

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

conviction that he was not only not selfish, but absolutely devoted to herself, there had come upon her a fear of desolation, a dread of being left alone—of finding herself abandoned by this strange companion, the only person in the world with whom she had the habit of familiarity and the bond of a common past. Astrardente had thought, and had told her too, that the knowledge of his impending death might lighten her burden—might make the days of self-sacrifice that yet remained seem shorter; he had spoken kindly of her marrying again when he should be dead, deeming perhaps, in his sudden burst of generosity that she would be capable of looking beyond the unhappy present to the possibilities of a more brilliant future, or at least that the certainty of his consent to such a second union would momentarily please her. It was hard to say why he had spoken. It had been an impulse such as the most selfish people sometimes yield to when their failing strength brings upon them suddenly the sense of their inability to resist any longer the course of events. The vanity of man is so amazing that when he is past arrogating to himself the attention which is necessary to him as his daily bread, he is capable of so demeaning his manhood as to excite interest in his weaknesses rather than that he should cease to be the object of any interest whatever. The analysis of the feelings of old and selfish persons is the most difficult of all studies; for in proportion as the strength of the dominant passion or passions is quenched in the bitter still waters of the harbour of superannuation, the small influences of life grow in importance. As when, from the breaking surge of an angry ocean, the water is dashed high among the re-echoing rocks, leaving little pools of limpid clearness in the hollows of the storm-beaten cliffs; and as when the anger of the tossing waves has subsided, the hot sun shines upon the mimic seas, and the clear waters that were so transparent grow thick and foul with the motion of a tiny and insignificant insect-life undreamed of before in such crystal purity: so also the clear strong sea of youth is left to dry in the pools and puddles of old age, and in

the motionless calm of the still places where the ocean of life has washed it, it is dried up and consumed by myriads of tiny parasites—lives within lives, passions within passions—tiny efforts at mimic greatness,—a restless little world, the very parody and infinitesimal reproduction of the mighty flood whence it came, wherein great monsters have their being, and things of unspeakable beauty grow free in the large depths of an unfathomed ocean.

To Corona d'Astrardente in the freshness of her youth the study of her husband's strange littleness had grown to be a second nature from the habit of her devotion to him. But she could not understand him; she could not explain to herself the sudden confession of old age, the quiet anticipation of death, the inexplicable generosity towards herself. She only knew that he must be at heart a man more kindly and of better impulse than he had generally been considered, and she resolved to do her utmost to repay him, and to soothe the misery of his last years.

Since he had told her so plainly, it must be true. It was natural, perhaps—for he was growing more feeble every day—but it was very sad. Five years ago, when she had choked down her loathing for the old man to whom she had sold herself for her father's sake, she would not have believed that she should one day feel the tears rise fast at the thought of his dying and leaving her free. He had said it; she would be free. They say that men who have been long confined in a dungeon become indifferent, and when turned out upon the world would at first gladly return to their prison walls. Liberty is in the first place an instinct, but it will easily grow to be a habit. Corona had renounced all thought of freedom five years ago, and in the patient bowing of her noble nature to the path she had chosen, she had attained to a state of renunciation like that of a man who has buried himself for ever in an order of Trappists, and neither dreams of the freedom of the outer world, nor desires to dream of it. And she had grown fond of the aged dandy and his

foolish ways—ways which seemed foolish because they were those of youth grafted upon senility. She had not known that she was fond of him, it is true; but now that he spoke of dying, she felt that she would weep his loss. He was her only companion, her only friend. In the loyal determination to be faithful to him, she had so shut herself from all intimacy with the world that she had not a friend. She kept women at a distance from her, instinctively dreading lest in their careless talk some hint or comment should remind her that she had married a man ridiculous in their eyes; and with men she could have but little intercourse, for their society was dangerous. No man save Giovanni Saracinesca had for years put himself in the light of a mere acquaintance, always ready to talk to her upon general subjects, studiously avoiding himself in all discussions, and delicately flattering her vanity by his deference to her judgment. The other men had generally spoken of love at the second meeting, and declared themselves devoted to her for life at the end of a week: she had quietly repulsed them, and they had dropped back into the position of indifferent acquaintances, going in search of other game, after the manner of young gentlemen of leisure. Giovanni alone had sternly maintained his air of calmness, had never offended her simple pride of loyalty to Astrardente by word or deed; so that, although she felt and dreaded her growing interest in him, she had actually believed that he was nothing in her life, until at last she had been undeceived and awakened to the knowledge of his fierce passion, and being taken unawares, had nearly been carried off her feet by the tempest his words had roused in her own breast. But her strength had not utterly deserted her. Years of supreme devotion to the right, of honest and unwavering loyalty, neither deceiving her conscience on the one hand with the morbid food of a fictitious religious exaltation, nor, upon the other, sinking to a cynical indifference to inevitable misery; days of quiet and constant effort; long hours of thoughtful meditation upon

the one resolution of her life,—all this had strengthened the natural force of her character, so that, when at last the great trial had come, she had not yielded, but had conquered once and for ever, in the very moment of sorest temptation. And with her there would be no return of the danger. Having found strength to resist, she knew that there would be no more weakness; her love for Giovanni was deep and sincere, but it had become now the chief cause of suffering in her life; it had utterly ceased to be the chief element of joy, as it had been for a few short days. It was one thing more to be borne, and it outweighed all other cares.

The news of the duel had given her great distress. She believed honestly that she was in no way concerned in it, and she had bitterly resented old Saracinesca's imputation. In the hot words that had passed between them, she had felt her anger rise justly against the old Prince; but when he appealed to her on account of his son, her love for Giovanni had vanquished her wrath against the old man. Come what might, she would do what was best for him. If possible, she would induce him to leave Rome at once, and thus free herself from the pain of constantly meeting him. Perhaps she could make him marry—anything would be better than to allow things to go on in their present course, to have to face him at every turn, and to know that at any moment he might be quarrelling with somebody and fighting duels on her account.

She went boldly into the world that night, not knowing whether she should meet Giovanni or not, but resolved upon her course if he appeared. Many people looked curiously at her, and smiled cunningly as they thought they detected traces of care upon her proud face; but though they studied her, and lost no opportunity of talking to her upon the one topic which absorbed the general conversation, no one had the satisfaction of moving her even so much as to blush a little, or to lower the gaze of her eyes that looked them all indifferently through and through.

Giovanni, however, did not appear, and people told her he would not leave his room for several days, so that she returned to her home without having accomplished anything in the matter. Her husband was very silent, but looked at her with an expression of uncertainty, as though hesitating to speak to her upon some subject that absorbed his interest. Neither of them referred to the strange interview of the previous night. They went home early, as has been already recorded, seeing it was only a great and formal reception to which the world went that night; and even the toughest old society jades were weary from the ball of the day before, which had not broken up until half-past six in the morning.

On the next day, at about twelve o'clock, Corona was sitting in her boudoir writing a number of invitations which were to be distributed in the afternoon, when the door opened and her husband entered the room.

"My dear," he cried in great excitement, "it is perfectly horrible! Have you heard?"

"What?" asked Corona, laying down her pen.

"Spicca has killed Casalverde—the man who seconded Del Ferice yesterday,—killed him on the spot——"

Corona uttered an exclamation of horror.

"And they say Del Ferice is dead, or just dying"—his cracked voice rose at every word; "and they say," he almost screamed, laying his withered hand roughly upon his wife's shoulder,—“they say that the duel was about you—you, do you understand?"

"That is not true," said Corona, firmly. "Calm yourself—I beseech you to be calm. Tell me connectedly what has happened—who told you this story."

"What right has any man to drag your name into a quarrel?" cried the old man, hoarsely. "Everybody is saying it—it is outrageous, abominable——"

Corona quietly pushed her husband into a chair, and sat down beside him.

"You are excited—you will harm yourself,—remember your health," she said, endeavouring to soothe him.

"Tell me, in the first place, who told you that it was about me."

"Valdarno told me; he told me that every one was saying it—that it was the talk of the town."

"But why?" insisted Corona. "You allow yourself to be furious for the sake of a piece of gossip which has no foundation whatever. What is the story they tell?"

"Some nonsense about Giovanni Saracinesca's going away last week. Del Ferice proposed to call him before you, and Giovanni was angry."

"That is absurd," said Corona. "Don Giovanni was not the least annoyed. He was with me afterwards——"

"Always Giovanni! Always Giovanni! Wherever you go, it is Giovanni!" cried the old man, in unreasonable petulance—unreasonable from his point of view, reasonable enough had he known the truth. But he struck unconsciously upon the key-note of all Corona's troubles, and she turned pale to the lips.

"You say it is not true," he began again. "How do you know? How can you tell what may have been said? How can you guess it? Giovanni Saracinesca is about you in society more than any one. He has quarrelled about you, and two men have lost their lives in consequence. He is in love with you, I tell you. Can you not see it? You must be blind!"

Corona leaned back in her chair, utterly overcome by the suddenness of the situation, unable to answer, her hands folded tightly together, her pale lips compressed. Angry at her silence, old Astrardente continued, his rage gradually getting the mastery of his sense, and his passion working itself up to the pitch of madness.

"Blind—yes—positively blind!" he cried. "Do you think that I am blind too? Do you think I will overlook all this? Do you not see that your reputation is injured—that people associate your name with his—that no woman can be mentioned in the same breath with Giovanni Saracinesca and hope to maintain a fair fame? A fellow whose adventures are in everybody's mouth, whose

doings are notorious; who has but to look at a woman to destroy her; who is a duellist, a libertine——”

“That is not true,” interrupted Corona, unable to listen calmly to the abuse thus heaped upon the man she so dearly loved. “You are mad——”

“You defend him!” screamed Astrardente, leaning far forward in his chair and clenching his hands. “You dare to support him—you acknowledge that you care for him! Does he not pursue you everywhere, so that the town rings with it? You ought to long to be rid of him, to wish he were dead, rather than allow his name to be breathed with yours; and instead, you defend him to me—you say he is right, that you prefer his odious devotion to your good name, to my good name! Oh, it is not to be believed! If you loved him yourself you could not do worse!”

“If half you say were true——” said Corona, in terrible distress.

“True?” cried Astrardente, who would not brook interruption. “It is all true—and more also. It is true that he loves you, true that all the world says it, true—by all that is holy, from your face I would almost believe that you do love him! Why do you not deny it? Miserable woman!” he screamed, springing towards her and seizing her roughly by the arm, as she hid her face in her hands. “Miserable woman! you have betrayed me——”

In the paroxysm of his rage the feeble old man became almost strong; his grip tightened upon his wife’s wrist, and he dragged her violently from her seat.

“Betrayed! And by you!” he cried again, shaking with passion. “You whom I have loved! This is your gratitude, your sanctified devotion, your cunning pretence at patience! All to hide your love for such a man as that! You hypocrite, you——”

By a sudden effort Corona shook off his grasp, and drew herself up to her full height in magnificent anger.

“You shall hear me,” she said, in deep commanding tones. “I have deserved much, but I have not deserved this.”

“Ha!” he hissed, standing back from her a step, “you can speak now—I have touched you! You have found words. It was time!”

Corona was as white as death, and her black eyes shone like coals of fire. Her words came slowly, every accent clear and strong with concentrated passion.

“I have not betrayed you. I have spoken no word of love to any man alive, and you know that I speak the truth. If any one has said to me what should not be said, I have rebuked him to silence. You know, while you accuse me, that I have done my best to honour and love you; you know well that I would die by my own hand, your loyal and true wife, rather than let my lips utter one syllable of love for any other man.”

Corona possessed a supreme power over her husband. She was so true a woman that the truth blazed visibly from her clear eyes; and what she said was nothing but the truth. She had doubted it herself for one dreadful moment; she knew it now beyond all doubting. In a moment the old man’s wrath broke and vanished before the strong assertion of her perfect innocence. He turned pale under his paint, and his limbs trembled. He made a step forward, and fell upon his knees before her, and tried to take her hands.

“Oh, Corona, forgive me,” he moaned—“forgive me! I so love you!”

Suddenly his grasp relaxed from her hands, and with a groan he fell forward against her knees.

“God knows I forgive you!” cried Corona, the tears starting to her eyes in sudden pity. She bent down to support him; but as she moved, he fell prostrate upon his face before her. With a cry of terror she kneeled beside him; with her strong arms she turned his body and raised his head upon her knees. His face was ghastly white, save where the tinges of paint made a hideous mockery of colour upon his livid skin. His parted lips were faintly purple, and his hollow eyes stared wide open at his wife’s face, while the curled wig was thrust far back upon his bald and wrinkled forehead.

Corona supported his weight upon one knee, and took his nerveless hand in hers. An agony of terror seized her.

"Onofrio!" she cried—she rarely called him by his name—"Onofrio! speak to me! My husband!" She clasped him wildly in her arms. "O God, have mercy!"

Onofrio d'Astrardente was dead. The poor old dandy, in his paint and his wig and his padding, had died at his wife's feet, protesting his love for her to the last. The long averted blow had fallen. For years he had guarded himself against sudden emotions, for he was warned of the disease at his heart, and knew his danger; but his anger had killed him. He might have lived another hour while his rage lasted; but the revulsion of feeling, the sudden repentance for the violence he had done his wife, had sent the blood back to its source too quickly, and with his last cry of love upon his lips he was dead.

Corona had hardly ever seen death. She gently lowered the dead man's weight till he lay at full length upon the floor. Then she started to her feet, and drew back against the fireplace, and gazed at the body of her husband.

For fully five minutes she stood motionless, scarcely daring to draw breath, dazed and stupefied with horror, trying to realise what had happened. There he lay, her only friend, the companion of her life since she had known life; the man who in that very room, but two nights since, had spoken such kind words to her that her tears had flowed—the tears that would not flow now; the man who but a moment since was railing at her in a paroxysm of rage—whose anger had melted at her first word of defence, who had fallen at her feet to ask forgiveness, and to declare once more, for the last time, that he loved her! Her friend, her companion, her husband—had he heard her answer, that she forgave him freely? He could not be dead—it was impossible. A moment ago he had been speaking to her. She went forward again and kneeled beside him.

"Onofrio," she said very gently, "you are not dead—you heard me?"

She gazed down for a moment at the motionless features. Womanly thoughtful, she moved his head a little, and straightened the wig upon his poor forehead. Then, in an instant, she realised all, and with a wild cry of despair fell prostrate upon his body in an agony of passionate weeping. How long she lay, she knew not. A knock at the door did not reach her ears, nor another and another, at short intervals; and then some one entered. It was the butler, who had come to announce the mid-day breakfast. He uttered an exclamation and started back, holding the handle of the door in his hand.

Corona raised herself slowly to her knees, gazing down once more upon the dead man's face. Then she lifted her streaming eyes and saw the servant.

"Your master is dead," she said, solemnly.

The man grew pale and trembled, hesitated, and then turned and fled down the hall without, after the manner of Italian servants, who fear death, and even the sight of it, as they fear nothing else in the world.

Corona rose to her feet and brushed the tears from her eyes. Then she turned and rang the bell. No one answered the summons for some time. The news had spread all over the house in an instant, and everything was disorganised. At last a woman came and stood timidly at the door. She was a lower servant, a simple strong creature from the mountains. Seeing the others terrified and paralysed, it had struck her common-sense that her mistress was alone. Corona understood.

"Help me to carry him," she said, quietly; and the peasant and the noble lady stooped and lifted the dead duke, and bore him to his chamber without a word, and laid him tenderly upon his bed.

"Send for the doctor," said Corona; "I will watch beside him."

"But, Excellency, are you not afraid?" asked the woman.

Corona's lip curled a little.

"I am not afraid," she answered. "Send at once." When the woman was gone, she sat down by the bedside and waited. Her tears were dry now, but she could not think. She waited motionless for an hour. Then the old physician entered softly, while a crowd of servants stood without, peering timidly through the open door. Corona crossed the room and quietly shut it. The physician stood by the bedside.

"It is simple enough, Signora Duchessa," he said, gently. "He is quite dead. It was only the day before yesterday that I warned him that the heart disease was worse. Can you tell me how it happened?"

"Yes, exactly," answered Corona, in a low voice. She was calm enough now. "He came into my room two hours ago, and suddenly, in conversation, he became very angry. Then his anger subsided in a moment, and he fell at my feet."

"It is just as I expected," answered the physician, quietly. "They always die in this way. I entreat you to be calm—to consider that all men are mortal——"

"I am calm now," interrupted Corona. "I am alone. Will you see that what is necessary is done quickly? I will leave you for a moment. There are people outside."

As she opened the door the gaping crowd of servants slunk out of her way. With bent head she passed between them, and went out into the great reception-rooms, and sat down alone in her grief.

It was genuine, of its kind. The poor man's soul might rest in peace, for she felt the real sorrow at his death which he had longed for, which he had perhaps scarcely dared to hope she would feel. Had it not been real, in those first moments some thought would have crossed her mind—some faint, repressed satisfaction at being free at last—free to marry Giovanni Saracinesca. But it was not so. She did not feel free—she felt alone, intensely alone. She longed for the familiar sound of his querulous voice—for the expression of his thousand little

wants and interests; she remembered tenderly his harmless little vanities. She thought of his wig, and she wept. So true it is that what is most ridiculous in life is most sorrowfully pathetic in death. There was not one of the small things about him she did not recall with a pang of regret. It was all over now. His vanity was dead with him; his tender love for her was dead too. It was the only love she had known, until that other love—that dark and stirring passion—had been roused in her. But that did not trouble her now. Perhaps the unconscious sense that henceforth she was free to love whom she pleased had suddenly made insignificant a feeling which had before borne in her mind the terrible name of crime. The struggle for loyalty was no more, but the memory of what she had borne for the dead man made him dearer than before. The follies of his life had been many, but many of them had been for her, and there was the true ring in his last words. "To be young for your sake, Corona—for your sake!" The phrase echoed again and again in her remembrance, and her silent tears flowed afresh. The follies of his life had been many, but to her he had been true. The very violence of his last moments, the tenderness of his passionate appeal for forgiveness, spoke for the honesty of his heart, even though his heart had never been honest before.

She needed never to think again of pleasing him, of helping him, of foregoing for his sake any intimacy with the world which she might desire. But the thought brought no relief. He had become so much a part of her life that she could not conceive of living without him, and she would miss him at every turn. The new existence before her seemed dismal and empty beyond all expression. She wondered vaguely what she should do with her time. For one moment a strange longing came over her to return to the dear old convent, to lay aside for ever her coronet and state, and in a simple garb to do simple and good things to the honour of God.

She roused herself at last, and went to her own rooms,

dragging her steps slowly as though weighed down by a heavy burden. She entered the room where he had died, and a cold shudder passed over her. The afternoon sun was streaming through the window upon the writing-table where yet lay the unfinished invitation she had been writing, and upon the plants and the rich ornaments, upon the heavy carpet—the very spot where he had breathed his last word of love and died at her feet.

Upon that spot Corona d'Astrardente knelt down reverently and prayed,—prayed that she might be forgiven for all her shortcomings to the dear dead man; that she might have strength to bear her sorrow and to honour his memory; above all, that his soul might rest in peace and find forgiveness, and that he might know that she had been truly innocent—she prayed for that too, for she had a dreadful doubt. But surely he knew all now: how she had striven to be loyal, and how truly—yes, how truly—she mourned his death.

At last she rose to her feet, and lingered still a moment, her hands clasped as they had been in her prayer. Glancing down, something glistened on the carpet. She stooped and picked it up. It was her husband's seal-ring, engraven with the ancient arms of the Astrardente. She looked long at the jewel, and then put it upon her finger.

"God give me grace to honour his memory as he would have me honour it," she said, solemnly.

Truly, she had deserved the love the poor old dandy had so deeply felt for her.

CHAPTER XVII.

That night Giovanni insisted on going out. His wounds no longer pained him, he said; there was no danger whatever, and he was tired of staying at home. But he would dine with his father as usual. He loved

his father's company, and when the two omitted to quarrel over trifles they were very congenial. To tell the truth, the differences between them arose generally from the petulant quickness of the Prince; for in his son his own irascible character was joined with the melancholy gravity which Giovanni inherited from his mother, and in virtue of which, being taciturn, he was sometimes thought long-suffering.

As usual, they sat opposite each other, and the ancient butler Pasquale served them. As the man deposited Giovanni's soup before him, he spoke. A certain liberty was always granted to Pasquale; Italian servants are members of the family, even in princely houses. Never assuming that confidence implies familiarity, they enjoy the one without ever approaching the latter. Nevertheless it was very rarely that Pasquale spoke to his masters when they were at table.

"I beg your Excellencies' pardon——" he began, as he put down the soup-plate.

"Well, Pasquale?" asked old Saracinesca, looking sharply at the old servant from under his heavy brows.

"Have your Excellencies heard the news?"

"What news? No," returned the Prince.

"The Duca d'Astrardente——"

"Well, what of him?"

"Is dead."

"Dead!" repeated Giovanni in a loud voice, that echoed to the vaulted roof of the dining-room.

"It is not true," said old Saracinesca; "I saw him in the street this morning."

"Nevertheless, your Excellency," replied Pasquale, "it is quite true. The gates of the palace were already draped with black before the Ave Maria this evening; and the porter, who is a nephew of mine, had *crêpe* upon his hat and arm. He told me that the Duca fell down dead of a stroke in the Signora Duchessa's room at half-past twelve to-day."

"Is that all you could learn?" asked the Prince.