

cation, but, having tacitly discouraged it for so long, she had taken it for granted that he would not venture on a declaration. Even now, though he had spoken words which could bear no other interpretation, she determined to put the taunt aside, and prevent him, if possible, from speaking more plainly. And yet her heart stirred strangely when he called her by her name!

"Yours is almost the only sword we should decline to enlist on any terms, Lord Castletowers," she replied, gravely. "You are an only son, and the last inheritor of a noble name. Your duties lie here."

"You would not think thus if I were an Italian?"

"Certainly not. I should then say that your first duty was to your country."

The Earl came and stood before her, pale and earnest, and not to be turned from his purpose.

"Hear me, Olympia," he said, passionately.

"I love you, and you know that I love you. I have loved you for more than four years. I will not say that I have dared to hope. If I had hoped, I should not, perhaps, have kept silence so long, but I may have thought that you read my secret, and that silence might plead for me more eloquently than words. I know how heavy the chances are against me—I have weighed them all, long since. I know that he who would aspire to your hand must love your Italy as if he were a son of the soil, must throw in his fortunes with her fortunes, and deserve you through his devotion to her cause. I also know that the man who had done all this would only have fulfilled those primary conditions without which the humblest red-shirt in Garibaldi's wake would stand a better chance than himself. Am I not right?"

"Perfectly; but—"

"Do not reply yet, I implore you! You say that I have duties here. It is true; and I am prepared to fulfil them to the uttermost. I will settle this house and half my income on my mother for her life. All else that is mine, land, revenue, strength of body and will, personal influence, life itself, shall be Italy's. Your country shall be my country—your people, my people—your God, my God. Can I say more, except that I love you? That, deeply and dearly as I love you now, I believe from my soul I shall love you better still in years to come. In my eyes you will never be less young or less beautiful. Should sorrow or sickness come upon you, I will do all that man may do to cherish and comfort you. If you are in peril, I will die defending you. The love of my youth will be the love of my age; and what you are to me now, Olympia, whether you reject or accept me, that you will be till my last hour!"

He paused. His manner, even more than his words, had been intense and eager, and now that his passionate appeal was all poured out, he waited for his sentence.

And Olympia? Did she listen unmoved? She strove hard to do so; but she could not quite control the colour that came and went, or the tears that would not be stayed. One by one, as his pleading grew more earnest, they had slipped slowly over the dark lashes and down the oval cheek; and the Earl, who had never seen her shed a tear before, believed it one wild moment that his cause was won.

Her first words undeceived him.

"I am very sorry for this, Lord Castletowers," she said; and her voice, which was a little tremulous at first, became steady as she went on. "I would have given much that these words had never been spoken, for they are spoken in vain. I believe that you love me sincerely. I believe that I have never been so well loved—that I shall never be so well loved again; but—I cannot marry you."

"You will, at least, give me a reason?"

"To what end? That, you might combat it? Do not ask it, my lord. Nothing that I could tell, nothing that you could say, would alter my decision."

The Earl turned his face aside.

"This is cruel," he said. "I have not deserved it."

"Heaven knows that I do not mean it so," replied Olympia, quickly. "I should be more or

less than woman if I did not regret the loss of such a heart as yours."

"You have not lost it, Olympia," he replied, brokenly. "You will never lose it. With me, once is always."

She clasped her hands together, like one in pain.

"Oh, that it were not so!" she exclaimed.

"Are you, then, sorry for me?"

"Bitterly—bitterly!"

"And yet you cannot love me?"

Olympia was silent.

Again the hope flashed upon him—again he broke into passionate pleading.

"I used to think once—madly, presumptuously, if you will—that you were not quite so indifferent to me as you have been of late. Was I mistaken in so thinking? Or is it possible that I have done anything to lessen your regard? Have I ever offended you? Or pained you? Or manifested my admiration too openly?"

"Never—never."

"Then, did you never care for me? For heaven's sake, tell me this before we part."

Olympia became ashy pale and leaned upon the table, as if her strength were failing her.

"Lord Castletowers," she said, slowly, "you have no right to press me thus."

"Not when the happiness of my whole life is at stake? Give me but the shadow of a hope, and I will be silent!"

"I cannot."

The Earl put his hand to his forehead in a bewildered way.

"I don't seem as if I could believe it," he said. "But—if I only knew why, perhaps it would not be so hard to bear."

Miss Colonna looked down, and for some moments neither spoke nor stirred. At length she said:

"I will tell you why, Lord Castletowers, if you must know. It is possible that I may never marry, but if I do, it must be to one who can do more for Italy than yourself. Are you satisfied?"

The young man could not trust himself to speak. He only looked at her; and a dark expression came into his face—such an expression as Olympia had never seen it wear till that moment.

"Farewell," she said, almost imploringly, and put out her hand.

"Farewell," he replied, and, having held it for a moment in his own, disengaged it gently, and said no more.

She remembered afterwards how cold her own hand was, and how dry and hot was the palm in which it rested.

But a few moments later, and she was kneeling by her bedside in her own far-away chamber, silent and self-reliant no longer, but wringing her hands with a woman's passionate sorrow, and crying aloud:

"Oh, that he could have looked into my heart—that he could only have known how I love him!"

CHAPTER LV. AT ARM'S LENGTH.

There was no superfluous guest at Lady Castletowers' table, after all; for Miss Colonna excused herself on the plea of severe headache, and Signor Montecuculi opportunely filled her place. But the dinner proved an *effete inanqué* notwithstanding. The Earl, though as host he strove to do his best, played the part languidly, and was bitterly sad at heart. Saxon, who had come in covered with dust and foam about five minutes before the dinner was served, looked weary and thoughtful, and all unlike his own joyous self. Giulio Colonna, full of Italian politics, was indisposed for conversation. And so, what with Olympia's absence, and what with that vague sense of discomfort inseparable from any kind of parting or removal, a general dreariness pervaded the table.

Miss Matherton, however, was lively and talkative, as usual. Finding Saxon unwontedly silent, she consoled herself with the stranger, and questioned Signor Montecuculi about Sicily and Naples, Calatafimi, Palermo, Garibaldi, and Victor Emmanuel, to her heart's content.

In the meanwhile, Colonna, sitting at Lady

Castletowers' left hand, had been lamenting the non-fulfilment of certain of his plans.

"I had hoped," he said, in a low tone, "that something would have come of it ere this."

"And I had hoped it too, dear friend—for your sake," replied Lady Castletowers, benevolently.

"I had made certain that, knowing how unexpectedly we are called away, he would have spoken to-day; but, on the contrary, he ordered out his horse quite early, and has been in the saddle all day."

"That looks strange."

"Very strange. I wish to heaven we could have remained with you one week longer."

"But it is not too late to reverse your plans."

Colonna shook his head.

"I can no more reverse them," he said, "than I can reverse the order of the planets."

"Then leave Olympia with me. She is not fit to go up to town this evening."

"Thanks—I had already thought of that; but she is determined to accompany me."

To which the Countess, who was much more deeply interested in procuring Miss Matherton's fortune for her son than in securing a wealthy bridegroom for the daughter of her friend, replied, "I am sorry, amico," and transferred her conversation to Mr. Walkingshaw.

But Colonna had not yet played his last card. When the ladies retired, he took the vacant seat at Saxon's right hand, and said:

"Our's is an abrupt departure, Mr. Trefalden; but I trust we shall see you in London."

Saxon bowed, and murmured something about obligation and kindness.

"You are yourself returning to town, I understand, the day after to-morrow."

Saxon believed he was.

"Then you must promise to come and see us. You will find us, for at least the next fortnight, at the Portland Hotel; but after that time we shall probably be bending our steps towards Italy."

Saxon bowed again, and passed the decanters. Colonna began to see that there was something wrong.

"When friends wish to ensure a meeting," said he,—"and we *are* friends, I trust, Mr. Trefalden—their best plan is to make some definite appointment. Will you dine with us on Thursday at our hotel?"

"I am afraid—" began Saxon.

"Nay, that is an ominous beginning."

"I have been so long away from town," continued the young man, somewhat confusedly, "and shall have so many claims upon my time for the next few weeks, that I fear I must make no engagements."

Giulio Colonna was utterly confounded. But yesterday, and this young millionaire would have grasped at any straw of an invitation that might have brought him nearer to Olympia; and now—Was he drawing off? Was he offended? He laid his hand on Saxon's arm, and, bending his most gracious smile upon him, said:

"I will not part from you thus, my dear sir. Those who serve my country serve me, and you have been so munificent a benefactor to our cause, that you have made me your debtor for life. I will not, therefore, suffer you to drop away into the outer ranks of mere acquaintance-ship. I look upon you as a friend, and as a friend you must promise to break bread with me before I leave England."

Saxon would have given the best thoroughbred in his stables—nay, every horse that he possessed, and the mail phaeton into the bargain!—only to know at that moment how the Earl had prospered in his wooing. Being ignorant, however, on this point, he made the best reply he could, under the circumstances.

"I will dine with you, if I can, Signor Colonna," he said, bluntly. At all events, I will call upon you at your hotel, but, until I know how I am situated with—with regard to other friends—I can say nothing more positive."

"Then I suppose I must try to be content," replied the Italian, pleasantly; but he felt that Saxon Trefalden was on his guard, and holding him at arm's length, and, in his heart, he cursed