

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.

At the embassy he soon heard all the details, for no one talked of anything else; but Astrardente was ashamed of not having heard it all before, and affected a cynical indifference to the tale which the military attaché of the embassy repeated for his benefit. He vouchsafed some remark to the effect that fighting duels was the natural amusement of young gentlemen, and that if one of them killed another there was at least one fool the less in society; after which he looked about him for some young beauty to whom he might reel off a score of compliments. He knew all the time that he was making a great effort, that he felt unaccountably ill, and that he wished he had taken his wife's advice and stayed quietly at home. But at the end of the evening he chanced to overhear a remark that Valdarno was making to Casalverde, who looked exceedingly pale and ill at ease.

"You had better make your will, my dear fellow," said Valdarno. "Spicca is a terrible man with the foils."

Astrardente turned quickly and looked at the speaker. But both men were suddenly silent, and seemed absorbed in gazing at the crowd. It was enough, however. Astrardente had gathered that Casalverde was to fight Spicca the next day, and that the affair begun that morning had not yet reached its termination. He determined that he would not again be guilty of not knowing what was going on in society; and with the intention of rising early on the following morning, he found Corona, and rather unceremoniously told her it was time to go home.

On the next day the Duca d'Astrardente walked into the club soon after ten o'clock. On ordinary occasions that resort of his fellows was entirely empty until a much later hour; but Astrardente was not disappointed to-day. Twenty or thirty men were congregated in the large hall which served as a smoking-room, and all of them were talking together excitedly. As the door swung on its hinges and the old dandy entered, a sudden silence fell upon the assembly. Astrardente naturally judged that the conversation had turned upon himself, and had been

checked by his appearance; but he affected to take no notice of the occurrence, adjusting his single eyeglass in his eye and serenely surveying the men in the room. He could see that, although they had been talking loudly, the matter in hand was serious enough, for there was no trace of mirth on any of the faces before him. He at once assumed an air of gravity, and going up to Valdarno, who seemed to have occupied the most prominent place in the recent discussion, he put his question in an undertone.

"I suppose Spicca killed him?"

Valdarno nodded, and looked grave. He was a thoughtless young fellow enough, but the news of the tragedy had sobered him. Astrardente had anticipated the death of Casalverde, and was not surprised. But he was not without human feeling, and showed a becoming regret at the sad end of a man he had been accustomed to see so frequently.

"How was it?" he asked.

"A simple 'un, deux,' tierce and carte at the first bout. Spicca is as quick as lightning. Come away from this crowd," added Valdarno, in a low voice, "and I will tell you all about it."

In spite of his sorrow at his friend's death, Valdarno felt a certain sense of importance at being able to tell the story to Astrardente. Valdarno was vain in a small way, though his vanity was to that of the old Duca as the humble violet to the full-blown cabbage-rose. Astrardente enjoyed a considerable importance in society as the husband of Corona, and was an object of especial interest to Valdarno, who supported the incredible theory of Corona's devotion to the old man. Valdarno's stables were near the club, and on pretence of showing a new horse to Astrardente, he nodded to his friends, and left the room with the aged dandy. It was a clear, bright winter's morning, and the two men strolled slowly down the Corso towards Valdarno's palace.

"You know, of course, how the affair began?" asked the young man.

"The first duel? Nobody knows—certainly not I."

"Well—perhaps not," returned Valdarno, doubtfully. "At all events, you know that Spicca flew into a passion because poor Casalverde forgot to step in after he cried halt; and then Del Ferice ran Giovanni through the arm."

"That was highly improper—most reprehensible," said Astrardente, putting up his eyeglass to look at a pretty little sempstress who hurried past on her way to her work.

"I suppose so. But Casalverde certainly meant no harm; and if Del Ferice had not been so unlucky as to forget himself in the excitement of the moment, no one would have thought anything of it."

"Ah yes, I suppose not," murmured Astrardente, still looking after the girl. When he could see her face no longer, he turned sharply back to Valdarno.

"This is exceedingly interesting," he said. "Tell me more about it."

"Well, when it was over, old Saracinesca was for killing Casalverde himself."

"The old fire-eater! He ought to be ashamed of himself."

"However, Spicca was before him, and challenged Casalverde then and there. As both the principals in the first duel were so badly wounded, it had to be put off until this morning."

"They went out, and—piff, paff! Spicca ran him through," interrupted Astrardente. "What a horrible tragedy!"

"Ah yes; and what is worse——"

"What surprises me most," interrupted the Duca again, "is that in this delightfully peaceful and paternally governed little nest of ours, the authorities should not have been able to prevent either of these duels. It is perfectly amazing! I cannot remember a parallel instance. Do you mean to say that there was not a *sbirro* or a *gendarme* in the neighbourhood to-day nor yesterday?"

"That is not so surprising," answered Valdarno, with a knowing look. "There would have been few tears in

high quarters if Del Ferice had been killed yesterday; there will be few to-day over the death of poor Casalverde."

"Bah!" ejaculated Astrardente. "If Antonelli had heard of these affairs he would have stopped them soon enough."

Valdarno glanced behind him, and, bending a little, whispered in Astrardente's ear—

"They were both Liberals, you must know."

"Liberals?" repeated the old dandy, with a cynical sneer. "Nonsense, I say! Liberals? Yes, in the way you are a Liberal, and Donna Tullia Mayer, and Spicca himself, who has just killed that other Liberal, Casalverde. Liberals indeed! Do you flatter yourself for a moment that Antonelli is afraid of such Liberals as you are? Do you think the life of Del Ferice is of any more importance to politics than the life of that dog there?"

It was Astrardente's habit to scoff mercilessly at all the petty manifestations of political feeling he saw about him in the world. He represented a class distinct both from the Valdarno set and from the men represented by the Saracinesca—a class who despised everything political as unworthy of the attention of gentlemen, who took everything for granted, and believed that all was for the best, provided that society moved upon rollers and so long as no one meddled with old institutions. To question the wisdom of the municipal regulations was to attack the Government itself; to attack the Government was to cast a slight upon his Holiness the Pope, which was rank heresy, and very vulgar into the bargain. Astrardente had seen a great deal of the world, but his ideas of politics were almost childishly simple—whereas many people said that his principles in relation to his fellows were fiendishly cynical. He was certainly not a very good man; and if he pretended to no reputation for devoutness, it was probable that he recognised the absurdity of his attempting such a pose. But politically he believed in Cardinal Antonelli's ability to defy Europe with or without the

aid of France, and laughed as loudly at Louis Napoleon's old idea of putting the sovereign Pontiff at the head of an Italian federation, as he jeered at Cavour's favourite phrase concerning a free Church in a free State. He had good blood in him, and the hereditary courage often found with it. He had a certain skill in matters worldly; but his wit in things political seemed to belong to an earlier generation, and to be incapable of receiving new impressions.

But Valdarno, who was vain and set great value on his opinions, was deeply offended at the way Astrardente spoke of him and his friends. In his eyes he was risking much for what he considered a good object, and he resented any contemptuous mention of Liberal principles, whenever he dared. No one cared much for Astrardente, and certainly no one feared him; nevertheless in those times men hesitated to defend anything which came under the general head of Liberalism, when they were likely to be overheard, or when they could not trust the man to whom they were speaking. If no one feared Astrardente, no one trusted him either. Valdarno consequently judged it best to smother his annoyance at the old man's words, and to retaliate by striking him in a weak spot.

"If you despise Del Ferice as much as you say," he remarked, "I wonder that you tolerate him as you do."

"I tolerate him. Toleration is the very word—it delightfully expresses my feelings towards him. He is a perfectly harmless creature, who affects immense depth of insight into human affairs, and who cannot see an inch before his face. Dear me! yes, I shall always tolerate Del Ferice, poor fellow!"

"You may not be called upon to do so much longer," replied Valdarno. "They say he is in a very dangerous condition."

"Ah!" ejaculated Astrardente, putting up his eyeglass at his companion. "Ah, you don't say so!"

There was something so insolent in the old man's affected stare that even the foolish and good-natured Valdarno lost his temper, being already somewhat irritated.

"It is a pity that you should be so indifferent. It is hardly becoming. If you had not tolerated him as you have, he might not be lying there at the point of death."

Astrardente stared harder than ever.

"My dear young friend," he said, "your language is the most extraordinary I ever heard. How in the world can my treatment of that unfortunate man have had anything to do with his being wounded in a duel?"

"My dear old friend," replied Valdarno, impudently mimicking the old man's tone, "your simplicity surpasses anything I ever knew. Is it possible that you do not know that this duel was fought for your wife?"

Astrardente looked fixedly at Valdarno; his eyeglass dropped from his eye, and he turned ashy pale beneath his paint. He staggered a moment, and steadied himself against the door of a shop. They were just passing the corner of the Piazza di Sciarra, the most crowded crossing of the Corso.

"Valdarno," said the old man, his cracked voice dropping to a hoarser and deeper tone, "you must explain yourself or answer for this."

"What! Another duel!" cried Valdarno, in some scorn. Then, seeing that his companion looked ill, he took him by the arm and led him rapidly through the crowd, across the Arco dei Carbognani. Entering the Caffè Aragno, a new institution in those days, both men sat down at a small marble table. The old dandy was white with emotion; Valdarno felt that he was enjoying his revenge.

"A glass of cognac, Duke?" he said, as the waiter came up. Astrardente nodded, and there was silence while the man brought the cordial. The Duca lived by an invariable rule, seeking to balance the follies of his youth by excessive care in his old age; it was long, indeed, since he had taken a glass of brandy in the morning. He swallowed it quickly, and the stimulant produced its effect immediately; he readjusted his eyeglass, and faced Valdarno sternly.

"And now," he said, "that we are at our ease, may I inquire what the devil you mean by your insinuations about my wife?"

"Oh," replied Valdarno, affecting great indifference, "I only say what everybody says. There is no offence to the Duchessa."

"I should suppose not, indeed. Go on."

"Do you really care to hear the story?" asked the young man.

"I intend to hear it, and at once," replied Astrardente.

"You will not have to employ force to extract it from me, I can assure you," said Valdarno, settling himself in his chair, but avoiding the angry glance of the old man. "Everybody has been repeating it since the day before yesterday, when it occurred. You were at the Frangipani ball—you might have seen it all. In the first place, you must know that there exists another of those beings to whom you extend your merciful toleration—a certain Giovanni Saracinesca—you may have noticed him?"

"What of him?" asked Astrardente, fiercely.

"Among other things, he is the man who wounded Del Ferice, as I daresay you have heard. Among other things concerning him, he has done himself the honour of falling desperately, madly in love with the Duchessa d'Astrardente, who——"

"What?" cried the old man in a cracked voice, as Valdarno paused.

"Who does you the honour of ignoring his existence on most occasions, but who was so unfortunate as to recall him to her memory on the night of the Frangipani ball. We were all sitting in a circle round the Duchessa's chair that night, when the conversation chanced to turn upon this same Giovanni Saracinesca, a fire-eating fellow with a bad temper. He had been away for some days; indeed he was last seen at the Apollo in your box, when they gave 'Norma'——"

"I remember," interrupted Astrardente. The mention of that evening was but a random shot. Valdarno had

been in the club-box, and had seen Giovanni when he made his visit to the Astrardente; he had not seen him again till the Frangipani ball.

"Well, as I was saying, we spoke of Giovanni, and every one had something to say about his absence. The Duchessa expressed her curiosity, and Del Ferice, who was with us, proposed calling him—he was at the other end of the room, you see—that he might answer for himself. So I went and brought him up. He was in a very bad humour——"

"What has all this absurd story got to do with the matter?" asked the old man, impatiently.

"It is the matter itself. The irascible Giovanni is angry at being questioned, treats us all like mud under his feet, sits down by the Duchessa and forces us to go away. The Duchessa tells him the story, with a laugh no doubt, and Giovanni's wrath overflows. He goes in search of Del Ferice, and nearly strangles him. The result of these eccentricities is the first duel, leading to the second."

Astrardente was very angry, and his thin gloved hands twitched nervously at the handle of his stick.

"And this," he said—"this string of trivial ball-room incident, seems to you a sufficient pretext for stating that the duel was about my wife?"

"Certainly," replied Valdarno, coolly. "If Saracinesca had not been for months openly devoting himself to the Duchessa—who, I assure you, takes no kind of notice of him——"

"You need not waste words——"

"I do not,—and if Giovanni had not thought it worth while to be jealous of Del Ferice, there would have been no fighting."

"Have you been telling your young friends that my wife was the cause of all this?" asked Astrardente, trembling with a genuine rage which lent a certain momentary dignity to his feeble frame and painted face.

"Why not?"

"Have you or have you not?"

"Certainly—if you please," returned Valdarno insolently, enjoying the old man's fury.

"Then permit me to tell you that you have taken upon yourself an outrageous liberty, that you have lied, and that you do not deserve to be treated like a gentleman."

Astrardente got upon his feet and left the café without further words. Valdarno had indeed wounded him in a weak spot, and the wound was mortal. His blood was up, and at that moment he would have faced Valdarno sword in hand, and might have proved himself no mean adversary, so great is the power of anger to revive in the most decrepit the energies of youth. He believed in his wife with a rare sincerity, and his blood boiled at the idea of her being rudely spoken of as the cause of a scandalous quarrel, however much Valdarno insisted upon it that she was as indifferent to Giovanni as to Del Ferice. The story was a shallow invention upon the face of it. But though the old man told himself so again and again as he almost ran through the narrow streets towards his house, there was one thought suggested by Valdarno which rankled deep. It was true that Giovanni had last been seen in the Astrardente box at the opera; but he had not remained five minutes seated by the Duchessa before he had suddenly invented a shallow excuse for leaving; and finally, there was no doubt that at that very moment Corona had seemed violently agitated. Giovanni had not reappeared till the night of the Frangipani ball, and the duel had taken place on the very next morning. Astrardente could not reason—his mind was too much disturbed by his anger against Valdarno; but a vague impression that there was something wrong in it all, drove him homewards in wild excitement. He was ill, too, and had he been in a frame of mind to reflect upon himself, he would have noticed that his heart was beating with ominous irregularity. He did not even think of taking a cab, but hurried along

on foot, finding, perhaps, a momentary relief in violent exertion. The old blood rushed to his face in good earnest, and shamed the delicately painted lights and shadows touched in by the master-hand of Monsieur Isidore, the cosmopolitan valet.

Valdarno remained seated in the café, rather disturbed at what he had done. He certainly had had no intention of raising such a storm; he was a weak and good-natured fellow, whose vanity was easily wounded, but who was not otherwise very sensitive, and was certainly not very intelligent. Astrardente had laughed at him and his friends in a way which touched him to the quick, and with childish petulance he had retaliated in the easiest way which presented itself. Indeed there was more foundation for his tale than Astrardente would allow. At least it was true that the story was in the mouths of all the gossips that morning, and Valdarno had only repeated what he had heard. He had meant to annoy the old man; he had certainly not intended to make him so furiously angry. As for the deliberate insult he had received, it was undoubtedly very shocking to be told that one lied in such very plain terms; but on the other hand, to demand satisfaction of such an old wreck as Astrardente would be ridiculous in the extreme. Valdarno was incapable of very violent passion, and was easily persuaded that he was in the wrong when any one contradicted him flatly; not that he was altogether devoid of a certain physical courage if hard pushed, but because he was not very strong, not very confident of himself, not very combative, and not very truthful. When Astrardente was gone, he waited a few minutes, and then sauntered up the Corso again towards the club, debating in his mind how he should turn a good story out of his morning's adventure without making himself appear either foolish or pusillanimous. It was also necessary so to turn his narrative that in case any one repeated it to Giovanni, the latter might not propose to cut his throat, though it was not probable that any one would be bold enough to desire a con-

versation with the younger Saracinesca on such a subject.

When he again entered the smoking-room of the club, he was greeted by a chorus of inquiries concerning his interview with Astrardente.

"What did he ask? What did he say? Where is he? What did you tell him? Did he drop his eyeglass? Did he blush through his paint?"

Everybody spoke together in the same breath. Valdarno's vanity rose to the occasion. Weak and insignificant by nature, he particularly delighted in being the centre of general interest, if even for a moment only.

"He really dropped his eyeglass," he answered, with a gay laugh, "and he really changed colour in spite of his paint."

"It must have been a terrible interview, then," remarked one or two of the loungers.

"I shall be happy to offer you my services in case you wish to cut each other's throats," said a French officer of the Papal Zouaves who stood by the fireplace rolling a cigarette. Whereupon everybody laughed loudly.

"Thanks," answered Valdarno; "I am expecting a challenge every minute. If he proposes a powder-puff and a box of rouge for the weapons, I accept without hesitation. Well, it was very amusing. He wanted to know all about it, and so I told him about the scene in Casa Frangipani. He did not seem to understand at all. He is a very obtuse old gentleman."

"I hope you explained the connection of events," said some one.

"Indeed I did. It was delightful to witness his fury. It was then that he dropped his eyeglass and turned as red as a boiled lobster. He swore that his wife was above suspicion, as usual."

"That is true," said a young man who had attempted to make love to Corona during the previous year.

"Of course it is true," echoed all the rest, with unanimity rare indeed where a woman's reputation is concerned.

"Yes," continued Valdarno, "of course. But he goes so far as to say it is absurd that any one should admire his wife, who is nevertheless a most admirable woman. He stamped, he screamed, he turned red in the face, and he went off without taking leave of me, flourishing his stick, and swearing eternal hatred and vengeance against the entire civilised society of the world. He was delightfully amusing. Will anybody play baccarat? I will start a bank."

The majority were for the game, and in a few minutes were seated at a large green table, drawing cards and betting with a good will, and interspersing their play with stray remarks on the events of the morning.

CHAPTER XVI.

Corona was fast coming to a state of mind in which a kind of passive expectation—a sort of blind submission to fate—was the chief feature. She had shed tears when her husband spoke of his approaching end, because her gentle heart was grateful to him, and by its own sacrifices had grown used to his presence, and because she suddenly felt that she had comprehended the depth of his love for her, as she had never understood it before. In the five years of married life she had spent with him, she had not allowed herself to think of his selfishness, of his small daily egotism; for, though it was at no great expense to herself, he had been uniformly generous and considerate to her. But she had been conscious that if she should ever remove from her conscience the pressure of a self-imposed censorship, so that her judgment might speak boldly, the verdict of her heart would not have been so indulgent to her husband as was that formal opinion of him which she forced herself to hold. Now, however, it seemed as though the best things she had desired to believe of him were true; and with the