeling for the man whom the gossips had set down as her most devoted admirer.

Poor Duchessa! It was no wonder that she had started at the idea that Giovanni was in trouble. He had played a great part in her life that day, and she could not forget him. She had hardly as yet had time to think of what she felt, for it was only by a supreme effort that she had been able to bear the great strain upon her strength. If she had not loved him, it would have been different; and in the strange medley of emotions through which she was passing, she wished that she might never have loved—that, loving, she might be allowed wholly to forget her love, and to return by some sudden miracle to that cold dreamy state of indifference to all other men, and of unflinching thoughtfulness for her husband, from which she had been so cruelly awakened. She would have given anything to have not loved, now that the great struggle was over; but until the supreme moment had come, she had not been willing to put the dangerous thought from her, saving in those hours of prayer and solitary suffering, when the whole truth rose up clearly before her in its undisguised nakedness. So soon as she had gone into the world, she had recklessly longed for Giovanni Saracinesca's presence.

But now it was all changed. She had not deceived herself when she had told him that she would rather not see him any more. It was true; not only did she wish not to see him, but she earnestly desired that the love of him might pass from her heart. With a sudden longing, her thoughts went back to the old convent-life of her girlhood, with its regular occupations, its constant religious exercises, its narrowness of view, and its unchanging simplicity. What mattered narrowness, when all beyond that close limitation was filled with evil? Was it not better that the lips should be busy with singing litanies than that the heart should be tormented by

temptation? Were not those simple tasks, that had seemed so all-important then, more sweet in the performance than the manifold duties of this complicated social existence, this vast web and woof of life's loom, this great machinery that worked and groaned and rolled endlessly upon its wheels without producing any more result than the ceaseless turning of a prison treadmill? But there was no way out of life now; there was no escape, as there was also no prospect of relief, from care and anxiety. There was no reason why Giovanni should go away—no reason either why Corona should ever love him less. She belonged to a class of women, if there are enough of them to be called a class, who, where love is concerned, can feel but one impression, which becomes in their hearts the distinctive seal and mark of their lives, for good or for evil. Corona was indeed so loyal and good a woman, that the strong pressure of her love could not abase her nobility, nor put untruth where all was so true; but the sign of her love for Giovanni was upon her for ever. The vacant place in her heart had been filled, and filled wholly; the bulwark she had reared against the love of man was broken down and swept away, and the waters flowed softly over its place and remembered it not. She would never be the same woman again, and it was bitter to her to feel it: for ever the face of Giovanni would haunt her waking hours and visit her dreams unbidden,—a perpetual reproach to her, a perpetual memory of the most desperate struggle of her life, and more than a memory—the undying present of an unchanging love.

She was quite sure of herself in future, as she also trusted sincerely in Giovanni's promise. There should be no moment of weakness, no word should ever fall from her lips to tempt him to a fresh outbreak of passionate words and acts; her life should be measured in the future by the account of the dangers past, and there should be no instant of unguarded conduct, no hour wherein even to herself she would say it was sweet to love and to be loved. It

was indeed not sweet, but bitter as death itself, to feel that weight at her heart, that constant toiling effort in her mind to keep down the passion in her breast. But Corona had sacrificed much; she would sacrifice this also; she would get strength by her prayers and courage from her high pride, and she would smile to all the world as she had never smiled before. She could trust herself, for she was doing the right and trampling upon the wrong. But the suffering would be none the less for all her pride; there was no concealing it—it would be horrible. To meet him daily in the world, to speak to him and to hear his voice, perhaps to touch his hand, and all the while to smile coldly, and to be still and for ever above suspicion, while her own burning consciousness accused her of the past, and seemed to make the dangers of mere living yawn beside her path at every step,—all this would be terrible to bear, but by God's help she would bear it to the end.

But now a new horror seized her, and terrified her beyond measure. This rumour of a duel—a mere word dropped carelessly in conversation by a thoughtless acquaintance—called up to her sudden visions of evil to come. Surely, howsoever she might struggle against love and beat it roughly to silence in her breast, it was not wrong to fear danger for Giovanni,—it could not be a sin to dread the issue of peril when it was all so very near to her. It might perhaps not be true, for people in the world are willing to amuse their empty minds with empty tales, acknowledging the emptiness. It could not be true; she had seen Giovanni but a moment before—he would have given some hint, some sign.

Why—after all? Was it not the boast of such men that they could face the world and wear an indifferent look, at times of the greatest anxiety and danger? But, again, if Giovanni had been involved in a quarrel so serious as to require the arbitrament of blood, some rumour of it would have reached her. She had talked with many men that night, and with some women—gossips all, whose tongues wagged merrily over the troubles

of friend or foe, and who would have battered upon anything so novel as a society duel, as a herd of jackals upon the dead body of one of their fellows, to make their feast off it with a light heart. Some one of all these would have told her; the quarrel would have been common property in half an hour, for somebody must have witnessed it.

It was a consolation to Corona to reflect upon the extreme improbability of the story; for when the diplomatist was gone, her husband dwelt upon it—whether because he could not conceal his unsatisfied curiosity, or from other motives, it was hard to tell.

Astrardente led his wife from the supper-table through the great rooms, now almost deserted, and past the wide doors of the hall where the cotillon was at its height. They paused a moment and looked in, as Giovanni had done a quarter of an hour earlier. It was a magnificent scene; the lights flashed back from the jewels of fair women, and surged in the dance as starlight upon rippling waves. The air was heavy with the odour of the countless flowers that filled the deep recesses of the windows, and were distributed in hundreds of nosegays for the figures of the cotillon; enchanting strains of waltz music seemed to float down from above and inspire the crowd of men and women with harmonious motion, so that sound was made visible by translation into graceful movement. As Corona looked there was a pause, and the crowd parted, while a huge tiger, the heraldic beast of the Frangipani family, was drawn into the hall by the young prince and Bianca Valdarno. The magnificent skin had been so artfully stuffed as to convey a startling impression of life, and in the creature's huge jaws hung a great basket filled with tiny tigers, which were to be distributed as badges for the dance by the leaders. A wild burst of applause greeted this novel figure, and every one ran forward to obtain a nearer view.

"Ah!" exclaimed old Astrardente, "I envy them that invention, my dear; it is perfectly magnificent. You must

have a tiger to take home. How fortunate we were to be in time!" He forced his way into the crowd, leaving his wife alone for a moment by the door; and he managed to catch Valdarno, who was distributing the little emblems to right and left. Madame Mayer's quick eyes had caught sight of Corona and her husband, and from some instinct of curiosity she made towards the Duchessa. She was still angry, as she had never been in her short life, at Giovanni's rudeness in forgetting her dance, and she longed to inflict some wound upon the beautiful woman who had led him into such forgetfulness. When Astrardente left his wife's side, Donna Tullia pressed forward with her partner in the general confusion that followed upon the entrance of the tiger, and she managed to pass close to Corona. She looked up suddenly with an air of surprise. "What! not dancing, Duchessa?" she asked. "Has your partner gone home?"

With the look that accompanied the question, it was an insulting speech enough. Had Donna Tullia seen old Astrardente close behind her, she would not have made it. The old dandy was returning in triumph in possession of the little tiger-badge for Corona. He heard the words, and observed with inward pleasure his wife's calm look of indifference.

"Madam," he said, placing himself suddenly in Madame Mayer's way, "my wife's partners do not go home while she remains."

"Oh, I see," returned Donna Tullia, flushing quickly; "the Duchessa is dancing the cotillon with you. I beg your pardon—I had forgotten that you still danced."

"Indeed it is long since I did myself the honour of asking you for a quadrille, madam," answered Astrardente with a polite smile; and so saying, he turned and presented the little tiger to his wife with a courtly bow. There was good blood in the old *roué*.

Corona was touched by his thoughtfulness in wishing to get her the little keepsake of the dance, and she was still more affected by his ready defence of her. He was

indeed sometimes a little ridiculous, with his paint and his artificial smile—he was often petulant and unreasonable in little things; but he was never unkind to her, nor discourteous. In spite of her cold and indifferent stare at Donna Tullia, she had keenly felt the insult, and she was grateful to the old man for taking her part. Knowing what she knew of herself that night, she was deeply sensible to his kindness. She took the little gift, and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Forgive me," she said, as they moved away, "if I am ever ungrateful to you. You are so very good to me. I know no one so courteous and kind as you are."

Her husband looked at her in delight. He loved her sincerely with all that remained of him. There was something sad in the thought of a man like him finding the only real passion of his life when worn out with age and dissipation. Her little speech raised him to the seventh heaven of joy.

"I am the happiest man in all Rome," he said, assuming his most jaunty walk, and swinging his hat gaily between his thumb and finger. But a current of deep thought was stirring in him as he went down the broad staircase by his wife's side. He was thinking what life might have been to him had he found Corona del Carmine—how could he? she was not born then—had he found her, or her counterpart, thirty years ago. He was wondering what conceivable sacrifice there could be which he would not make to regain his youth—even to have his life lived out and behind him, if he could only have looked back to thirty years of marriage with Corona. How differently he would have lived, how very differently he would have thought! how his whole memory would be full of the sweet past, and would be common with her own past life, which, to her too, would be sweet to ponder on! He would have been such a good man—so true to her in all those years! But they were gone, and he had not found her until his foot was on the edge of the grave—until he could hardly count on one year more of a pitiful

artificial life, painted, bewigged, stuffed to the semblance of a man by a clever tailor—and she in the bloom of her glory beside him! What he would have given to have old Saracinesca's strength and fresh vitality—old Saracinesca whom he hated! Yes, with all that hair—it was white, but a little dye would change it. What was a little dye compared with the profound artificiality of his own outer man? How the old fellow's deep voice rang, loud and clear, from his broad chest! How strong he was, with his firm step, and his broad brown hands, and his fiery black eyes! He hated him for the greenness of his age—he hated him for his stalwart son, another of those long-lived fierce Saracinesca, who seemed destined to outlive time. He himself had no children, no relations, no one to bear his name—he had only a beautiful young wife and much wealth, with just enough strength left to affect a gay walk when he was with her, and to totter unsteadily to his couch when he was alone, worn out with the effort of trying to seem young.

As they sat in their carriage he thought bitterly of all these things, and never spoke. Corona herself was weary, and glad to be silent. They went up-stairs, and as she took his arm, she gently tried to help him rather than be helped. He noticed it, and made an effort, but he was very tired. He paused upon the landing, and looked at her, and a gentle and sad smile stole over his face, such as Corona had never seen there.

"Shall we go into your boudoir for ten minutes, my love?" he said; "or will you come into my smoking-room? I would like to smoke a little before going to bed."

"You may smoke in my boudoir, of course," she answered kindly, though she was surprised at the request. It was half-past three o'clock. They went into the softly lighted little room, where the embers of the fire were still glowing upon the hearth. Corona dropped her furs upon a chair, and sat down upon one side of the chimneypiece. Astrardente sank wearily into a deep easy-chair opposite

her, and having found a cigarette, lighted it, and began to smoke. He seemed in a mood which Corona had never seen. After a short silence he spoke.

"Corona," he said, "I love you." His wife looked up with a gentle smile, and in her determination to be loyal to him she almost forgot that other man who had said those words but two hours before, so differently.

"Yes," he said, with a sigh, "you have heard it before—it is not new to you. I think you believe it. You are good, but you do not love me—no, do not interrupt me, my dear; I know what you would say. How should you love me? I am an old man—very old, older than my years." Again he sighed, more bitterly, as he confessed what he had never owned before. The Duchessa was too much astonished to answer him.

"Corona," he said again, "I shall not live much longer."

"Ah, do not speak like that," she cried suddenly. "I trust and pray that you have yet many years to live." Her husband looked keenly at her.

"You are so good," he answered, "that you are really capable of uttering such a prayer, absurd as it would seem."

"Why absurd? It is unkind of you to say it——"

"No, my dear; I know the world very well. That is all. I suppose it is impossible for me to make you understand how I love you. It must seem incredible to you, in the magnificence of your strength and beautiful youth, that a man like me—an artificial man—he laughed scornfully—"a creature of paint and dye—let me be honest—a creature with a wig, should be capable of a mad passion. And yet, Corona," he added, his thin cracked voice trembling with a real emotion, "I do love you—very dearly. There are two things that make my life bitter: the regret that I did not meet you, that you were not born, when I was young; and worse than that, the knowledge that I must leave you very soon—I, the exhausted dandy, the shadow of what I was, tottering to my grave in a last vain effort to be young for your sake

—for your sake, Corona dear. Ah, it is contemptible!" he almost moaned.

Corona hid her eyes in her hand. She was taken off her guard by his strange speech.

"Oh, do not speak like that—do not!" she cried. "You make me very unhappy. Do I reproach you? Do I ever make you feel that you are—older than I? I will lead a new life; you shall never think of it again. You are too kind—too good for me."

"No one ever said I was too good before," replied the old man with a shade of sadness. "I am glad the one person who finds me good, should be the only one for whose sake I ever cultivated goodness. I could have been different, Corona, if I had had you for my wife for thirty years, instead of five. But it is too late now. Before long I shall be dead, and you will be free."

"What makes you say such things to me?" asked Corona. "Can you think I am so vile, so ungrateful, so unloving, as to wish your death?"

"Not unloving; no, my dear child. But not loving, either. I do not ask impossibilities. You will mourn for me a while—my poor soul will rest in peace if you feel one moment of real regret for me, for your old husband, before you take another. Do not cry, Corona, dearest; it is the way of the world. We waste our youth in scoffing at reality, and in the unrealness of our old age the present no longer avails us much. You know me, perhaps you despise me. You would not have scorned me when I was young—oh, how young I was! how strong and vain of my youth, thirty years ago!"

"Indeed, indeed, no such thought ever crossed my mind. I give you all I have," cried Corona, in great distress; "I will give you more—I will devote my whole life to you——"

"You do, my dear. I am sensible of it," said Astradente, quietly. "You cannot do more, if you will; you cannot make me young again, nor take away the bitterness of death—of a death that leaves you behind."

Corona leaned forward, staring into the dying embers of the fire, one hand supporting her chin. The tears stood in her eyes and on her cheeks. The old dandy in his genuine misery had excited her compassion.

"I would mourn you long," she said. "You may have wasted your life; you say so. I would love you more if I could, God knows. You have always been to me a courteous gentleman and a faithful husband."

The old man rose with difficulty from his deep chair, and came and stood by her, and took the hand that lay idle on her knees. She looked up at him.

"If I thought my blessing were worth anything, I would bless you for what you say. But I would not have you waste your youth. Youth is that which, being wasted, is like water poured out upon the ground. You must marry again, and marry soon—do not start. You will inherit all my fortune; you will have my title. It must descend to your children. It has come to an unworthy end in me; it must be revived in you."

"How can you think of it? Are you ill?" asked Corona kindly, pressing gently his thin hand in hers. "Why do you dwell on the idea of death to-night?"

"I am ill; yes, past all cure, my dear," said the old man, gently raising her hand to his lips, and kissing it.

"What do you mean?" asked Corona, suddenly rising to her feet and laying her hand affectionately upon his shoulder. "Why have you never told me?"

"Why should I tell you—except that it is near, and you must be prepared? Why should I burden you with anxiety? But you were so gentle and kind to-night, upon the stairs," he said, with some hesitation, "that I thought perhaps it would be a relief to you to know—to know that it is not for long."

There was something so gentle in his tone, so infinitely pathetic in his thought that possibly he might lighten the burden his wife bore so bravely, there was something at last so human in the loving regret with which he spoke, that Corona forgot all his foolish ways, his wig and his

false teeth and his petty vanities, and letting her head fall upon his shoulder, burst into passionate tears.

"Oh no, no!" she sobbed. "It must be a long time yet; you must not die!"

"It may be a year, not more," he said gently. "God bless you for those tears, Corona—the tears you have shed for me. Good night, my dearest."

He let her sink upon her chair, and his hand rested for one moment upon her raven hair. Then with a last remnant of energy he quickly left the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

Such affairs as the encounter between Giovanni and Del Ferice were very rare in Rome. There were many duels fought; but, as a general rule, they were not very serious, and the first slight wound decided the matter in hand to the satisfaction of both parties. But here there had been a fight for life and death. One of the combatants had received two such wounds as would have been sufficient to terminate an ordinary meeting, and the other was lying at death's door stabbed through the throat. Society was frantic with excitement. Giovanni was visited by scores of acquaintances, whom he allowed to be admitted, and he talked with them cheerfully, in order to have it thoroughly known that he was not badly hurt. Del Ferice's lodging was besieged by the same young gentlemen of leisure, who went directly from one to the other, anxious to get all the news in their power. But Del Ferice's door was guarded jealously from intruders by his faithful Neapolitan servant—a fellow who knew more about his master than all the rest of Rome together, but who had such a dazzlingly brilliant talent for lying as to make him a safe repository for any secret committed to his keeping. On the present occasion, however, he had small use for duplicity. He