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THE CHILD OF PLEASURE

Gabriele D'Annunzio



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Book I

Chapter I

Andrea Sperelli dined regularly every Wednesday with his cousin the Marchesa d'Ateleta.

The salons of the Marchesa in the Palazzo Roccagiovine were much frequented. She attracted specially by her sparkling wit and gaiety and her inextinguishable good humour. Her charming and expressive face recalled certain feminine profiles of the younger Moreau and in the vignettes of Gravelot. There was something Pompadouresque in her manner, her tastes, her style of dress, which she no doubt heightened purposely, tempted by her really striking resemblance to the favourite of Louis xv.

One Tuesday evening, in a box at the Valle Theatre, she said laughingly to her cousin, 'Be sure, you come to-morrow, Andrea. Among the guests there will be an interesting, not to say *fatal*, personage. Forewarned is forearmed—Beware of her spells—you are in a very weak frame of mind just now.'

He laughed. 'If you don't mind, I prefer to come unarmed,' he replied, 'or rather in the guise of a victim. It is a character I have assumed for many an evening lately, but alas, without result so far.'

'Well, the sacrifice will soon be consummated, *cugino mio*.'

'The victim is ready!'

The next evening, he arrived at the palace a few minutes earlier than usual, with a wonderful gardenia in his button-hole and a vague uneasiness in his mind. His *compé* had to stop in front of the entrance, the portico being occupied by another carriage, from which a lady was alighting. The liveries, the horses, the ceremonial which accompanied her arrival all proclaimed a great position. The Count caught a glimpse of a tall and graceful figure, a scintillation of diamonds in dark hair and a slender foot on the step. As he went upstairs he had a back view of the lady.

She ascended in front of him with a slow and rhythmic movement; her cloak, lined with fur as white as swan's-down, was unclasped at the throat, and slipping back, revealed her shoulders, pale as polished ivory, the shoulder-blades disappearing into the lace of the corsage with an indescribably soft and fleeting curve as of wings. The neck rose slender and round, and the hair, twisted into a great knot on the crown of her head, was held in place by jewelled pins.

The harmonious gait of this unknown lady gave Andrea such sincere pleasure that he stopped a moment on the first landing to watch her. Her long train swept rustling over the stairs; behind her came a servant, not immediately in the wake of his mistress on the red carpet, but at the side along the wall with irreproachable gravity. The absurd contrast between the magnificent creature and the automaton following her brought a smile to Andrea's lips.

In the anteroom while the servant was relieving her of her cloak, the lady cast a rapid glance at the young man who entered.

The servant announced—'Her Excellency the Duchess of Scerni!' and immediately afterwards—'Count Sperelli-Fieschi d'Ugenta!' It pleased Andrea that his name should be coupled so closely with that of the lady in question.

In the drawing-room were already assembled the Marchese and Marchesa d'Ateleta, the Baron and Baroness d'Isola and Don Filippo del Monte. The fire burned cheerily on the hearth, and several low seats were invitingly disposed within range of its warmth, while large leaf plants spread their red-veined foliage over the low backs.

The Marchesa, advanced to meet the two new arrivals with her delightful ready laugh.