

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

sat all day long by the open door, for he had removed the bell-handle, lest the ringing should disturb his master. He had a basket into which he dropped the cards of the visitors who called, answering each inquiry with the same unchanging words:

"He is very ill, the signorino. Do not make any noise."

"Where is he hurt?" the visitor would ask. Whereupon Temistocle pointed to his throat.

"Will he live?" was the next question; to which the man answered by raising his shoulders to his ears, elevating his eyebrows, and at the same time shutting his eyes, while he spread out the palms of his hands over his basket of cards—whereby he meant to signify that he did not know, but doubted greatly. It being impossible to extract any further information from him, the visitor had nothing left but to leave his card and turn away. Within, the wounded man was watched by a Sister of Mercy. The surgeon had pronounced his recovery probable if he had proper care: the wound was a dangerous one, but not likely to prove mortal unless the patient died of the fever or of exhaustion.

The young gentlemen of leisure who thus obtained the news of the two duellists, lost no time in carrying it from house to house. Giovanni himself sent twice in the course of the day to inquire after his antagonist, and received by his servant the answer which was given to everybody. By the time the early winter night was descending upon Rome, there were two perfectly well-authenticated stories circulated in regard to the cause of the quarrel—neither of which, of course, contained a grain of truth. In the first place, it was confidently asserted by one party, represented by Valdarno and his set, that Giovanni had taken offence at Del Ferice for having proposed to call him to be examined before the Duchessa d'Astrardente in regard to his absence from town: that this was a palpable excuse for picking a quarrel, because it was well known that Saracinesca loved the Astrardente, and that Del Ferice was always in his way.

"Giovanni is a rough fellow," remarked Valdarno, "and will not stand any opposition, so he took the first opportunity of getting the man out of the way. Do you see? The old story—jealous of the wrong man. Can one be jealous of Del Ferice? Bah!"

"And who would have been the right man to attack?" was asked.

"Her husband, of course," returned Valdarno with a sneer. "That angel of beauty has the ineffably eccentric idea that she loves that old transparency, that old magic-lantern slide of a man!"

On the other hand, there was a party of people who affirmed, as beyond all doubt, that the duel had been brought about by Giovanni's forgetting his dance with Donna Tullia. Del Ferice was naturally willing to put himself forward in her defence, reckoning on the favour he would gain in her eyes. He had spoken sharply to Giovanni about it, and told him he had behaved in an ungentlemanly manner—whereupon Giovanni had answered that it was none of his business; an altercation had ensued in a remote room in the Frangipani palace, and Giovanni had lost his temper and taken Del Ferice by the throat, and otherwise greatly insulted him. The result had been the duel in which Del Ferice had been nearly killed. There was a show of truth about this story, and it was told in such a manner as to make Del Ferice appear as the injured party. Indeed, whichever tale were true, there was no doubt that the two men had disliked each other for a long time, and that they were both looking out for the opportunity of an open disagreement.

Old Saracinesca appeared in the afternoon, and was surrounded by eager questioners of all sorts. The fact of his having served his own son in the capacity of second excited general astonishment. Such a thing had not been heard of in the annals of Roman society, and many ancient wisdom-mongers severely censured the course he had pursued. Could anything be more abominably unnatural? Was it possible to conceive of the hard-heart-

edness of a man who could stand quietly and see his son risk his life? Disgraceful!

The old Prince either would not tell what he knew, or had no information to give. The latter theory was improbable. Some one made a remark to that effect.

"But, Prince," the man said, "would you second your own son in an affair without knowing the cause of the quarrel?"

"Sir," returned the old man, proudly, "my son asked my assistance; I did not sell it to him for his confidence." People knew the old man's obstinacy, and had to be satisfied with his short answers, for he was himself as quarrelsome as a Berserker or as one of his own irascible ancestors.

He met Donna Tullia in the street. She stopped her carriage, and beckoned him to come to her. She looked paler than Saracinesca had ever seen her, and was much excited.

"How could you let them fight?" were her first words.

"It could not be helped. The quarrel was too serious. No one would more gladly have prevented it than I; but as my son had so desperately insulted Del Ferice, he was bound to give him satisfaction."

"Satisfaction!" cried Donna Tullia. "Do you call it satisfaction to cut a man's throat? What was the real cause of the quarrel?"

"I do not know."

"Do not tell me that—I do not believe you," answered Donna Tullia, angrily.

"I give you my word of honour that I do not know," returned the Prince.

"That is different. Will you get in and drive with me for a few minutes?"

"At your commands." Saracinesca opened the carriage-door and got in.

"We shall astonish the world; but I do not care," said Donna Tullia. "Tell me, is Don Giovanni seriously hurt?"

"No—a couple of scratches that will heal in a week. Del Ferice is very seriously wounded."

"I know," answered Donna Tullia, sadly. "It is dreadful—I am afraid it was my fault."

"How so?" asked Saracinesca, quickly. He had not heard the story of the forgotten waltz, and was really ignorant of the original cause of disagreement. He guessed, however, that Donna Tullia was not so much concerned in it as the Duchessa d'Astrardente.

"Your son was very rude to me," said Madame Mayer. "Perhaps I ought not to tell you, but it is best you should know. He was engaged to dance with me the last waltz but one before the cotillon. He forgot me, and I found him with that—with a lady—talking quietly."

"With whom did you say?" asked Saracinesca, very gravely.

"With the Astrardente—if you will know," returned Donna Tullia, her anger at the memory of the insult bringing the blood suddenly to her face.

"My dear lady," said the old Prince, "in the name of my son I offer you the humble apologies which he will make in person when he is well enough to ask your forgiveness."

"I do not want apologies," answered Madame Mayer, turning her face away.

"Nevertheless they shall be offered. But, pardon my curiosity, how did Del Ferice come to be concerned in that incident?"

"He was with me when I found Don Giovanni with the Duchessa. It is very simple. I was very angry—I am very angry still; but I would not have had Don Giovanni risk his life on my account for anything, nor poor Del Ferice either. I am horribly upset about it all."

Old Saracinesca wondered whether Donna Tullia's vanity would suffer if he told her that the duel had not been fought for anything which concerned her. But he reflected that her supposition was very plausible, and

that he himself had no evidence. Furthermore, and in spite of his good-natured treatment of Giovanni, he was very angry at the thought that his son had quarrelled about the Duchessa. When Giovanni should be recovered from his wounds he intended to speak his mind to him. But he was sorry for Donna Tullia, for he liked her in spite of her eccentricities, and would have been satisfied to see her married to his son. He was a practical man, and he took a prosaic view of the world. Donna Tullia was rich, and good-looking enough to be called handsome. She had the talent to make herself a sort of centre in her world. She was a little noisy; but noise was fashionable, and there was no harm in her—no one had ever said anything against her. Besides, she was one of the few relations still left to the Saracinesca. The daughter of a cousin of the Prince, she would make a good wife for Giovanni, and would bring sunshine into the house. There was a tinge of vulgarity in her manner; but, like many elderly men of his type, Saracinesca pardoned her this fault in consideration of her noisy good spirits and general good-nature. He was very much annoyed at hearing that his son had offended her so grossly by his forgetfulness; especially it was unfortunate that since she believed herself the cause of the duel, she should have the impression that it had been provoked by Del Ferice to obtain satisfaction for the insult Giovanni had offered her. There would be small chance of making the match contemplated after such an affair.

"I am sincerely sorry," said the Prince, stroking his white beard and trying to get a sight of his companion's face, which she obstinately turned away from him. "Perhaps it is better not to think too much of the matter until the exact circumstances are known. Some one is sure to tell the story one of these days."

"How coldly you speak of it! One would think it had happened in Peru, instead of here, this very morning."

Saracinesca was at his wits' end. He wanted to smooth the matter over, or at least to soften the unfavourable im-

pression against Giovanni. He had not the remotest idea how to do it. He was not a very diplomatic man.

"No, no; you misunderstand me. I am not cold. I quite appreciate your situation. You are very justly annoyed."

"Of course I am," said Donna Tullia impatiently. She was beginning to regret that she had made him get into her carriage.

"Precisely; of course you are. Now, so soon as Giovanni is quite recovered, I will send him to explain his conduct to you if he can, or to——"

"Explain it? How can he explain it? I do not want you to send him, if he will not come of his own accord. Why should I?"

"Well, well, as you please, my dear cousin," said old Saracinesca, smiling to cover his perplexity. "I am not a good ambassador; but you know I am a good friend, and I really want to do something to restore Giovanni to your graces."

"That will be difficult," answered Donna Tullia, although she knew very well that she would receive Giovanni kindly enough when she had once had an opportunity of speaking her mind to him.

"Do not be hard-hearted," urged the Prince. "I am sure he is very penitent."

"Then let him say so."

"That is exactly what I ask."

"Is it? Oh, very well. If he chooses to call I will receive him, since you desire it. Where shall I put you down?"

"Anywhere, thank you. Here, if you wish—at the corner. Good-bye. Do not be too hard on the boy."

"We shall see," answered Donna Tullia, unwilling to show too much indulgence. The old Prince bowed, and walked away into the gloom of the dusky streets.

"That is over," he muttered to himself. "I wonder how the Astrardente takes it." He would have liked to see her; but he recognized that, as he so very rarely

called upon her, it would seem strange to choose such a time for his visit. It would not do—it would be hardly decent, seeing that he believed her to be the cause of the catastrophe. His steps, however, led him almost unconsciously in the direction of the Astrardente palace; he found himself in front of the arched entrance almost before he knew where he was. The temptation to see Corona was more than he could resist. He asked the porter if the Duchessa was at home, and on being answered in the affirmative, he boldly entered and ascended the marble staircase—boldly, but with an odd sensation, like that of a schoolboy who is getting himself into trouble.

Corona had just come home, and was sitting by the fire in her great drawing-room, alone, with a book in her hand, which she was not reading. She rarely remained in the reception-rooms; but to-day she had rather capriciously taken a fancy to the broad solitude of the place, and had accordingly installed herself there. She was very much surprised when the doors were suddenly opened wide and the servant announced Prince Saracinesca. For a moment she thought it must be Giovanni, for his father rarely entered her house, and when the old man's stalwart figure advanced towards her, she dropped her book in astonishment, and rose from her deep chair to meet him. She was very pale, and there were dark rings under her eyes that spoke of pain and want of sleep. She was so utterly different from Donna Tullia, whom he had just left, that the Prince was almost awed by her stateliness, and felt more than ever like a boy in a bad scrape. Corona bowed rather coldly, but extended her hand, which the old gentleman raised to his lips respectfully, in the manner of the old school.

"I trust you are not exhausted after the ball?" he began, not knowing what to say.

"Not in the least. We did not stay late," replied Corona, secretly wondering why he had come.

"It was really magnificent," he answered. "There has been no such ball for years. Very unfortunate that

it should have terminated in such an unpleasant way," he added, making a bold dash at the subject of which he wished to speak.

"Very. You did a bad morning's work," said the Duchessa, severely. "I wonder that you should speak of it."

"No one speaks of anything else," returned the Prince, apologetically. "Besides, I do not see what was to be done."

"You should have stopped it," answered Corona, her dark eyes gleaming with righteous indignation. "You should have prevented it at any price, if not in the name of religion, which forbids it as a crime, at least in the name of decency—as being Don Giovanni's father."

"You speak strong words, Duchessa," said the Prince, evidently annoyed at her tone.

"If I speak strongly, it is because I think you acted shamefully in permitting this disgraceful butchery."

Saracinesca suddenly lost his temper, as he frequently did.

"Madam," he said, "it is certainly not for you to accuse me of crime, lack of decency, and what you are pleased to call disgraceful butchery, seeing who was the probable cause of the honourable encounter which you characterise in such tasteful language."

"Honourable indeed!" said Corona, very scornfully. "Let that pass. Who, pray, is more to blame than you? Who is the probable cause?"

"Need I tell you?" asked the old man, fixing his flashing eyes upon her.

"What do you mean?" inquired Corona, turning white, and her voice trembling between her anger and her emotion.

"I may be wrong," said the Prince, "but I believe I am right. I believe the duel was fought on your account."

"On my account!" repeated Corona, half rising from her chair in her indignation. Then she sank back again,

and added, very coldly, "If you have come here to insult me, Prince, I will send for my husband."

"I beg your pardon, Duchessa," said old Saracinesca. "It is very far from my intention to insult you."

"And who has told you this abominable lie?" asked Corona, still very angry.

"No one, upon my word."

"Then how dare you——"

"Because I have reason to believe that you are the only woman alive for whom my son would engage in a quarrel."

"It is impossible," cried Corona. "I will never believe that Don Giovanni could——" She checked herself.

"Don Giovanni Saracinesca is a gentleman, madam," said the old Prince, proudly. "He keeps his own counsel. I have come by the information without any evidence of it from his lips."

"Then I am at a loss to understand you," returned the Duchessa. "I must beg you either to explain your extraordinary language, or else to leave me."

Corona d'Astrardente was a match for any man when she was angry. But old Saracinesca, though no diplomatist, was a formidable adversary, from his boldness and determination to discover the truth at any price.

"It is precisely because, at the risk of offending you, I desired an explanation, that I have intruded myself upon you to-day," he answered. "Will you permit me one question before I leave you?"

"Provided it is not an insulting one, I will answer it," replied Corona.

"Do you know anything of the circumstances which led to this morning's encounter?"

"Certainly not," Corona answered, hotly. "I assure you most solemnly," she continued in calmer tones, "that I am wholly ignorant of it. I suppose you have a right to be told that."

"I, on my part, assure you, upon my word, that I know no more than you yourself, excepting this: on some provo-

cation, concerning which he will not speak, my son seized Del Ferice by the throat and used strong words to him. No one witnessed the scene. Del Ferice sent the challenge. My son could find no one to act for him and applied to me, as was quite right that he should. There was no apology possible—Giovanni had to give the man satisfaction. You know as much as I know now."

"That does not help me to understand why you accuse me of having caused the quarrel," said Corona. "What have I to do with Del Ferice, poor man?"

"This—any one can see that you are as indifferent to my son as to any other man. Every one knows that the Duchessa d'Astrardente is above suspicion."

Corona raised her head proudly and stared at Saracinesca.

"But, on the other hand, every one knows that my son loves you madly—can you yourself deny it?"

"Who dares to say it?" asked Corona, her anger rising afresh.

"Who sees, dares. Can you deny it?"

"You have no right to repeat such hearsay tales to me," answered Corona. But the blush rose to her pale dark cheeks, and she suddenly dropped her eyes.

"Can you deny it, Duchessa?" asked the Prince a third time, insisting roughly.

"Since you are so certain, why need you care for my denial?" inquired Corona.

"Duchessa, you must forgive me," answered Saracinesca, his tone suddenly softening. "I am rough, probably rude; but I love my son dearly. I cannot bear to see him running into a dangerous and hopeless passion, from which he may issue only to find himself grown suddenly old and bitter, disappointed and miserable for the rest of his life. I believe you to be a very good woman; I cannot look at you and doubt the truth of anything you tell me. If he loves you, you have influence over him. If you have influence, use it for his good; use it to break down this mad love of his, to show him his own folly—to save him, in

short, from his fate. Do you understand me? Do I ask too much?"

Corona understood well enough—far too well. She knew the whole extent of Giovanni's love for her, and, what old Saracinesca never guessed, the strength of her own love for him, for the sake of which she would do all that a woman could do. There was a long pause after the old Prince had spoken. He waited patiently for an answer.

"I understand you—yes," she said at last. "If you are right in your surmises, I should have some influence over your son. If I can advise him, and he will take my advice, I will give him the best counsel I can. You have placed me in a very embarrassing position, and you have shown little courtesy in the way you have spoken to me; but I will try to do as you request me, if the opportunity offers, for the sake of—of turning what is very bad into something which may at last be good."

"Thank you, thank you, Duchessa!" cried the Prince. "I will never forget—"

"Do not thank me," said Corona, coldly. "I am not in a mood to appreciate your gratitude. There is too much blood of those honest gentlemen upon your hands."

"Pardon me, Duchessa, I wish there were on my hands and head the blood of that gentleman you call honest—the gentleman who twice tried to murder my son this morning, and twice nearly succeeded."

"What!" cried Corona, in sudden terror.

"That fellow thrust at Giovanni once to kill him while they were halting and his sword was hanging lowered in his hand; and once again he threw himself upon his knee and tried to stab him in the body—which is a dastardly trick not permitted in any country. Even in duelling, such things are called murder; and it is their right name."

Corona was very pale. Giovanni's danger had been suddenly brought before her in a very vivid light, and she was horror-struck at the thought of it.

"Is—is Don Giovanni very badly wounded?" she asked.

"No, thank heaven; he will be well in a week. But either one of those attempts might have killed him; and he would have died, I think—pardon me, no insult this time—I think, on your account. Do you see why for him I dread this attachment to you, which leads him to risk his life at every turn for a word about you? Do you see why I implore you to take the matter into your serious consideration, and to use your influence to bring him to his senses?"

"I see; but in this question of the duel you have no proof that I was concerned."

"No,—no proof, perhaps. I will not weary you with surmises; but even if it was not for you this time, you see that it might have been."

"Perhaps," said Corona, very sadly.

"I have to thank you, even if you will not listen to me," said the Prince, rising. "You have understood me. It was all I asked. Good night."

"Good night," answered Corona, who did not move from her seat nor extend her hand this time. She was too much agitated to think of formalities. Saracinesca bowed low and left the room.

It was characteristic of him that he had come to see the Duchessa not knowing what he should say, and that he had blurted out the whole truth, and then lost his temper in support of it. He was a hasty man, of noble instincts, but always inclined rather to cut a knot than to unloose it—to do by force what another man would do by skill—angry at opposition, and yet craving it by his combative nature.

His first impulse on leaving Corona was to go to Giovanni and tell him what he had done; but he reflected as he went home that his son was ill with his wounds, and that it would be bad for him to be angry, as of course he would be if he were told of his father's doings. Moreover, as old Saracinesca thought more seriously of the matter, he wisely concluded that it would be

better not to speak of the visit; and when he entered the room where Giovanni was lying on his couch with a novel and a cigarette, he had determined to conceal the whole matter.

"Well, Giovanni," he said, "we are the talk of the town, of course."

"It was to be expected. Whom have you seen?"

"In the first place, I have seen Madame Mayer. She is in a state of anger against you which borders on madness—not because you have wounded Del Ferice, but because you forgot to dance with her. I cannot conceive how you could be so foolish."

"Nor I. It was idiotic in the last degree," replied Giovanni, annoyed that his father should have learned the story.

"You must go and see her at once—as soon as you can go out. It is a disagreeable business."

"Of course. What else did she say?"

"She thought that Del Ferice had challenged you on her account, because you had not danced with her."

"How silly! As if I should fight duels about her."

"Since there was probably a woman in the case, she might have been the one," remarked his father.

"There was no woman in the case, practically speaking," said Giovanni, shortly.

"Oh, I supposed there was. However, I told Donna Tullia that I advised her not to think anything more of the matter until the whole story came out."

"When is that likely to occur?" asked Giovanni, laughing. "No one alive knows the cause of the quarrel but Del Ferice and I myself. He will certainly not tell the world, as the thing was even more disgraceful to him than his behaviour this morning. There is no reason why I should speak of it either."

"How reticent you are, Giovanni!" exclaimed the old gentleman.

"Believe me, if I could tell you the whole story without injuring any one but Del Ferice, I would."

"Then there was really a woman in the case?"

"There was a woman outside the case, who caused us to be in it," returned Giovanni.

"Always your detestable riddles," cried the old man, petulantly; and presently, seeing that his son was obstinately silent, he left the room to dress for dinner.

CHAPTER XV.

It may be that when Astrardente spoke so tenderly to his wife after the Frangipani ball, he felt some warning that told him his strength was failing. His heart was in a dangerous condition, the family doctor had said, and it was necessary that he should take care of himself. He had been very tired after that long evening, and perhaps some sudden sinking had shaken his courage. He awoke from an unusually heavy sleep with a strange sense of astonishment, as though he had not expected to awake again in life. He felt weaker than he had felt for a long time, and even his accustomed beverage of chocolate mixed with coffee failed to give him the support he needed in the morning. He rose very late, and his servant found him more than usually petulant, nor did the message brought back from Giovanni seem to improve his temper. He met his wife at the mid-day breakfast, and was strangely silent, and in the afternoon he shut himself up in his own rooms and would see nobody. But at dinner he appeared again, seemingly revived, and declared his intention of accompanying his wife to a reception given at the Austrian embassy. He seemed so unlike his usual self, that Corona did not venture to speak of the duel which had taken place in the morning; for she feared anything which might excite him, well knowing that excitement might prove fatal. She did what she could to dissuade him from going out; but he grew petulant, and she unwillingly yielded.