

Corona not to attempt to see her. He would have gone to Saracinesca for the mere sake of being nearer to her, had he not reflected that he would be encouraging all manner of gossip by so doing. But he determined that so soon as Lent began, he would declare his intention of leaving the city for a year. No one ever went to Saracinesca, and by making a circuit he could reach the ancestral castle without creating suspicion. He might even go to Paris for a few days, and have it supposed that he was wandering about Europe, for he could trust his own servants implicitly; they were not of the type who would drink wine at a tavern with Temistocle or any of his class.

The old Prince came into his son's room in the morning and found him disconsolately looking over his guns, for the sake of an occupation.

"Well, Giovanni," he said, "you have time to reflect upon your future conduct. What! are you going upon a shooting expedition?"

"I wish I could. I wish I could find anything to do," answered Giovanni, laying down the breech-loader and looking out of the window. "The world is turned inside out like a beggar's pocket, and there is nothing in it."

"So the Astrardente is gone," remarked the Prince.

"Yes; gone to live within twenty miles of Saracinesca," replied Giovanni, with an angry intonation.

"Do not go there yet," said his father. "Leave her alone a while. Women become frantic in solitude."

"Do you think I am an idiot?" exclaimed Giovanni. "Of course I shall stay where I am till Carnival is over." He was not in a good humour.

"Why are you so petulant?" retorted the old man. "I merely gave you my advice."

"Well, I am going to follow it. It is good. When Carnival is over I will go away, and perhaps get to Saracinesca by a roundabout way, so that no one will know where I am. Will you not come too?"

"I daresay," answered the Prince, who was always

pleased when his son expressed a desire for his company. "I wish we lived in the good old times."

"Why?"

"We would make small scruple of besieging Astrardente and carrying off the Duchessa for you, my boy," said the Prince, grimly.

Giovanni laughed. Perhaps the same idea had crossed his mind. He was not quite sure whether it was respectful to Corona to think of carrying her off in the way his father suggested; but there was a curious flavour of possibility in the suggestion, coming as it did from a man whose grandfather might have done such a thing, and whose great-grandfather was said to have done it. So strong are the instincts of barbaric domination in races where the traditions of violence exist in an unbroken chain, that both father and son smiled at the idea as if it were quite natural, although Giovanni had only the previous day promised that he would not even attempt to see Corona d'Astrardente without her permission. He did not tell his father of his promise, however, for his more delicate instinct made him sure that though he had acted rightly, his father would laugh at his scruples, and tell him that women liked to be wooed roughly.

Meanwhile Giovanni felt that Rome had become for him a vast solitude, and the smile soon faded from his face at the thought that he must go out into the world, and for Corona's sake act as though nothing had happened.

CHAPTER XX.

Poor Madame Mayer was in great anxiety of mind. She had not a great amount of pride, but she made up for it by a plentiful endowment of vanity, in which she suffered acutely. She was a good-natured woman enough, and by nature she was not vindictive; but she could not

help being jealous, for she was in love. She felt how Giovanni every day evidently cared less and less for her society, and how, on the other hand, Del Ferice was quietly assuring his position, so that people already began to whisper that he had a chance of becoming her husband. She did not dislike Del Ferice; he was a convenient man of the world, whom she always found ready to help her when she needed help. But by dint of making use of him, she was beginning to feel in some way bound to consider him as an element in her life, and she did not like the position. The letter he had written her was of the kind a man might write to the woman he loved; it bordered upon the familiar, even while the writer expressed himself in terms of exaggerated respect. Perhaps if Del Ferice had been well, she would have simply taken no notice of what he had written, and would not even have sent an answer; but she had not the heart to repulse him altogether in his present condition. There was a phrase cunningly introduced and ambiguously worded, which seemed to mean that he had come by his wound in her cause. He spoke of having suffered and of still suffering so much for her,—did he mean to refer to pain of body or of mind? It was not certain. Don Giovanni had assured her that she was in no way concerned in the duel, and he was well known for his honesty; nevertheless, out of delicacy, he might have desired to conceal the truth from her. It seemed like him. She longed for an opportunity of talking with him and eliciting some explanation of his conduct. There had been a time when he used to visit her, and always spent some time in her society when they met in the world—now, on the contrary, he seemed to avoid her whenever he could; and in proportion as she noticed that his manner cooled, her own jealousy against Corona d'As-trardente increased in force, until at last it seemed to absorb her love for Giovanni into itself and turn it into hate.

Love is a passion which, like certain powerful drugs, acts differently upon each different constitution of temper;

love also acts more strongly when it is unreturned or thwarted than when it is mutual and uneventful. If two persons love each other truly, and there is no obstacle to their union, it is probable that, without any violent emotion, their love will grow and become stronger by imperceptible degrees, without changing in its natural quality; but if thwarted by untoward circumstances, the passion, if true, attains suddenly to the dimensions which it would otherwise need years to reach. It sometimes happens that the nature in which this unforeseen and abnormal development takes place is unable to bear the precocious growth; then, losing sight of its identity in the strange inward confusion of heart and mind which ensues, it is driven to madness, and, breaking every barrier, either attains its object at a single bound, or is shivered and ruined in dashing itself against the impenetrable wall of complete impossibility. But again, in the last case, when love is wholly unreturned, it dies a natural death of atrophy, when it has existed in a person of common and average nature; or if the man or woman so afflicted be proud and of noble instincts, the passion becomes a kind of religion to the heart—sacred, and worthy to be guarded from the eyes of the world; or, finally, again, where it finds vanity the dominant characteristic of the being in whom it has grown, it draws a poisonous life from the unhealthy soil on which it is fed, and the tender seed of love shoots and puts forth evil leaves and blossoms, and grows to be a most venomous tree, which is the tree of hatred.

Donna Tullia was certainly a woman who belonged to the latter class of individuals. She had qualities which were perhaps good because not bad; but the mainspring of her being was an inordinate vanity; and it was in this characteristic that she was most deeply wounded, as she found herself gradually abandoned by Giovanni Saracinesca. She had been in the habit of thinking of him as a probable husband; the popular talk had fostered the idea, and occasional hints, and smiling questions concerning him, had made her feel that he could not long hang back.

She had been in the habit of treating him familiarly; and he, tutored by his father to the belief that she was the best match for him, and reluctantly yielding to the force of circumstances, which seemed driving him into matrimony, had suffered himself to be ordered about and made use of with an indifference which, in Madame Mayer's eyes, had passed for consent. She had watched with growing fear and jealousy his devotion to the Astrardente, which all the world had noticed; and at last her anger had broken out at the affront she had received at the Frangipani ball. But even then she loved Giovanni in her own vain way. It was not till Corona was suddenly left a widow, that Donna Tullia began to realise the hopelessness of her position; and when she found how determinately Saracinesca avoided her wherever they met, the affection she had hitherto felt for him turned into a bitter hatred, stronger even than her jealousy against the Duchessa. There was no scene of explanation between them, no words passed, no dramatic situation, such as Donna Tullia loved; the change came in a few days, and was complete. She had not even the satisfaction of receiving some share of the attention Giovanni would have bestowed upon Corona if she had been in town. Not only had he grown utterly indifferent to her; he openly avoided her, and thereby inflicted upon her vanity the cruellest wound she was capable of feeling.

With Donna Tullia to hate was to injure, to long for revenge—not of the kind which is enjoyed in secret, and known only to the person who suffers and the person who causes the suffering. She did not care for that so much as she desired some brilliant triumph over her enemies before the world; some startling instance of poetic justice, which should at one blow do a mortal injury to Corona d'Astrardente, and bring Giovanni Saracinesca to her own feet by force, repentant and crushed, to be dealt with as she saw fit, according to his misdeeds. But she had chosen her adversaries ill, and her heart misgave her. She had no hold upon them, for they were very strong

people, very powerful, and very much respected by their fellows. It was not easy to bring them into trouble; it seemed impossible to humiliate them as she wished to do, and yet her hate was very strong. She waited and pondered, and in the meanwhile, when she met Giovanni, she began to treat him with haughty coldness. But Giovanni smiled, and seemed well satisfied that she should at last give over what was to him very like a persecution. Her anger grew hotter from its very impotence. The world saw it, and laughed.

The days of Carnival came and passed, much as they usually pass, in a whirl of gaiety. Giovanni went everywhere, and showed his grave face; but he talked little, and of course every one said he was melancholy at the departure of the Duchessa. Nevertheless he kept up an appearance of interest in what was done, and as nobody cared to risk asking him questions, people left him in peace. The hurrying crowd of social life filled up the place occupied by old Astrardente and the beautiful Duchessa, and they were soon forgotten, for they had not had many intimate friends.

On the last night of Carnival, Del Ferice appeared once more. He had not been able to resist the temptation of getting one glimpse of the world he loved, before the wet blanket of Lent extinguished the lights of the ball-rooms and the jollity of the dancers. Every one was surprised to see him, and most people were pleased; he was such a useful man, that he had often been missed during the time of his illness. He was improved in appearance; for though he was very pale, he had grown also extremely thin, and his features had gained delicacy.

When Giovanni saw him, he went up to him, and the two men exchanged a formal salutation, while every one stood still for a moment to see the meeting. It was over in a moment, and society gave a little sigh of relief, as though a weight were removed from its mind. Then Del Ferice went to Donna Tullia's side. They were soon alone upon a small sofa in a small room, whither a couple strayed

now and then to remain a few minutes before returning to the ball. A few people passed through, but for more than an hour they were not disturbed.

"I am very glad to see you," said Donna Tullia; "but I had hoped that the first time you went out you would have come to my house."

"This is the first time I have been out—you see I should not have found you at home, since I have found you here."

"Are you entirely recovered? You still look ill."

"I am a little weak—but an hour with you will do me more good than all the doctors in the world."

"Thanks," said Donna Tullia, with a little laugh. "It was strange to see you shaking hands with Giovanni Saracinesca just now. I suppose men have to do that sort of thing."

"You may be sure I would not have done it unless it had been necessary," returned Del Ferice, bitterly.

"I should think not. What an arrogant man he is!"

"You no longer like him?" asked Del Ferice, innocently.

"Like him! No; I never liked him," replied Donna Tullia, quickly.

"Oh, I thought you did; I used to wonder at it." Ugo grew thoughtful.

"I was always good to him," said Donna Tullia. "But of course I can never forgive him for what he did at the Frangipani ball."

"No; nor I," answered Del Ferice, readily. "I shall always hate him for that too."

"I do not say that I exactly hate him."

"You have every reason. It appears to me that since my illness we have another idea in common, another bond of sympathy." Del Ferice spoke almost tenderly; but he laughed immediately afterwards, as though not wishing his words to be interpreted too seriously. Donna Tullia smiled too; she was inclined to be very kind to him.

"You are very quick to jump at conclusions," she said, playing with her red fan and looking down.

"It is always easy to reach that pleasant conclusion—that you and I are in sympathy," he answered, with a tender glance, "even in regard to hating the same person. The bond would be close indeed, if it depended on the opposite of hate. And yet I sometimes think it does. Are you not the best friend I have in the world?"

"I do not know,—I am a good friend to you," she answered.

"Indeed you are; but do you not think it would be possible to cement our friendship even more closely yet?"

Donna Tullia looked up sharply; she had no idea of allowing him to propose to marry her. His face, however, was grave—unlike his usual expression when he meant to be tender, and which she knew very well.

"I do not know," she said, with a light laugh. "How do you mean?"

"If I could do you some great service—if I could by any means satisfy what is now your chief desire in life—would not that help to cement our friendship, as I said?"

"Perhaps," she answered, thoughtfully. "But then you do not know—you cannot guess even—what I most wish at this moment."

"I think I could," said Del Ferice, fixing his eyes upon her. "I am sure I could, but I will not. I should risk offending you."

"No; I will not be angry. You may guess if you please." Donna Tullia in her turn looked fixedly at her companion. They seemed trying to read each other's thoughts.

"Very well," said Ugo at last, "I will tell you. You would like to see the Astrardente dead and Giovanni Saracinesca profoundly humiliated."

Donna Tullia started. But indeed there was nothing strange in her companion's knowledge of her feelings. Many people, being asked what she felt, would very likely

have said the same, for the world had seen her discomfiture and had laughed at it.

"You are a very singular man," she said, uneasily.

"In other words," replied Del Ferice, calmly, "I am perfectly right in my surmises. I see it in your face. Of course," he added, with a laugh, "it is mere jest. But the thing is quite possible. If I fulfilled your desire of just and poetic vengeance, what would you give me?"

Donna Tullia laughed in her turn, to conceal the extreme interest she felt in what he said.

"Whatever you like," she said. But even while the laugh was on her lips her eyes sought his uneasily.

"Would you marry me, for instance, as the enchanted princess in the fairy story marries the prince who frees her from the spell?" He seemed immensely amused at the idea.

"Why not?" she laughed.

"It would be the only just recompense," he answered. "See how impossible the thing appears. And yet a few pounds of dynamite would blow up the Great Pyramid. Giovanni Saracinesca is not so strong as he looks."

"Oh, I would not have him hurt!" exclaimed Donna Tullia in alarm.

"I do not mean physically, nor morally, but socially."

"How?"

"That is my secret," returned Del Ferice, quietly.

"It sounds as though you were pretending to know more than you really do," she answered.

"No; it is the plain truth," said Del Ferice, quietly. "If you were in earnest I might be willing to tell you what the secret is, but for a mere jest I cannot. It is far too serious a matter."

His tone convinced Donna Tullia that he really possessed some weapon which he could use against Don Giovanni if he pleased. She wondered only why, if it were true, he did not use it, seeing that he must hate Saracinesca with all his heart. Del Ferice knew so much about people, so many strange and forgotten stories, he had so

accurate a memory and so acute an intelligence, that it was by no means impossible that he was in possession of some secret connected with the Saracinesca. They were, or were thought to be, wild, unruly men, both father and son; there were endless stories about them both; and there was nothing more likely than that, in his numerous absences from home, Giovanni had at one time or another figured in some romantic affair, which he would be sorry to have had generally known. Del Ferice was wise enough to keep his own counsel; but now that his hatred was thoroughly roused, he might very likely make use of the knowledge he possessed. Donna Tullia's curiosity was excited to its highest pitch, and at the same time she had pleasant visions of the possible humiliation of the man by whom she felt herself so ill-used. It would be worth while making the sacrifice in order to learn Del Ferice's secret.

"This need not be a mere jest," she said, after a moment's silence.

"That is as you please," returned Del Ferice, seriously. "If you are willing to do your part, you may be sure that I will do mine."

"You cannot think I really meant what I said just now," replied Donna Tullia. "It would be madness."

"Why? Am I halt, am I lame, am I blind? Am I repulsively ugly? Am I a pauper, that I should care for your money? Have I not loved you—yes, loved you long and faithfully? Am I too old? Is there anything in the nature of things why I should not aspire to be your husband?"

It was strange. He spoke calmly, as though enumerating the advantages of a friend. Donna Tullia looked at him for a moment, and then laughed outright.

"No," she said; "all that is very true. You may aspire, as you call it. The question is, whether I shall aspire too. Of course, if we happened to agree in aspiring, we could be married to-morrow."

"Precisely," answered Del Ferice, perfectly unmoved.

"I am not proposing to marry you. I am arguing the case. There is this in the case which is perhaps outside the argument—this, that I am devotedly attached to you. The case is the stronger for that. I was only trying to demonstrate that the idea of our being married is not so unutterably absurd. You laughingly said you would marry me if I could accomplish something which would please you very much. I laughed also; but now I seriously repeat my proposition, because I am convinced that although at first sight it may appear extremely humorous, on a closer inspection it will be found exceedingly practical. In union is strength."

Donna Tullia was silent for a moment, and her face grew grave. There was reason in what he said. She did not care for him—she had never thought of marrying him; but she recognised the justice of what he said. It was clear that a man of his social position, received everywhere and intimate with all her associates, might think of marrying her. He looked positively handsome since he was wounded; he was accomplished and intelligent; he had sufficient means of support to prevent him from being suspected of marrying solely for money, and he had calmly stated that he loved her. Perhaps he did. It was flattering to Donna Tullia's vanity to believe him, and his acts had certainly not belied his words. He was by far the most thoughtful of all her admirers, and he affected to treat her always with a certain respect which she had never succeeded in obtaining from Valdarno and the rest. A woman who likes to be noisy, but is conscious of being a little vulgar, is always flattered when a man behaves towards her with profound reverence. It will even sometimes cure her of her vulgarity. Donna Tullia reflected seriously upon what Del Ferice had said.

"I never had such a proposition made to me in my life," she said. "Of course you cannot think I regard it as a possible one, even now. You cannot think I am so base as to sell myself for the sake of revenging an insult once offered me. If I am to regard this as a proposal of mar-

riage, I must decline it with thanks. If it is merely a proposition for an alliance, I think the terms of the treaty are unequal."

Del Ferice smiled.

"I knew you well enough to know what your answer would be," he said. "I never insulted you by dreaming that you would accept such a proposition. But as a subject for speculation it is very pleasant. It is delightful to me to think of being your husband; it is equally delightful to you to think of the humiliation of an enemy. I took the liberty of uniting the two thoughts in one dream—a dream of unspeakable bliss for myself."

Donna Tullia's gay humour returned.

"You have certainly amused me very well for a quarter of an hour with your dreams," she answered. "I wish you would tell me what you know of Don Giovanni. It must be very interesting if it can really seriously influence his life."

"I cannot tell you. The secret is too valuable."

"But if the thing you know has such power, why do you not use it yourself? You must hate him far more than I do."

"I doubt that," answered Del Ferice, with a cunning smile. "I do not use it, I do not choose to strike the blow, because I do not care enough for retribution merely on my own account. I do not pretend to generosity, but I am not interested enough in him to harm him, though I dislike him exceedingly. We had a temporary settlement of our difficulties the other day, and we were both wounded. Poor Casalverde lost his head and did a foolish thing, and that cold-blooded villain Spicca killed him in consequence. It seems to me that there has been enough blood spilled in our quarrel. I am prepared to leave him alone so far as I am concerned. But for you it would be different. I could do something worse than kill him if I chose."

"For me?" said Donna Tullia. "What would you do

for me?" She smiled sweetly, willing to use all her persuasion to extract his secret.

"I could prevent Don Giovanni from marrying the Astrardente, as he intends to do," he answered, looking straight at his companion.

"How in the world could you do that?" she asked, in great surprise.

"That, my dear friend, is my secret, as I said before. I cannot reveal it to you at present."

"You are as dark as the Holy Office," said Donna Tullia, a little impatiently. "What possible harm could it do if you told me?"

"What possible good either?" asked Del Ferice, in reply. "You could not use it as I could. You would gain no advantage by knowing it. Of course," he added, with a laugh, "if we entered into the alliance we were jesting about, it would be different."

"You will not tell me unless I promise to marry you?"

"Frankly, no," he answered, still laughing.

It exasperated Donna Tullia beyond measure to feel that he was in possession of what she so coveted, and to feel that he was bargaining, half in earnest, for her life in exchange for his secret. She was almost tempted for one moment to assent, to say she would marry him, so great was her curiosity; it would be easy to break her promise, and laugh at him afterwards. But she was not a bad woman, as women of her class are considered. She had suffered a great disappointment, and her resentment was in proportion to her vanity. But she was not prepared to give a false promise for the sake of vengeance; she was only bad enough to imagine such bad faith possible.

"But you said you never seriously thought I could accept such an engagement," she objected, not knowing what to say.

"I did," replied Del Ferice. "I might have added that I never seriously contemplated parting with my secret."

"There is nothing to be got from you," said Donna

Tullia, in a tone of disappointment. "I think that when you have nearly driven me mad with curiosity, you might really tell me something."

"Ah no, dear lady," answered her companion. "You may ask anything of me but that—anything. You may ask that too, if you will sign the treaty I propose."

"You will drive me into marrying you out of sheer curiosity," said Donna Tullia, with an impatient laugh.

"I wish that were possible. I wish I could see my way to telling you as it is, for the thing is so curious that it would have the most intense interest for you. But it is quite out of the question."

"You should never have told me anything about it," replied Madame Mayer.

"Well, I will think about it," said Del Ferice at last, as though suddenly resolving to make a sacrifice. "I will look over some papers I have, and I will think about it. I promise you that if I feel that I can conscientiously tell you something of the matter, you may be sure that I will."

Donna Tullia's manner changed again, from impatience to persuasion. The sudden hope he held out to her was delicious to contemplate. She could not realise that Del Ferice, having once thoroughly interested her, could play upon her moods as on the keys of an instrument. If she had been less anxious that the story he told should be true, she might have suspected that he was practising upon her credulity. But she seized the idea of obtaining some secret influence over the life of Giovanni, and it completely carried her away.

"You must tell me—I am sure you will," she said, letting her kindest glance rest upon her companion. "Come and dine with me,—do you fast? No—nor I. Come on Friday—will you?"

"I shall be delighted," answered Del Ferice, with a quiet smile of triumph.

"I will have the old lady, of course, so you cannot tell me at dinner; but she will go to sleep soon afterwards—

she always does. Come at seven. Besides, she is deaf, you know."

The old lady in question was the aged Countess whom Donna Tullia affected as a companion in her solitary magnificence.

"And now, will you take me back to the ball-room? I have an idea that a partner is looking for me."

Del Ferice left her dancing, and went home in his little coupé. He was desperately fatigued, for he was still very weak, and he feared lest his imprudence in going out so soon might bring on a relapse from his convalescence. Nevertheless, before he went to bed he dismissed Temistocle, and opened a shabby-looking black box which stood upon his writing-table. It was bound with iron, and was fastened by a patent lock which had frequently defied Temistocle's ingenuity. From this repository he took a great number of papers, which were all neatly filed away and marked in the owner's small and ornamented handwriting. Beneath many packages of letters he found what he sought for, a long envelope containing several folded documents.

He spread out the papers and read them carefully over.

"It is a very singular thing," he said to himself; "but there can be no doubt about it. There it is."

He folded the papers again, returned them to their envelope, and replaced the latter deep among the letters in his box. He then locked it, attached the key to a chain he wore about his neck, and went to bed, worn out with fatigue.

CHAPTER XXI.

Del Ferice had purposely excited Donna Tullia's curiosity, and he meant before long to tell more than he had vouchsafed in his first confidence. But he himself trembled before the magnitude of what he had suddenly

thought of doing, for the fear of Giovanni was in his heart. The temptation to boast to Donna Tullia that he had the means of preventing Giovanni from marrying was too strong; but when it had come to telling her what those means were, prudence had restrained him. He desired that if the scheme were put into execution it might be by some one else; for, extraordinary as it was, he was not absolutely certain of its success. He was not sure of Donna Tullia's discretion, either, until by a judicious withholding of the secret he had given her a sufficient idea of its importance. But on mature reflection he came to the conclusion that, even if she possessed the information he was able to give, she would not dare to mention it, nor even to hint at it.

The grey light of Ash-Wednesday morning broke over Rome, and stole through the windows of Giovanni Saracinesca's bedroom. Giovanni had not slept much, but his restlessness was due rather to his gladness at having performed the last of his social duties than to any disturbance of mind. All night he lay planning what he should do,—how he might reach his place in the mountains by a circuitous route, leaving the general impression that he was abroad—and how, when at last he had got to Saracinesca unobserved, he would revel in the solitude and in the thought of being within half a day's journey of Corona d'Astrardente. He was willing to take a great deal of trouble, for he did not wish people to know his whereabouts; he would not have it said that he had gone into the country to be near Corona and to see her every day, as would certainly be said if his real movements were discovered. Accordingly, he fulfilled his programme to the letter. He left Rome on the afternoon of Ash-Wednesday for Florence; there he visited several acquaintances who, he knew, would write to their friends in Rome of his appearance; from Florence he went to Paris, and gave out that he was going upon a shooting expedition in the Arctic regions, as soon as the weather was warm enough. As he was well known for a sportsman and a traveller, this