

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.

"Except that the Signora Duchessa was overcome with grief," returned the servant, gravely.

"I should think so—her husband dead of an apoplexy! It is natural," said the Prince, looking at Giovanni. The latter was silent, and tried to eat as though nothing had happened—inwardly endeavouring not to rejoice too madly at the terrible catastrophe. In his effort to control his features, the blood rushed to his forehead, and his hand trembled violently. His father saw it, but made no remark.

"Poor Astrardente!" he said. "He was not so bad as people thought him."

"No," replied Giovanni, with a great effort; "he was a very good man."

"I should hardly say that," returned his father, with a grim smile of amusement. "I do not think that by the greatest stretch of indulgence he could be called good."

"And why not?" asked the younger man, sharply snatching at any possible discussion in order to conceal his embarrassment.

"Why not, indeed! Why, because he had a goodly share of original sin, to which he added others of his own originating but having an equal claim to originality."

"I say I think he was a very good man," repeated Giovanni, maintaining his point with an air of conviction.

"If that is your conception of goodness, it is no wonder that you have not attained to sanctity," said the old man, with a sneer.

"It pleases you to be witty," answered his son. "Astrardente did not gamble; he had no vices of late. He was kind to his wife."

"No vices—no. He did not steal like a fraudulent bank-clerk, nor try to do murder like Del Ferice. He did not deceive his wife, nor starve her to death. He had therefore no vices. He was a good man."

"Let us leave poor Del Ferice alone," said Giovanni.

"I suppose you will pity him now," replied the Prince,

sarcastically. "You will talk differently if he dies and you have to leave the country at a moment's notice, like Spicca this morning."

"I should be very sorry if Del Ferice died. I should never recover from it. I am not a professional duellist like Spicca. And yet Casalverde deserved his death. I can quite understand that Del Ferice might in the excitement of the moment have lunged at me after the halt was cried, but I cannot understand how Casalverde could be so infamous as not to cross his sword when he himself called. It looked very much like a preconcerted arrangement. Casalverde deserved to die, for the safety of society. I should think that Rome had had enough of duelling for a while."

"Yes; but after all, Casalverde did not count for much. I am not sure I ever saw the fellow before in my life. And I suppose Del Ferice will recover. There was a story this morning that he was dead; but I went and inquired myself, and found that he was better. People are much shocked at this second duel. Well, it could not be helped. Poor old Astrardente! So we shall never see his wig again at every ball and theatre and supper-party! There was a man who enjoyed his life to the very end!"

"I should not call it enjoyment to be built up every day by one's valet, like a card-house, merely to tumble to pieces again when the pins are taken out," said Giovanni.

"You do not seem so enthusiastic in his defence as you were a few minutes ago," said the Prince, with a smile.

Giovanni was so much disturbed at the surprising news that he hardly knew what he said. He made a desperate attempt to be sensible.

"It appears to me that moral goodness and personal appearance are two things," he said, oracularly. The Prince burst into a loud laugh.

"Most people would say that! Eat your dinner, Giovanni, and do not talk such arrant nonsense."

"Why is it nonsense? Because you do not agree with me?"

"Because you are too much excited to talk sensibly," said his father. "Do you think I cannot see it?"

Giovanni was silent for a time. He was angry at his father for detecting the cause of his vagueness, but he supposed there was no help for it. At last Pasquale left the room. Old Saracinesca gave a sigh of relief.

"And now, Giovannino," he said familiarly, "what have you got to say for yourself?"

"I?" asked his son, in some surprise.

"You! What are you going to do?"

"I will stay at home," said Giovanni, shortly.

"That is not the question. You are wise to stay at home, because you ought to get yourself healed of that scratch. Giovanni, the Astrardente is now a widow."

"Seeing that her husband is dead—of course. There is vast ingenuity in your deduction," returned the younger man, eyeing his father suspiciously.

"Do not be an idiot, Giovannino. I mean, that as she is a widow, I have no objection to your marrying her."

"Good God, sir!" cried Giovanni, "what do you mean?"

"What I say. She is the most beautiful woman in Rome. She is one of the best women I know. She will have a sufficient jointure. Marry her. You will never be happy with a silly little girl just out of a convent. You are not that sort of man. The Astrardente is not three-and-twenty, but she has had five years of the world, and she has stood the test well. I shall be proud to call her my daughter."

In his excitement Giovanni sprang from his seat, and rushing to his father's side, threw his arms round his neck and embraced him. He had never done such a thing in his life. Then he remained standing, and grew suddenly thoughtful.

"It is heartless of us to talk in this way," he said.

"The poor man is not buried yet."

"My dear boy," said the old Prince, "Astrardente is dead. He hated me, and was beginning to hate you, I

fancy. We were neither of us his friends, at any rate. We do not rejoice at his death; we merely regard it in the light of an event which modifies our immediate future. He is dead, and his wife is free. So long as he was alive, the fact of your loving her was exceedingly unfortunate: it was injuring you and doing a wrong to her. Now, on the contrary, the greatest good fortune that can happen to you both is that you should marry each other."

"That is true," returned Giovanni. In the suddenness of the news, it had not struck him that his father would ever look favourably upon the match, although the immediate possibility of the marriage had burst upon him as a great light suddenly rising in a thick darkness. But his nature, as strong as his father's, was a little more delicate, a shade less rough; and even in the midst of his great joy, it struck him as heartless to be discussing the chances of marrying a woman whose husband was not yet buried. No such scruple disturbed the geniality of the old Prince. He was an honest and straightforward man—a man easily possessed by a single idea—and he was capable of profound affections. He had loved his Spanish wife strongly in his own fashion, and she had loved him; but there was no one left to him now but his son, whom he delighted in, and he regarded the rest of the world merely as pawns to be moved into position for the honour and glory of the Saracinesca. He thought no more of a man's life than of the end of a cigar, smoked out and fit to be thrown away. Astrardente had been nothing to him but an obstacle. It had not struck him that he could ever be removed; but since it had pleased Providence to take him out of the way, there was no earthly reason for mourning his death. All men must die—it was better that death should come to those who stood in the way of their fellow-creatures.

"I am not at all sure that she will consent," said Giovanni, beginning to walk up and down the room.

"Bah!" ejaculated his father. "You are the best match in Italy. Why should any woman refuse you?"

"I am not so sure. She is not like other women. Let us not talk of it now. It will not be possible to do anything for a year, I suppose. A year is a long time. Meanwhile I will go to that poor man's funeral."

"Of course. So will I."

And they both went, and found themselves in a vast crowd of acquaintances. No one had believed that Astrardente could ever die, that the day would ever come when society should know his place no more; and with one consent everybody sent their carriages to the funeral, and went themselves a day or two later to the great requiem Mass in the parish church. There was nothing to be seen but the great black catafalque, with Corona's household of servants in deep mourning liveries kneeling behind it. Relations she had none, and the dead man was the last of his race—she was utterly alone.

"She need not have made it so terribly impressive," said Madame Mayer to Valdarno when the Mass was over. Madame Mayer paused beside the holy-water basin, and dipping one gloved finger, she presented it to Valdarno with an engaging smile. Both crossed themselves.

"She need not have got it up so terribly impressively, after all," she repeated.

"I daresay she will miss him at first," returned Valdarno, who was a kind-hearted fellow enough, and was very far from realising how much he had contributed to the sudden death of the old dandy. "She is a strange woman. I believe she had grown fond of him."

"Oh, I know all that," said Donna Tullia, as they left the church.

"Yes," answered her companion, with a significant smile, "I presume you do." Donna Tullia laughed harshly as she got into her carriage.

"You are detestable, Valdarno—you always misunderstand me. Are you going to the ball to-night?"

"Of course. May I have the pleasure of the cotillon?"

"If you are very good—if you will go and ask the news of Del Ferice."

"I sent this morning. He is quite out of danger, they believe."

"Is he? Oh, I am very glad—I felt so very badly, you know. Ah, Don Giovanni, are you recovered?" she asked coldly, as Saracinesca approached the other side of the carriage. Valdarno retired to a distance, and pretended to be buttoning his greatcoat; he wanted to see what would happen.

"Thank you, yes; I was not much hurt. This is the first time I have been out, and I am glad to find an opportunity of speaking to you. Let me say again how profoundly I regret my forgetfulness at the ball the other night——"

Donna Tullia was a clever woman, and though she had been very angry at the time, she was in love with Giovanni. She therefore looked at him suddenly with a gentle smile, and just for one moment her fingers touched his hand as it rested upon the side of the carriage.

"Do you think it was kind?" she asked, in a low voice.

"It was abominable. I shall never forgive myself," answered Giovanni.

"I will forgive you," answered Donna Tullia, softly. She really loved him. It was the best thing in her nature, but it was more than balanced by the jealousy she had conceived for the Duchessa d'Astrardente.

"Was it on that account that you quarrelled with poor Del Ferice?" she asked, after a moment's pause. "I have feared it——"

"Certainly not," answered Giovanni, quickly. "Pray set your mind at rest. Del Ferice or any other man would have been quite justified in calling me out for it—but it was not for that. It was not on account of you."

It would have been hard to say whether Donna Tullia's face expressed more clearly her surprise or her disappointment at the intelligence. Perhaps she had both really believed herself the cause of the duel, and had been flattered at the thought that men would fight for her.

"Oh, I am very glad—it is a great relief," she said, rather coldly. "Are you going to the ball to-night?"

"No; I cannot dance. My right arm is bound up in a sling, as you see."

"I am sorry you are not coming. Good-bye, then."

"Good-bye; I am very grateful for your forgiveness." Giovanni bowed low, and Donna Tullia's brilliant equipage dashed away.

Giovanni was well satisfied at having made his peace so easily, but he nevertheless apprehended danger from Donna Tullia.

The next thing which interested Roman society was Astrardente's will, but no one was much surprised when the terms of it were known. As there were no relations, everything was left to his wife. The palace in Rome, the town and castle in the Sabines, the broad lands in the low hill-country towards Ceprano, and what surprised even the family lawyer, a goodly sum in solid English securities,—a splendid fortune in all, according to Roman ideas. Astrardente abhorred the name of money in his conversation—it had been one of his affectations; but he had an excellent understanding of business, and was exceedingly methodical in the management of his affairs. The inheritance, the lawyer thought, might be estimated at three millions of scudi.

"Is all this wealth mine, then?" asked Corona, when the solicitor had explained the situation.

"All, Signora Duchessa. You are enormously rich."

Enormously rich! And alone in the world. Corona asked herself if she was the same woman, the same Corona del Carmine who five years before had suffered in the old convent the humiliation of having no pocket-money, whose wedding-gown had been provided from the proceeds of a little sale of the last relics of her father's once splendid collection of old china and pictures. She had never thought of money since she had been married; her husband was generous, but methodical; she never bought anything without consulting him, and the bills all went

through his hands. Now and then she had rather timidly asked for a small sum for some charity; she had lacked nothing that money could buy, but she never remembered to have had more than a hundred francs in her purse. Astrardente had once offered to give her an allowance, and had seemed pleased that she refused it. He liked to manage things himself, being a man of detail.

And now she was enormously rich, and alone. It was a strange sensation. She felt it to be so new that she innocently said so to the lawyer.

"What shall I do with it all?"

"Signora Duchessa," returned the old man, "with regard to money the question is, not what to do with it, but how to do without it. You are very young, Signora Duchessa."

"I shall be twenty-three in August," said Corona, simply.

"Precisely. I would beg to be allowed to observe that by the terms of the will, and by the laws of this country, you are not the dowager-duchess, but you are in your own right and person the sole and only feudal mistress and holder of the title."

"Am I?"

"Certainly, with all the privileges thereto attached. It may be—I beg pardon for being so bold as to suggest it—it may be that in years to come, when time has soothed your sorrow, you may wish, you may consent, to renew the marriage tie."

"I doubt it—but the thing is possible," said Corona, quietly.

"In that case, and should you prefer to contract a marriage of inclination, you will have no difficulty in conferring your title upon your husband, with any reservations you please. Your children will then inherit from you, and become in their turn Dukes of Astrardente. This I conceive to have been the purpose and spirit of the late Duke's will. The estate, magnificent as it is, will not be too large for the foundation of a new race. If you desire

any distinctive title, you can call yourself Duchessa del Carmine d'Astrardente—it would sound very well," remarked the lawyer, contemplating the beautiful woman before him.

"It is of little importance what I call myself," said Corona. "At present I shall certainly make no change. It is very unlikely that I shall ever marry."

"I trust, Signora Duchessa, that in any case you will always command my most humble services."

With this protestation of fidelity the lawyer left the Palazzo Astrardente, and Corona remained in her boudoir in meditation of what it would be like to be the feudal mistress of a great title and estate. She was very sad, but she was growing used to her solitude. Her liberty was strange to her, but little by little she was beginning to enjoy it. At first she had missed the constant care of the poor man who for five years had been her companion; she had missed his presence and the burden of thinking for him at every turn of the day. But it was not for long. Her memory of him was kind and tender, and for months after his death the occasional sight of some object associated with him brought the tears to her eyes. She often wished he could walk into the room in his old way, and begin talking of the thousand and one bits of town gossip that interested him. But the first feeling of desolation soon passed, for he had not been more than a companion; she could analyse every memory she had of him to its source and reason. There was not in her that passionate unformulated yearning for him that comes upon a loving heart when its fellow is taken away, and which alone is a proof that love has been real and true. She soon grew accustomed to his absence.

To marry again—every one would say she would be right—to marry and to be the mother of children, of brave sons and noble girls,—ah yes! that was a new thought, a wonderful thought, one of many that were wonderful.

Then, again, her strong nature suddenly rose in a new

sense of strength, and she paced the room slowly with a strange expression of sternness upon her beautiful features.

"I am a power in the world," she said to herself, almost starting at the truth of the thought, and yet taking delight in it. "I am what men call rich and powerful; I have money, estates, castles, and palaces; I am young, I am strong. What shall I do with it all?"

As she walked, she dreamed of raising some great institution of charity; she knew not for what precise object, but there was room enough for charity in Rome. The great Torlonia had built churches, and hospitals, and asylums. She would do likewise; she would make for herself an interest in doing good, a satisfaction in the exercise of her power to combat evil. It would be magnificent to feel that she had done it herself, alone and unaided; that she had built the walls from the foundation and the corner-stone to the eaves; that she had entered herself into the study of each detail, and herself peopled the great institution with such as needed most help in the world—with little children, perhaps. She would visit them every day, and herself provide for their wants and care for their sufferings. She would give the place her husband's name, and the good she would accomplish with his earthly portion might perhaps profit his soul. She would go to Padre Filippo and ask his advice. He would know what was best to be done, for he knew more of the misery in Rome than any one, and had a greater mind to relieve it. She had seen him since her husband's death, but she had not yet conceived this scheme.

And Giovanni—she thought of him too; but the habit of putting him out of her heart was strong. She dimly fancied that in the far future a day might come when she would be justified in thinking of him if she so pleased; but for the present, her loyalty to her dead husband seemed more than ever a sacred duty. She would not permit herself to think of Giovanni, even though, from a general point of view, she might contemplate the possibility of a second marriage. She would go to Padre Filippo and

talk over everything with him; he would advise her well.

Then a wild longing seized her to leave Rome for a while, to breathe the air of the country, to get away from the scene of all her troubles, of all the terrible emotions that had swept over her life in the last three weeks, to be alone in the hills or by the sea. It seemed dreadful to be tied to her great house in the city, in her mourning, shut off suddenly from the world, and bound down by the chain of conventionality to a fixed method of existence. She would give anything to go away. Why not? She suddenly realised what was so hard to understand, that she was free to go where she pleased—if only, by accident, she could chance to meet Giovanni Saracinesca before she left. No—the thought was unworthy. She would leave town at once—surely she could have nothing to say to Giovanni—she would leave to-morrow morning.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Corona found it impossible to leave town so soon as she had wished. She had indeed sent out great cart-loads of furniture, servants, horses, and all the paraphernalia of an establishment in the country, and she believed herself ready to move at once, when she received an exceedingly courteous note from Cardinal Antonelli requesting the honour of being received by her the next day at twelve o'clock. It was impossible to refuse, and to her great annoyance she was obliged to postpone her departure another twenty-four hours. She guessed that the great man was the bearer of some message from the Holy Father himself; and in her present frame of mind, such words of comfort could not fail to be acceptable from one whom she revered and loved, as all who knew Pius IX. did sincerely revere and love him. She did not like the

Cardinal, it is true; but she did not confound the ambassador with him who sent the embassy. The Cardinal was a most courteous and accomplished man of the world, and Corona could not easily have explained the aversion she felt for him. It is very likely that if she could have understood the part he was sustaining in the great European struggle of those days, she would have accorded him at least the admiration he deserved as a statesman. He had his faults, and they were faults little becoming a cardinal of the Holy Roman Church. But few are willing to consider that, though a cardinal, he was not a priest—that he was practically a layman who, by his own unaided genius, had attained to great power, and that those faults which have been charged against him with such virulence would have passed, nay, actually pass, unnoticed and uncensured in many a great statesman of those days and of these. He was a brave man, who fought a desperate and hopeless fight to his last breath, and who fought almost alone—a man most bitterly hated by many, at whose death many rejoiced loudly and few mourned; and to the shame of many be it said, that his most obstinate adversaries, those who unsparingly heaped abuse upon him during his lifetime, and most unseemingly exulted over his end, were the very men among whom he should have found the most willing supporters and the firmest friends. But in 1865 he was feared, and those who reckoned without him in the game of politics reckoned badly.

Corona was a woman, and very young. She had not the knowledge or the experience to understand his value, and she had taken a personal dislike to him when she first appeared in society. He was too smooth for her; she thought him false. She preferred a rougher type. Her husband, on the other hand, had a boundless admiration for the cardinal-statesman; and perhaps the way in which Astrardente constantly tried to impress his wife with a sense of the great man's virtues, indirectly contributed to increase her aversion. Nevertheless, when he sent word that he desired to be received by her, she did not hesitate