

**ДЖИН
УЭБСТЕР**

THE WHEAT
PRINCESS

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The Wheat Princess

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Jean Webster

The Wheat Princess

PROLOGUE

If you leave the city by the Porta Maggiore and take the Via Prænestina, which leads east into the Sabine hills, at some thirty-six kilometers' distance from Rome you will pass on your left a grey-walled village climbing up the hillside. This is Palestrina, the old Roman Præneste; and a short distance beyond—also on the left—you will find branching off from the straight Roman highway a steep mountain road, which, if you stick to it long enough, will take you, after many windings, to Castel Madama and Tivoli.

Several kilometers along this road you will see shooting up from a bare crag above you a little stone hamlet crowned by the ruins of a mediaeval fortress. The town—Castel Vivalanti—was built in the days when a stronghold was more to be thought of than a water-supply, and its people, from habit or love, or perhaps sheer necessity, have lived on there ever since, going down in the morning to their work in the plain and toiling up at night to their homes on the hill. So steep is its site that the doorway of one house looks down on the roof of the house below, and its narrow stone streets are in reality flights of stairs. The only approach is from the front, by a road which winds and unwinds like a serpent and leads at last to the Porta della Luna, through which all of the traffic enters the town. The gate is ornamented with the crest of the Vivalanti—a phoenix rising out of the flame, supported by a heavy machicolated top, from which, in the old days, stones and burning oil might be dropped upon the heads of the unwelcome guests.

The town is a picturesque little affair—it would be hard to find a place more so in the Sabine villages, it is very, very poor. In the march of the centuries it has fallen out of step and been left far behind; to look at it, one would scarcely dream that on the clear days the walls and towers of modern Rome are in sight on the horizon. But in its time Castel Vivalanti was not insignificant. This little hamlet has entertained history within its walls. It has bodily outfaced robber barons and papal troops. It has been besieged and conquered, and, alas, betrayed—and that by its own prince. Twice has it been razed to the ground and twice rebuilt. In one way or another, though, it has weathered the centuries, and it stands to-day grey and forlorn, clustering about the walls of its donjon and keep.

Castel Vivalanti, as in the middle ages, still gives the title to a Roman prince. The house of Vivalanti was powerful in its day, and the princes may often be met with—not always to their credit—in the history of the Papal States. They were oftener at war than at peace with the holy see, and there is the story of one pope who spent four weary months watching the view from a very small window in Vivalanti's donjon. But, in spite of their unholy quarrels, they were at times devout enough, and twice a cardinal's hat has been worn in the family. The house of late years has dwindled somewhat, both in fortune and importance; but, nevertheless, Vivalanti is a name which is still spoken with respect among the old nobles of Rome.

The lower slopes of the hill on which the village stands are well wooded and green with stone-pines and cypresses, olive orchards and vineyards. Here the princes built their villas when the wars with the popes were safely at an end and they could risk coming down from their stronghold on the mountain. The old villa was built about a mile below the town, and the gardens were laid out in terraces and parterres along the slope of the hill. It has long been in ruin, but its foundations still stand, and the plan of the gardens may easily be traced. You will see the entrance at the left of the road—a massive stone gateway topped with moss-covered urns and a double row of cone-shaped cypresses bordering a once stately avenue now grown over with weeds. If you pause for a moment

—and you cannot help doing so—you will see, between the portals at the end of the avenue, some crumbling arches, and even, if your eyes are good, the fountain itself.

Any contadino that you meet on the road will tell you the story of the old Villa Vivalanti and the 'Bad Prince' who was (by the grace of God) murdered two centuries ago. He will tell you—a story not uncommon in Italy—of storehouses bursting with grain while the peasants were starving, and of how, one moonlight night, as the prince was strolling on the terrace contentedly pondering his wickednesses of the day, a peasant from his own village up on the mountain, creeping behind him, quiet as a cat, stabbed him in the back and dropped his body in the fountain. He will tell you how the light from the burning villa was seen as far as Rocca di Papa in the Alban hills; and he will add, with a laugh and a shrug, that some people say when the moon is full the old prince comes back and sits on the edge of the fountain and thinks of his sins, but that, for himself, he thinks it an old woman's tale. Whereupon he will cast a quick glance over his shoulder at the dark shadow of the cypresses and covertly cross himself as he wishes you, '*A revederla.*'

You cannot wonder that the young prince (two centuries ago) did not build his new villa on the site of the old; for even had he, like the brave contadino, cared nothing for ghosts, still it was scarcely a hallowed spot, and lovers would not care to stroll by the fountain. So it happens that you must travel some distance further along the same road before you reach the gates of the new villa, built anno domini 1693, in the pontificate of his Holiness Innocent XII. Here you will find no gloomy cypresses: the approach is bordered by spreading plane-trees. The villa itself is a rambling affair, and, though slightly time-worn, is still decidedly imposing, with its various wings, its balconies and loggia and marble terrace.

The new villa—for such one must call it—faces west and north. On the west it looks down over olive orchards and vineyards to the Roman Campagna, with the dome of St. Peter's a white speck in the distance, and, beyond it, to a narrow, shining ribbon of sea. On the north it looks up to the Sabine mountains, with the height of Soracte rising like an island on the horizon. For the rest, it is surrounded by laurel and ilex groves with long shady walks and leafy arbors, with fountains and cascades and broken statues all laid out in the stately formality of the seventeenth century. But the trees are no longer so carefully trimmed as they were a century ago; the sun rarely shines in these green alleys, and the nightingales sing all day. Through every season, but especially in the springtime, the garden-borders are glowing with colour. Hedges of roses, oleanders and golden laburnum, scarlet pomegranate blossoms and red and white camellias, marguerites and lilies and purple irises, bloom together in flaming profusion. And twice a year, in the spring and the autumn, the soft yellow walls of the villa are covered with lavender wistaria and pink climbing roses, and every breeze is filled with their fragrance.

It is a spot in which to dream of old Italy, of cardinals and pages and gorgeous lackeys, of gallant courtiers and beautiful ladies, of Romeos and Juliets trailing back and forth over the marble terrace and making love under the Italian moon. But if there have been lovers, as is doubtless the case, there have also been haters among the Vivalanti, and you may read of more than one prince murdered by hands other than those of his peasants. The walls of the new villa, in the course of their two hundred years, have looked down on their full share of tragedies, and the Vivalanti annals are grim reading withal.

And now, having pursued the Vivalanti so far, you may possibly be disappointed to hear that the story has nothing to do with them. But if you are interested in learning more of the family you can find his Excellency Anastasio di Vivalanti, the present prince and the last of the line, any afternoon during the season in the casino at Monte Carlo. He is a slight young man with a dark, sallow face and many fine lines under his eyes.

Then why, you may ask, if we are not concerned with the Vivalanti, have we lingered so long in their garden? Ah—but the garden does concern us, though the young prince may not; and it is a pleasant spot, you must acknowledge, in which to linger. The people with whom we are concerned

are (I hesitate to say it for fear of destroying the glamour) an American family. Yes, it is best to confess it boldly—are American millionaires. It is out—the worst is told! But why, may I ask in my turn, is there anything so inherently distressing in the idea of an American family (of millionaires) spending the summer in a seventeenth-century Italian villa up in the Sabine hills—especially when the rightful heir prefers *trente-et-un* at Monte Carlo? Must they of necessity spoil the romance? They are human, and have their passions like the rest of us; and one of them at least is young, and men have called her beautiful—yes, in this very garden.

CHAPTER I

It was late and the studio was already well filled when two new-comers were ushered into the room—one a woman still almost young, and still (in a kindly light) beautiful; the other a girl emphatically young, her youth riding triumphant over other qualities which in a few years would become significant. A slight, almost portentous, hush had fallen over the room as they crossed the threshold and shook hands with their host. In a group near the door a young man—it was Laurence Sybert, the first secretary of the American Embassy—broke off in the middle of a sentence with the ejaculation: ‘Ah, the Wheat Princess!’

‘Be careful, Sybert! She will hear you,’ the grey-haired consul-general, who stood at his elbow, warned.

Sybert responded with a laugh and a half-shrug; but his tones, though low, had carried, and the girl flashed upon the group a pair of vivid hazel eyes containing a half-puzzled, half-questioning light, as though she had caught the words but not the meaning. Her vague expression changed to one of recognition; she nodded to the two diplomats as she turned away to welcome a delegation of young lieutenants, brilliant in blue and gold and shining boots.

‘Who is she?’ another member of the group inquired as he adjusted a pair of eye-glasses and turned to scrutinize the American girl—she was American to the most casual observer, from the piquant details of her gown to the masterly fashion in which she handled her four young men.

‘Don’t you know?’ There was just a touch of irony in Sybert’s tone. ‘Miss Marcia Copley, the daughter of the American Wheat King—I fancy you’ve seen his name mentioned in the papers.’

‘Well, well! And so that’s Willard Copley’s daughter?’ He readjusted his glasses and examined her again from this new point of view. ‘She isn’t bad-looking,’ was his comment. ‘The Wheat Princess!’ He repeated the phrase with a laugh. ‘I suppose she has come over to marry an Italian prince and make the title good?’

The originator of the phrase shrugged anew, with the intimation that it was nothing to him who Miss Marcia Copley married.

‘And who is the lady with her?’

It was Melville, the consul-general, who replied.

‘Her aunt, Mrs. Howard Copley. They live in the Palazzo Rosicorelli.’

‘Ah, to be sure! Yes, yes, I know who they are. Her husband’s a reformer or a philanthropist, or something of the sort, isn’t he? I’ve seen him at the meets. I say, you know,’ he added, with an appreciative smile, ‘that’s rather good, the way the two brothers balance each other. Philanthropist and Wheat King!’

An English girl in the group turned and studied the American girl a moment with a critical scrutiny. Marcia Copley’s appearance was daintily attractive. Her hat and gown and furs were a burnished brown exactly the colour of her hair; every little accessory of her dress was unobtrusively fastidious. Her whole bearing, her easy social grace, spoke of a past in which the way had been always smoothed by money. She carried with her a touch of imperiousness, a large air of commanding the world. The English girl noted these things with jealous feminine eyes.

‘Really,’ she said, ‘I don’t see how she has the audacity to face people. I should think that every beggar in the street would be a reproach to her.’

‘There were beggars in Italy long before Willard Copley cornered wheat,’ Melville returned.

‘If what the *Tribuna* says is true,’ some one ventured, ‘Howard Copley is as much implicated as his brother.’

‘I dare say,’ another laughed; ‘millionaire philanthropists have a way of taking back with the left hand what they have given with the right.’

Sybert had been listening in a half-indifferent fashion to the strictures on the niece, but in response to the implied criticism of the uncle he shook his head emphatically.

‘Howard Copley is no more implicated in the deal than I am,’ he declared. ‘He and his brother have had nothing to do with each other for the last ten years. His philanthropy is honest, and his money is as clean as any fortune can be.’

The statement was not challenged. Sybert was known to be Howard Copley’s friend, and he further carried the reputation of being a warm partizan on the one or two subjects which engaged his enthusiasm—on those which did not engage it he was nonchalant to a degree for a rising diplomat.

The two—Sybert and the consul-general—with a nod to the group presently drifted onward toward the door. The secretary was bent upon departure at the earliest possible opportunity. Teas were a part of the official routine of his life, but by the simple device of coming late and leaving early he escaped as much of their irksomeness as possible. Aside from being secretary of the Embassy, Sybert was a nephew of the ambassador, and it was the latter calling which he found the more onerous burden of the two. His Excellency had formed a troublesome habit of shifting social burdens to the unwilling shoulders of the younger man.

They paused at Mrs. Copley’s elbow with outstretched hands, and were received with a flattering show of cordiality from the aunt, though with but a fleeting nod from the niece; she was, patently, too interested in her officers to have much attention left.

‘Where is your husband?’ Sybert asked.

The lady raised her eyebrows in a picturesque gesture.

‘Beggars,’ she sighed. ‘Something has happened to the beggars again.’ Mr. Copley’s latest philanthropic venture had been the ‘Anti-Begging Society.’ Bread-tickets had been introduced, the beggars were being hunted down and given work, and as a result Copley’s name was cursed from end to end of Rome.

The men smilingly murmured their commiserations.

‘And what are you two diplomats doing here?’ Mrs. Copley asked. ‘I thought that Mr. Dessart invited only artists to his teas.’

Sybert’s gloomy air, as he eyed the door, reflected the question. It was Melville who answered:

‘Oh, we are admirers of art, even if we are not practitioners. Besides, Mr. Dessart and I are old friends. We used to know each other in Pittsburg when he was a boy and I was a good deal younger than I am now.’

His gaze rested for a moment upon their host, who formed one of the hilarious group about Miss Copley. He was an eminently picturesque young fellow, fitted with the usual artist attributes—a velveteen jacket, a flowing necktie, and rather long light-brown hair which constantly got into his eyes, causing him to shake his head impatiently as he talked. He had an open, frank face, humorous blue eyes and the inestimable, eager air of being in love with life.

The conversation showing signs of becoming general, the officers, with visible reluctance, made their bows and gave place to the new-comers. The girl now found time to extend a cordial hand to Melville, while to the secretary she tossed a markedly careless, ‘Good afternoon, Mr. Sybert.’ If Miss Marcia’s offhand manner conveyed something a trifle stronger than indifference, so Sybert’s half-amused smile as he talked to her suggested that her unkindness failed to hurt; that she was too young to count.

‘And what is this I hear about your moving out to a villa for the spring?’ he inquired, turning to Mrs. Copley.

‘Yes, we are thinking of it, but it is not decided yet.’

‘We still have Uncle Howard to deal with,’ added the girl. ‘He was the first one who suggested a villa, but now that exactly the right one presents itself, we very much suspect him of trying to back out.’

‘That will never do, Miss Marcia,’ said Melville. ‘You must hold him to his word.’

‘We are going out to-morrow to inspect it, and if Aunt Katherine and I are pleased—’ She broke off with a graceful gesture which intimated much.

Sybert laughed. ‘Poor Uncle Howard!’ he murmured.

The arrival of fresh guests called their host away, and Mrs. Copley and Melville, turning aside to greet some friends, left Miss Copley for the moment to a *tête à tête* with Sybert. He maintained his side of the conversation in a half-perfunctory fashion, while the girl allowed a slight touch of hostility to creep beneath her animation.

‘And where is the villa to be, Miss Marcia—at Frascati, I suppose?’

‘Farther away than Frascati; at Castel Vivalanti.’

‘Castel Vivalanti!’

‘Up in the Sabine hills between Palestrina and Tivoli.’

‘Oh, I know where it is; I have a vivid recollection of climbing the hill on a very hot day. I was merely exclaiming at the locality; it’s rather remote, isn’t it?’

‘Its remoteness is the best thing about it. Our object in moving into the hills is to escape from visitors, and if we go no farther than Frascati we shan’t do much escaping.’

This to the family’s most frequent visitor was scarcely a hospitable speech, and a smile of amusement crept to the corners of Sybert’s mouth.

Apparently just becoming aware of the content of her speech, she added with slightly exaggerated sweetness: ‘Of course I don’t mean you, Mr. Sybert. You come so often that I regard you as a member of the household.’

The secretary apparently had it on his tongue to retort, but, thinking better of it, he maintained a discreet silence, while their host approached with the new arrivals—a lady whose name Miss Copley did not catch, but who was presented with the explanatory remark, ‘she writes,’ and several young men who, she judged by their neckties, were artists also. The talk turned on the villa again, and Miss Copley was called upon for a description.

‘I haven’t seen it myself,’ she returned; ‘but from the steward’s account it is the most complete villa in Italy. It has a laurel walk and an ilex grove, balconies, fountains, a marble terrace, a view, and even a ghost.’

‘A ghost?’ queried Dessart. ‘But I thought they were extinct—that the railroads and tourists had driven them all back to the grave.’

‘Not the ghost of the “Bad Prince”; we rent him with the place—and the most picturesque ghost you ever dreamed of! He hoarded his wheat while the peasants were starving, and they murdered him two hundred years ago.’ She repeated the story, mimicking in inimitable fashion the gestures and broken English of Prince Vivalanti’s steward.

A somewhat startled silence hung over the close of the recital, while her auditors glanced at each other in secret amazement. The question uppermost in their minds was whether it was ignorance or mere bravado that had tempted her into repeating just that particular tale. It was a subject which Miss Copley might have been expected to avoid. Laurence Sybert alone was aware that she did not know what a dangerous topic she was venturing on, and he received the performance with an appreciative laugh.

‘A very picturesque story, Miss Copley. The old fellow got what he deserved.’

Marcia Copley assented with a smiling gesture, and the woman who wrote skilfully bridged over a second pause.

‘You were complaining the other day, Mr. Dessart, that the foreigners are making the Italians too modern. Why do you not catch the ghost? He is surely a true antique.’

‘But I am not an impressionist,’ he pleaded.

‘Who is saying anything against impressionists?’ a young man asked in somewhat halting English as he paused beside the group.

‘No one,’ said Dessart; ‘I was merely disclaiming all knowledge of them and their ways. Miss Copley, allow me to present Monsieur Benoit, the last *Prix de Rome*—he is the man to paint your ghost. He’s an impressionist and paints nothing else.’

‘I suppose you have ghosts enough in the Villa Medici, without having to search for them in the Sabine hills.’

‘Ah, *oui*, mademoiselle; the Villa Medici has ghosts of many kinds—ghosts of dead hopes and dead ambitions among others.’

‘I should think the ghost of a dead ambition might be too illusive for even an impressionist to catch,’ she returned.

‘Perhaps an impressionist is better acquainted with them than with anything else,’ suggested Dessart, a trifle unkindly.

‘Not when he’s young and a *Prix de Rome*,’ smiled the woman who wrote.

Mrs. Copley requiring her niece’s presence on the other side of the room, the girl nodded to the group and withdrew. The writer looked after her with an air of puzzled interest.

‘And doesn’t Miss Copley read the papers?’ she inquired mildly.

‘Evidently she does not,’ Sybert rejoined with a laugh as he made his adieus and withdrew.

Half an hour later, Marcia Copley, having made the rounds of the room, again found herself, as tea was being served, in the neighbourhood of her new acquaintance. She dropped down on the divan beside her with a slight feeling of relief at being for the moment out of the current of chatter. Her companion was a vivacious little woman approaching middle age; and though she spoke perfect English, she pronounced her words with a precision which suggested a foreign birth. Her conversation was diverting; it gave evidence of a vast amount of worldly wisdom as well as a wide acquaintance with other people’s affairs. And her range of subjects was wide. She flitted lightly from an artistic estimate of some intaglios of the Augustan age, that had just been dug up outside the Porta Pia, to a comparison of French and Italian dressmakers and a prophecy as to which cardinal would be the next pope.

A portfolio of sketches lay on a little stand beside them, and she presently drew them toward her, with the remark, ‘We will see how our young man has been amusing himself lately!’

There were a half-dozen or so of wash-drawings, and one or two outline sketches of figures in red chalk. None of them was at all finished, but the hasty blocking in showed considerable vigour, and the subjects were at least original. There was no Castle of St. Angelo with a boatman in the foreground, and no Temple of Vesta set off by a line of scarlet seminarists. One of the chalk drawings was of an old chestnut woman crouched over her charcoal fire; another was of the *octroi* officer under the tall arch of the San Giovanni gate, prodding the contents of a donkey-cart with his steel rod. There were corners of wall shaded by cypresses, bits of architectural adornment, a quick sketch of the lichen-covered elephant’s head spouting water at Villa Madama. They all, slight as they were, possessed a certain distinction, and suggested a very real impression of Roman atmosphere. Marcia examined them with interest.

‘They are extremely good,’ she said as she laid the last one down.

‘Yes,’ her companion agreed; ‘they are so good that they ought to be better—but they never will be.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘I know Paul Dessart well enough to know that he will never paint a picture. He has talent, and he’s clever, but he’s at everybody’s service. The workers have no time to be polite. However,’ she finished, ‘it is not for you and me to quarrel with him. If he set to work in earnest he would stop giving teas, and that would be a pity, would it not?’

‘Indeed it would!’ she agreed. ‘How pretty the studio looks this afternoon! I have seen it only by daylight before, and, like all the rest of us, it improves by candle-light.’ Her eyes wandered about the big room, with its furnishings of threadbare tapestry and antique carved chairs. The heavy curtains

had been partly drawn over the windows, making a pleasant twilight within. A subtle odour of linseed oil and cigarette smoke, mingled with the fresh scent of violets, pervaded the air.

Paul Dessart, with the *Prix de Rome* man and a young English sculptor of rising fame, presently joined them; and the talk drifted into Roman politics—a subject concerning which, the artists declared with one accord, they knew nothing and cared less.

‘Oh, I used to get excited over their squabbles,’ said the Englishman; ‘but I soon saw that I should have to choose between that and sculpture; I hadn’t time for both.’

‘I don’t even know who’s premier,’ put in Dessart.

‘A disgraceful lack of interest!’ maintained the American girl. ‘I have only been in Rome two months, and I am an authority on the Triple Alliance and the Abyssinian war; I know what Cavour wanted to do, and what Crispi has done.’

‘That’s not fair, Miss Copley,’ Dessart objected. ‘You’ve been going to functions at the Embassy, and one can absorb politics there through one’s skin. But I warn you, it isn’t a safe subject to get interested in; it becomes a disease, like the opium habit.’

‘He’s not so far from the truth,’ agreed the sculptor. ‘I was talking to a fellow this afternoon, named Sybert, who—perhaps you know him, Miss Copley?’

‘Yes, I know him. What about him?’

‘Oh—er—nothing, in that case.’

‘Pray slander Mr. Sybert if you wish—I’ll promise not to tell. He’s one of my uncle’s friends, not one of mine.’

‘Oh, I wasn’t going to slander him,’ the young man expostulated a trifle sheepishly. ‘The only thing I have against Sybert is the fact that my conversation bores him.’

Marcia laughed with a certain sense of fellow-feeling.

‘Say anything you please,’ she repeated cordially. ‘My conversation bores him too.’

‘Well, what I was going to say is that he has had about all the Roman politics that are good for him. If he doesn’t look out, he’ll be getting in too deep.’

‘Too deep?’ she queried.

It was Dessart who pursued the subject with just a touch of malice. Laurence Sybert, apparently, was not so popular a person as a diplomat should be.

‘He’s lived in Rome a good many years, and people are beginning to wonder what he’s up to. The Embassy does very well for a blind, for he doesn’t take any more interest in it than he does in whether or not Tammany runs New York. All that Sybert knows anything about or cares anything about is Italian politics, and there are some who think that he knows a good sight more about them than he ought. He’s in with the Church party, in with the Government—first friends with the Right, and then with the Left.’

‘Monsieur Sybert is what you call an eclectic,’ suggested Benoit. ‘He chooses the best of each.’

‘I’m not so sure of that,’ Dessart hinted darkly. ‘He’s interested in other factions besides the Vatican and the Quirinal. There are one or two pretty anarchistic societies in Rome, and I’ve heard it whispered—’

‘You don’t mean—’ she asked, with wide-open eyes.

The woman who wrote shook her head, with a laugh. ‘I suspect that Mr. Sybert’s long residence in Rome might be reduced to a simpler formula than that. It was a very wise person who first said, “*Cherchez la femme.*”’

‘Oh, really?’ said Marcia, with a new note of interest. Laurence Sybert was not a man whom she had ever credited with having emotions, and the suggestion came as a surprise.

‘Rumour says that he still takes a very strong interest in the pretty little Contessa Torrenieri. All I know is that nine or ten years ago, when she was Margarita Carretti, he was openly among her admirers; but she naturally preferred a count—or at least her parents did, which in Italy amounts to the same.’

The girl's eyes opened still wider; the Contessa Torrenieri was also a frequent guest at the palazzo. But Dessart received the suggestion with a very sceptical smile.

'And you think that he is only waiting until, in the ripeness of time, old Count Torrenieri goes the way of all counts? I know you are the authority on gossip, madame, but, nevertheless, I doubt very much if that is Laurence Sybert's trouble.'

'You don't really mean that he is an anarchist?' Marcia demanded.

'I give him up, Miss Copley.' The young man shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands in a gesture purely Italian.

'Are you talking politics?' asked Mrs. Copley as she joined the group in company with Mr. and Mrs. Melville.

'Always politics,' laughed her niece—'or is it Mr. Sybert now?'

'They're practically interchangeable,' said Dessart.

'And did I hear you calling him an anarchist, Miss Marcia?' Melville demanded.

She repudiated the charge with a laugh. 'I'm afraid Mr. Dessart's the guilty one.'

'Here, here! that will never do! Sybert's a special friend of mine. I can't allow you to be accusing him of anything like that.'

'A little applied anarchy wouldn't be out of place,' the young man returned. 'I feel tempted to use some dynamite myself when I see the way this precious government is scattering statues of Victor Emmanuel broadcast through the land.'

'If you are going to get back into politics,' said Mrs. Copley, rising, 'I fear we must leave. I know from experience that it is a long subject.'

The two turned away, escorted to the carriage by Dessart and the Frenchman, while the rest of the group resettled themselves in the empty places. The woman who wrote listened a moment to the badinage and laughter which floated back through the open door; then, 'Mr. Dessart's heiress is very attractive,' she suggested.

'Why Mr. Dessart's?' Melville inquired.

'Perhaps I was a little premature,' she conceded—'though, I venture to prophesy, not incorrect.'

'My dear lady,' said Mrs. Melville impressively, 'you do not know Mrs. Copley. Her niece is more likely to marry an Italian prince than a nameless young artist.'

'She's no more likely to marry an Italian prince than she is a South African chief,' her husband affirmed. 'Miss Marcia is a young woman who will marry whom she pleases—though,' he added upon reflection, 'I am not at all sure it will be Paul Dessart.'

'She might do worse,' said his wife. 'Paul is a nice boy.'

'Ah—and she might do better. I'll tell you exactly the man,' he added, in a burst of enthusiasm, 'and that is Laurence Sybert.'

The suggestion was met by an amused smile from the ladies and a shrug from the sculptor.

'My dear James,' said Mrs. Melville, 'you may be a very good business man, but you are no match-maker. That is a matter you would best leave to the women. As for your Laurence Sybert, he hasn't the ghost of a chance—and he doesn't want it.'

'I'm doubting he has other fish to fry just now,' threw out the sculptor.

'Sybert's all right,' said Melville emphatically.

The woman who wrote laughed as she rose. 'It will be an interesting matter to watch,' she announced; 'but you may mark my words that our host is the man.'

CHAPTER II

A carriage rumbled into the stone-paved courtyard of the Palazzo Rosicorelli a good twenty minutes before six o'clock the next evening, and the Copleys descended and climbed the stairs, at peace with Villa Vivalanti and its thirty miles. Though it was still light out of doors, inside the palace, with its deep-embursed windows and heavy curtains, it was already quite dark. As they entered the long salon the only light in the room came from a seven-branch candlestick on the tea-table, which threw its reflection upon Gerald's white sailor-suit and little bare knees as he sat back solemnly in a carved Savonarola chair. At the sound of their arrival he wriggled down quickly and precipitated himself against Mrs. Copley.

'Oh, mamma! Sybert came to tea, an' I made it; an' he said it was lots better van Marcia's tea, an' he dwank seven cups, an' I dwank four.'

A chorus of laughter greeted this revelation, and a lazy voice called from the depths of an easy chair, 'Oh, I say, Gerald, you mustn't tell such shocking tales, or your mother will never leave me alone with the tea-things again.' And the owner of the voice pulled himself together and walked across the room to shake hands with the new-comers.

Laurence Sybert, as he advanced toward his hostess, threw a long thin shadow against the wall. He had a spare, dark, clean-shaven face with deep-set, sullen eyes; he was a delightfully perfected type of the cosmopolitan; it would have taken a second, or very possibly a third, glance to determine his nationality. But if the expression of his face were Italian, Oriental, anything you please, his build was undoubtedly Anglo-Saxon. Further, a certain wiriness beneath his movements proclaimed him, to any one familiar with the loose-hung riders of the plains, unmistakably American.

'Your son slanders me, Mrs. Copley,' he said as he held out his hand; 'I didn't drink but six, upon my honour.'

'Hello, Sybert! Anything happened in Rome to-day? What's the news on the Rialto?' was Mr. Copley's greeting.

Marcia regarded him with a laugh as she drew off her gloves and lighted the spirit-lamp.

'We've been away since nine this morning, and here's Uncle Howard thirsting for news already! What he will do when we really get out of the city, I can't imagine.'

'Oh, and so you've taken the villa, have you?'

Marcia nodded.

'And you should see it! It looks like a papal palace. This is the first time that Prince Vivalanti has ever consented to rent it to strangers; it's his official seat.'

'Very condescending of him,' the young man laughed; 'and do you accept his responsibilities along with the place?'

'From the fattore's account I should say that his responsibilities rest but lightly on the Prince of Vivalanti.'

'Ah—that's true enough.'

'Do you know him?'

'Only by hearsay. I know the village; and a more desperate little place it would be hard to find in all the Sabine hills. The people's love for their prince is tempered by the need of a number of improvements which he doesn't supply.'

'I dare say they are pretty poor,' she conceded; 'but they are unbelievably picturesque! Every person there looks as if he had just walked out of a water-colour sketch. Even Uncle Howard was pleased, and he has lived here so long that he is losing his enthusiasms.'

'It is a pretty decent sort of a place,' Copley agreed, 'though I have a sneaking suspicion that we may find it rather far. But the rest of the family liked it, and my aim in life—'

‘Nonsense, Uncle Howard! you know you were crazy over it yourself. You signed the lease without a protest. Didn’t he, Aunt Katherine?’

‘I signed the lease, my dear Marcia, at the point of the pistol.’

‘The point of the pistol?’

‘You threatened, if we got a mile—an inch, I believe you said—nearer Rome, you would give a party every day; and if that isn’t the point of a pistol to a poor, worn-out man like me, I don’t know what is.’

‘It would certainly seem like it,’ Sybert agreed. And turning to Marcia, he added, ‘I am afraid that you rule with a very despotic hand, Miss Marcia.’

Marcia’s eyebrows went up a barely perceptible trifle, but she laughed and returned: ‘No, indeed, Mr. Sybert; you are mistaken there. It is not I, but Gerald, who plays the part of despot in the Copley household.’

At this point, Granton, Mrs. Copley’s English maid, appeared in the doorway. ‘Marietta is waiting to give Master Gerald his supper,’ she announced.

Gerald fled to his mother and raised a cry of protest.

‘Mamma, please let me stay up to dinner wif you to-night.’

For a moment Mrs. Copley looked as if she might consent, but catching sight of Granton’s relentless face, she returned: ‘No, my dear, you have had enough festivity for one evening. You must have your tea and go to bed like a good little boy.’

Gerald abandoned his mother and entrenched himself behind Sybert. ‘Cause Sybert’s here, an’ I like Sybert,’ he wailed desperately.

But Granton stormed even this fortress. ‘Come, Master Gerald; your supper’s getting cold,’ and she laid a firm hand on his shoulder and marched him away.

‘There’s the real despot,’ laughed Copley. ‘I tremble before Granton myself.’

Pietro appeared with a plate of toasted muffins and the evening mail. Mr. Copley settled himself in a wicker chair, with a pile of letters on the arm at his right; and, as he ran his eyes over them one by one, he tore them in pieces and formed a new pile at his left. They were begging letters for the most part. He received a great many, and this was his usual method of answering them: not that he was an ungenerous man; it was merely a matter of principle with him not to be generous in this particular way.

As he sat disposing of envelope after envelope with vigorous hands, Copley’s appearance suggested a series of somewhat puzzling contrasts: seriousness and humour; sensitiveness and force—an active impulse to forge ahead and accomplish things, a counter-impulse to shrug his shoulders and wonder why. He was a puzzle to most of his friends; at times even one to his wife; but she had accepted his eccentricities along with his millions, and though she did not always understand either his motives or his actions, she made no complaint. To most men a fortune is a blessing. To Copley it was rather in the nature of a curse. He might have amounted to almost anything had he had to work for it; but for the one field of activity which a fortune in America seems to entail upon its owner—that of entering the arena and doubling and tripling it—he was singularly unfitted both by temperament and inclination. In this he differed from his elder brother. And there was one other point in which the two were at variance. Though their father had been in the eyes of the law a just and upright man, still, in the battle of competition, many had fallen that he might stand, and the younger son had grown up with the knowledge that from a humanitarian standpoint the money was not irreproachable. He had the feeling—which his brother characterized as absurd—that with his share of the fortune he would like, in a measure, to make it up to mankind.

Howard Copley’s first move in the game of benefiting humanity had been, not very originally, an attempt at solving the negro problem; but the negroes were ever a leisurely race, and Copley was a man impatient for results. He finally abandoned them to the course of evolution, and engaged in a spasmodic orgy of East Side politics. Becoming disgusted, and failing of an election, he looked

aimlessly about for a further object in life. It was at this point that Mrs. Copley breathlessly suggested a year in Paris for the sake of Gerald's French; the child was only four, but one could not, as she justly pointed out, begin the study of the languages too early. Her husband apathetically consenting, they embarked for Paris by the roundabout route of the Mediterranean, landed in Naples, and there they stayed. He had found a fascinating occupation ready to his hand—that of helping on the work of good government in this still turbulent portion of United Italy. After a year the family drifted to Rome, and settled themselves in the *piano nobile* of the Palazzo Rosicorelli with something of an air of permanence. Copley was at last thoroughly contented; he had no racial prejudices, and Rome was as fair a field of reform as New York—and infinitely more diverting. If the Italians did not always understand his motives, still they accepted his services with a fair show of gratitude.

As for Mrs. Copley, she had by no means intended their sojourn to be an emigration, but she reflected that her husband had to be amused in some way, and that reforming Italian posterity was perhaps an harmless a way as he could have devised. She settled herself very contentedly to the enjoyment of the somewhat shifting foreign society of the capital, with only an occasional plaintive reference to her friends in New York and to Gerald's French.

Marcia, leaning back in her chair, watched her uncle dispose of his correspondence with a visible air of amusement. He had a thin nervous face traced with fine lines, a sharply cut jaw, and a mouth which twitched easily into a smile. To-night, however, as he ripped open envelope after envelope, he frowned oftener than he smiled; and presently, as he unfolded one letter, he suppressed a quick exclamation of anger.

'Read that,' he said shortly, tossing it to the other man.

Sybert perused it with no visible change of expression, and leaning over, he dropped it into the open grate.

Marcia laughed outright. 'Your mail doesn't seem to afford you much satisfaction, Uncle Howard.'

'A large share of it's anonymous, and not all of it's polite.'

'That is what you must expect if you will hound those poor old beggars to death.'

The two men shot each other a look of rather grim amusement. The letter in question had nothing to do with beggars, but Mr. Copley had no intention of discussing its contents with his niece.

'I find that the usual reward of virtue in this world is an anonymous letter,' he remarked, shrugging the matter from his mind and settling himself comfortably to his tea.

The guest refused the cup proffered him.

'I haven't the courage,' he declared, 'after Gerald's revelations.'

'By the way, Sybert,' said Copley, 'I have been hearing some bad stories about you to-day. My niece doesn't like to have me associate with you.'

Marcia looked at her uncle helplessly; when he once commenced teasing there was no telling where he would stop.

'I am sorry,' said Sybert humbly. 'What is the trouble?'

'She has found out that you are an anarchist.'

Both men laughed, and Marcia flushed slightly.

'Please, Miss Marcia,' Sybert begged, 'give me time to get out of the country before you expose me to the police.'

'There's no cause for fear,' she returned. 'I didn't believe the story when I heard it, for I knew that you haven't energy enough to run away from a bomb, much less throw one. That's why it surprised me that other people should believe it.'

'But most people have a better opinion of me than you have,' he expostulated.

'No, indeed, Mr. Sybert; I have a better opinion of you than most people. I really consider you harmless.'

The young man laughed and bowed his thanks, while he turned his attention to Mrs. Copley.

'I hope that Villa Vivalanti will prove more successful than the one in Naples.'

Mrs. Copley looked at him reproachfully. 'That horrible man! I never think of him without wishing we were safely back in America.'

'Then please don't think of him,' her husband returned. 'He is where he won't trouble you any more.'

'What man?' asked Marcia, emerging from a dignified silence.

'Is it possible Miss Marcia has never heard of the tattooed man?' Sybert inquired gravely.

'The tattooed man! What *are* you talking about?'

'It has a somewhat theatrical ring,' Mr. Copley admitted.

'It is nothing to make light of,' said his wife. 'It's a wonder to me that we escaped with our lives. Three years ago, while we were in Naples,' she added to her niece, 'your uncle, with his usual recklessness, got mixed up with one of the secret societies. Our villa was out toward Posilipo, and one afternoon I was driving home at about dusk—I had been shopping in the city—and just as we reached a lonely place in the road, between two high walls—'

Mr. Copley broke in: 'A masked man armed to the teeth sprang up in the path, with a horrible oath.'

'Not really!' Marcia cried, leaning forward delightedly. 'Aunt Katherine, *did* a masked man—'

'He wasn't masked, but I wish he had been; he would have looked less ferocious. He came straight to the side of the carriage, and taking off his hat with a very polite bow, he said that unless we left Naples in three days your uncle's life would no longer be safe. His shirt was open at the throat, and there was a crucifix tattooed upside down on his breast. You can imagine what a desperate character he must have been—here in Italy of all places, where the people are so religious.'

The two men laughed at the climax.

'What did you do?' Marcia asked.

'I was too shocked to speak, and Gerald, poor child, screamed all the way home.'

'And did you leave the city?'

'As it happened, we were leaving anyway,' her uncle put in; 'but we postponed our departure long enough for me to hunt the fellow down and put him in jail.'

'You may be thankful that they had the decency to warn you,' Sybert remarked.

'It's like a dime novel!' Marcia sighed. 'To be mixed up with murders and warnings and tattooed men and secret societies—Why didn't you send for me, Uncle Howard?'

'Well, you see, I didn't know that you had grown up into such a charming person—though I am not sure that it would have made any difference. I had all that I could do to take care of one woman.'

'That's the way,' she complained. 'Just because one's a girl one is always shut up in the house while there's anything exciting going on.'

'If you are so fond of bloodshed,' Sybert suggested, 'you may possibly have a chance of seeing some this spring.'

'This spring? Is the Camorra making trouble again?'

'Oh, no; not the Camorra. But unless all signs fail, there is a prospect of some fairly exciting riots.'

'Really? Here in Rome?'

'Well, no; probably not in Rome—there are too many soldiers. More likely in the Neapolitan provinces. I am sorry,' he added, 'since you seem to find them so entertaining, that we can't promise you a riot on your own door-step; but I dare say, when it comes to the point, you'll find Naples near enough.'

'I give you fair warning, Uncle Howard,' she said, 'if there are any riots in Naples, I'm going down to see them. What is the trouble? What are they rioting about?'

'If there are any riots,' said her uncle, 'you, my dear young lady, will amuse yourself at Villa Vivalanti until they are over,' and he abruptly changed the subject.

The talk drifted back to the villa again. Mrs. Copley afforded their guest a more detailed description.

‘Nineteen bedrooms aside from the servants’ quarters, and room in the stable for thirty horses!’ she finished.

‘The princes of Vivalanti must have kept up an establishment in their pre-Riviera days.’

‘Mustn’t they?’ agreed Marcia cordially. The new villa was proving an unexpectedly soothing topic. ‘We’ll keep up an establishment too,’ she added. ‘We’re going to give a house-party when the Roystons come down from Paris, and—I know what we’ll do! We’ll give a ball for my birthday—won’t we, Uncle Howard? And have everybody out from Rome, and the ilex grove all lighted with coloured lamps!’

‘Not if I have anything to say about it,’ said Mr. Copley.

‘But you won’t have,’ said Marcia.

‘The only reason that I consented to take this villa was that I thought it was far enough away to escape parties for a time. You said—’

‘I said if you got nearer Rome we’d give a party *every* day, while as it is I’m only planning one party for all the three months.’

‘Sybert and I won’t come to it,’ he grumbled.

‘Perhaps you and Mr. Sybert won’t be invited.’

‘I don’t know where you’d find two such charming men,’ said Mrs. Copley.

‘Rome’s full of them,’ returned Marcia imperturbably.

‘Who are the Roystons, Miss Marcia?’ Sybert inquired.

‘They are the friends I came over with last fall. You know Mr. Dessart?’

‘The artist? Yes, I know him.’

‘Well, Mrs. Royston is his aunt, and she has two daughters who—’

‘Are his cousins,’ suggested Mr. Copley.

‘Yes; to be sure, and very charming girls. They spend a great deal of time over here—at least Mrs. Royston and Eleanor do. Margaret has been in college.’

‘And Mr. Royston,’ asked Copley, ‘stays in America and attends to his business?’

‘Yes; Mrs. Royston and Eleanor go over quite often to keep him from getting lonely.’

‘Very generous of them,’ Sybert laughed.

‘They’ve spent winters in Cairo and Vienna and Paris and a lot of different places,’ pursued Marcia. ‘Eleanor,’ she added ruminatingly, ‘has been out nine seasons, and she has had a good deal of—experience.’

‘Dear, dear!’ said her uncle; ‘and you are proposing to expose all Rome—’

‘She’s very attractive,’ said Marcia, and then she glanced at Sybert and laughed. ‘If she should happen to take a fancy to you, Mr. Sybert—’

The young man rose to his feet and looked about for his hat. ‘Goodness!’ he murmured, ‘what would she do?’

‘There’s no telling.’ Marcia regarded him with a speculative light in her eyes.

‘A young woman who has been practising for nine seasons certainly ought to have her hand in,’ Copley agreed. ‘Perhaps, after all, Sybert, it is best we should not meet her.’

Sybert found his hat and paused for a moment.

‘You can’t frighten me that way, Miss Marcia,’ he said, with a shake of his head. ‘I have been out thirteen seasons myself.’

CHAPTER III

‘May I come in for tea, Cousin Marcia?’ Gerald inquired, with a note of anxiety in his voice, as they climbed the stone staircase of the Palazzo Rosicorelli. They had been spending the afternoon in the Borghese gardens, and the boy’s very damp sailor-suit bore witness to the fact that he had been indulging in the forbidden pleasure of catching goldfish in the fountain.

‘Indeed you may not,’ she returned emphatically. ‘You may go with Marietta and have some dry clothes put on before your mother sees you.’

Gerald, realizing the wisdom of this course, allowed himself to be quietly spirited off the back way, in spite of the fact that he heard the alluring sound of Sybert’s voice in the direction of the salon. Marcia went on in without waiting to take off her hat, and she met the Melvilles in the ante-room, on the point of leaving.

‘Good afternoon. Why do you go so early?’ she asked.

‘Oh, we are coming back later; we are just going home to dress. Your uncle is giving a dinner to-night—a very formal affair.’

‘Is that so?’ she laughed. ‘I have not been invited.’

‘You will be; don’t feel hurt. It’s a general invitation issued to all comers.’

Marcia found no one within but her aunt and uncle and Mr. Sybert.

‘What is this I hear about your giving a dinner to-night, Aunt Katherine?’ she asked as she settled herself in a wicker chair and stretched out her hand for a cup of tea.

‘You must ask your uncle. I have nothing to do with it,’ Mrs. Copley disclaimed. ‘He invited the guests, and he must provide the menu.’

‘What is it, Uncle Howard?’

‘Merely a little farewell dinner. I thought we ought to put on a bright face our last night, you know.’

‘One would think you were going to be led to execution at dawn.’

‘We will hope it’s nothing worse than exile,’ said Sybert.

‘Who are your guests, and when were they invited?’

‘My guests are the people who dropped in late to tea; I did not think of it early enough to make the invitation very general. The list, I believe, includes the Melvilles, Signora Androit and the Contessa Torrenieri, Sidney Carthrope the sculptor, and a certain young Frenchman, a most alluring youth, who called with him, but whose name for the moment escapes me.’

‘Adolphe Benoit,’ said Sybert.

‘The *Prix de Rome*?’ asked Marcia. ‘Oh, I know him! I met him a few weeks ago at a tea; he’s very entertaining. I suppose,’ she added, considering the list, ‘that he will fall to my share?’

‘Unless you prefer Mr. Sybert.’

‘An embarrassing predicament, Miss Marcia,’ Sybert laughed. ‘If it will facilitate matters we can draw lots.’

‘Not at all,’ said Marcia graciously, ‘I know the Contessa would rather have you; and as she is the guest I will let her choose. I hope your dinner will be a success,’ she added to her uncle, ‘but I can’t help feeling that you show a touching faith in the cook.’

‘Thank you, my dear; I am of an optimistic turn of mind, and François has never failed me yet.—How did the Borghese gallery go?’

‘Very well. I met Mr. Dessart there—and I met the King outside.’

‘Ah, I hope His Majesty was enjoying good health?’

‘He seemed to be. I didn’t stop to speak to him, but there was a boy in a group of seminarists near us who called out, “Viva il papa,” just as he passed.’

‘And what happened?’ Sybert inquired. ‘Did the King’s guard behead him on the spot, or did they only send him to the galleys for life?’

‘The King’s guard fortunately had eyes only for the King, and the old priest gathered his flock together and scuttled off down one of the side paths, as frightened as a hen who sees a hawk.’

‘And with good reason—but wait till the lads grow up, and they’ll do something besides shout and run.’

There was an undertone in Sybert’s voice different from his usual listless drawl. Marcia glanced up at him quickly and Dessart’s insinuations flashed through her mind.

‘Do you mean you would rather have Leo XIII king instead of Humbert?’ she asked.

‘Heavens, no! No one wants the temporal power back—not even the Catholics themselves.’

‘I should think that when the Italians have gone through so much to get their king, they might be satisfied with him. They ought to have more patience, and not expect the country to be rich in a minute. Everything can’t be done all at once; and as for blaming the government because the African war didn’t turn out well—why, no one could foresee the result. It was a mistake instead of a crime.’

Sybert was watching her lazily, with an amused smile about his lips. ‘Will you pardon me, Miss Marcia, if I ask if those are your own conclusions, or the opinions of our young friend the American artist?’

‘He does not plot against the King, at any rate!’ she retorted.

‘Please, Miss Marcia,’ he begged, ‘don’t think so badly of me as that. Really, I’m not an anarchist. I don’t want to blow His Majesty up.’

‘Go home and dress, Sybert,’ Copley murmured, taking him by the arm. ‘I have to go and interview the cook, and I don’t dare leave you and my niece together. There’s no telling what would happen.’

‘She’s a suspicious young woman,’ Sybert complained. ‘Can’t you teach her to take your friends on trust?’

‘For the matter of that, she doesn’t even take her uncle on trust.’

‘And no wonder!’ said Marcia. ‘I forgot to tell you my other adventure, just as the carriage turned into the Corso we got jammed in close to the curb and had to stop. I looked up and saw a man standing on the side-walk, glaring at me over the top of a newspaper—simply glaring—and suddenly he jumped to the side of the carriage and thrust the paper in my hands. He said something in Italian, but too fast for me to catch, and before I could move, Marietta had snatched it up and dashed it back in his face. The paper was named the *Cry of the People*; I just caught one word in it, and that was—’ she paused dramatically—‘Copley! Now, Uncle Howard,’ she finished, ‘do you think you ought to be trusted? When it gets to the point that the people in the street—’

She stopped suddenly. She had caught a quick glance between her uncle and Sybert. ‘What is it?’ she asked. ‘Do you know what it means?’

‘It means damned impudence!’ said her uncle. ‘I’ll have that editor arrested if he doesn’t keep still,’ and the two men stood eyeing each other a minute in silence. Then Copley gave a short laugh. ‘Oh, well,’ he said, ‘I don’t believe the *Grido del Popolo* can destroy my character. Nobody reads it.’ He looked at his watch. ‘You’d better go and dress, Marcia. My party begins promptly at eight.’

‘You needn’t use any such clumsy method as that of getting rid of me,’ she laughed. ‘I’m not going to stay where I’m not wanted. All I have to say,’ she called back from the doorway, ‘is that you’d better stop badgering those poor old beggars, or you’ll be getting a warning to leave Rome as well as Naples.’

Marcia rang for Granton.

‘Have you time to fix my hair now?’ she inquired as the maid appeared, ‘or does Mrs. Copley need you?’

‘Mrs. Copley hasn’t begun to dress yet; she is watching Master Gerald eat his supper.’

‘Oh, very well, then, there is time enough; I’ll get through before she is ready for you. Do my hair sort of Frenchy,’ she commanded as she sat down before the mirror. ‘What dress do you think I’d better wear?’ she continued presently. ‘That white one I wore last week, or the new green one that came from Paris yesterday?’

‘I should think the white one, Miss Marcia, and save the new one for some party.’

‘It would be more sensible,’ Marcia agreed; ‘but,’ she added with a laugh, ‘I think I’ll wear the new one.’

Granton got it out with an unsmiling face which was meant to convey the fact that she could not countenance this American prodigality. She had lived ten years with an elderly English duchess, and had thought that she knew the ways of the aristocracy.

The gown was a filmy green mousseline touched with rose velvet and yellow lace. Marcia put it on and surveyed herself critically. ‘What do you think, Granton?’ she asked.

‘It’s very becoming, Miss Marcia,’ Granton returned primly.

‘Yes,’ Marcia sighed—‘and very tight!’ She caught up her fan and turned toward the door. ‘Don’t be hurt because I didn’t take your advice,’ she called back over her shoulder. ‘I never take anybody’s, Granton.’

She found her uncle alone in the salon, pacing the floor in a restless fashion, with two frowning lines between his brows. He paused in his walk as she appeared, and his frown gave place, readily enough, to a smile.

‘You look very well to-night,’ he remarked approvingly. ‘You—er—have a new gown, haven’t you?’

‘Oh, yes, Uncle Howard,’ she laughed. ‘It’s all the gown. Send your compliments to my dressmaker, 45 Avenue de l’Opéra. I thought I would wear it in honour of Mr. Sybert; it’s so seldom we have him with us.’

Mr. Copley received this statement with something like a grunt.

‘There! Uncle Howard, I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. Mr. Sybert is the nicest man that ever lived. And what I particularly like about him, is the fact that he is so genial and expansive and thoughtful for others—always trying to put people at their ease.’

Mr. Copley refused to smile. ‘I am sorry, Marcia, that you don’t like Sybert,’ he said quietly. ‘It’s because you don’t understand him.’

‘I dare say; and I suppose he doesn’t like me, for the same reason.’

‘He is a splendid fellow; I’ve never known a better one—and a man can judge.’

Marcia laughed. ‘Uncle Howard, do you know what you remind me of? An Italian father who is arranging a marriage for his daughter, and having chosen the man, is recommending him for her approval.’

‘Oh, no; I don’t go to the length of asking you to fall in love with him—though you might do worse—but I should be pleased if you would treat him—er—’

‘Respectfully, as I would my father.’

‘More respectfully than you do your uncle, at any rate. He may not be exactly what you’d call a lady’s man—’

‘A lady’s man! Uncle Howard, you make me furious when you talk like that; as if I only liked men with dimples in their chins, who dance well and get ices for you! I’m sorry if I don’t treat Mr. Sybert seriously enough; but really I don’t think he treats me seriously, either. You think I don’t know anything, just because I can’t tell the difference between the Left and the Right. I’ve only just come to Rome, and I don’t see how you can expect me to know about Italian politics. You both of you laugh whenever I ask the simplest question.’

‘But you ask such exceedingly simple questions, dear.’

‘How can I help it when you give me such absurd answers?’

‘I’m sorry. We’ll try to do better in the future. I suppose we’ve both of us been a little worried this spring, and you probe us on a tender point.’

‘But who ever heard of a man’s being really worried over politics—that is, unless he’s running for something? They should be regarded as an amusement to while away your leisure. You and Mr. Sybert are so funny, Uncle Howard; you take your amusements so seriously.’

“Politics” is a broad word, Marcia,’ he returned, with a slight frown; ‘and when it stands for oppression and injustice and starving peasants it has to be taken seriously.’

‘Is it really so bad, Uncle Howard?’

‘Good heavens, Marcia! It’s awful!’

She was startled at his tone, and glanced up at him quickly. He was staring at the light, with a hard look in his eyes and his mouth drawn into a straight line.

‘I’m sorry, Uncle Howard; I didn’t know. What can I do?’

‘What can any of us do?’ he asked bitterly. ‘We can give one day, and it’s eaten up before night. And we can keep on giving, but what does it amount to? The whole thing is rotten from the bottom.’

‘Can’t the people get work?’

‘No; and when they can, their earnings are eaten up in taxes. The people in the southern provinces are literally starving, I tell you; and it’s worse this year than usual, thanks to men like your father and me.’

‘What do you mean?’

For a moment he felt almost impelled to tell her the truth. Then, as he glanced down at her, he stopped himself quickly. She looked so delicate, so patrician, so aloof from everything that was sordid and miserable; she could not help, and it was better that she should not know.

‘What do you mean?’ she repeated. ‘What has papa been doing?’

‘Oh, nothing very criminal,’ he returned. ‘Only at a time like this one feels as if one’s money were a reproach. Italy’s in a bad way just now; the wheat crop failed last year, and that makes it inconvenient for people who live on macaroni.’

‘Do you mean the people really haven’t anything to eat?’

‘Not much.’

‘How terrible, Uncle Howard! Won’t the government do anything?’

‘The government is doing what it can. There was a riot in Florence last month, and they lowered the grain tax; King Humbert gave nine thousand lire to feed the people of Pisa a couple of weeks ago. You can do the same for some other city, if you want to play at being a princess.’

‘I thought you believed in finding them work instead giving them money.’

‘Oh, as a matter of principle, certainly. But you can’t have ’em dying on your door-step, you know.’

‘And to think we’re having a dinner to-night, when we’re not the slightest bit hungry!’

‘I’m afraid our dinner wouldn’t go far toward feeding the hungry in Italy.’

‘How does my dress look, my dear?’ asked Mrs. Copley, appearing in the doorway. ‘I have been so bothered over it; she didn’t fix the lace at all as I told her. These Italian dressmakers are not to be depended upon. I really should have run up to Paris for a few weeks this spring, only you were so unwilling, Howard.’

Marcia looked at her aunt a moment with wide-open eyes. ‘Heavens!’ she thought, ‘do I usually talk this way? No wonder Mr. Sybert doesn’t like me!’ And then she laughed. ‘I think it looks lovely, Aunt Katherine, and I am sure it is very becoming.’

The arrival of guests precluded any further conversation on the subject of Italian dressmakers. The Contessa Torrenieri was small and slender and olive-coloured, with a cloud of black hair and dramatic eyes. She had a pair of nervous little hands which were never still, and a magnetic manner which brought the men to her side and created a tendency among the women to say spiteful things.

Marcia was no exception to the rest of her sex, and her comments on the contessa's doings were frequently not prompted by a spirit of charitableness.

To-night the contessa evidently had something on her mind. She barely finished her salutations before transferring her attention to Marcia. 'Come, Signorina Copley, and sit beside me on the sofa; we harmonize so well'—this with a glance from her own rose-coloured gown to Marcia's rose trimmings. 'I missed you from tea this afternoon,' she added. 'I trust you had a pleasant walk.'

'A pleasant walk?' Marcia questioned, off her guard.

'I passed you as I was driving in the Borghese. But you did not see me; you were too occupied.' She shook her head, with a smile. 'It will not do in Italy, my dear. An Italian girl would never walk alone with a young man.'

'Fortunately I am not an Italian girl.'

'You are too strict, contessa,' Sybert, who was sitting near, put in with a laugh. 'If Miss Copley chooses, there is no reason why she should not walk in the gardens with a young man.'

'A girl of the lower classes perhaps, but not of Signorina Copley's class. With her dowry, she will be marrying an Italian nobleman one of these days.'

Marcia flushed with annoyance. 'I have not the slightest intention of marrying an Italian nobleman,' she returned.

'One must marry some one,' said her companion.

Mr. Melville relieved the tension by inquiring, 'And who was the hero of this episode, Miss Marcia? We have not heard his name.'

Marcia laughed good-humouredly. 'Your friend Mr. Dessart.' The Melvilles exchanged glances. 'I met him in the gallery, and as the carriage hadn't come and Gerald was playing in the fountain and Marietta was flirting with a gendarme (Dear me! Aunt Katherine, I didn't mean to say that), we strolled about until the carriage came. I'm sure I had no intention of shocking the Italian nobility; it was quite unpremeditated.'

'If the Italian nobility never stands a worse shock than that, it is happier than most nobilities,' said her uncle. And the simultaneous announcement of M. Benoit and dinner created a diversion.

It was a small party, and every one felt the absence of that preliminary chill which a long list of guests invited two weeks beforehand is likely to produce. They talked back and forth across the table, and laughed and joked in the unpremeditated way that an impromptu affair calls forth. Marcia glanced at her uncle once or twice in half perplexity. He seemed so entirely the careless man of the world, as he turned a laughing face to answer one of Mrs. Melville's sallies, that she could scarcely believe he was the same man who had spoken so seriously to her a few minutes before. She glanced across at Sybert. He was smiling at some remark of the contessa's, to which he retorted in Italian. 'I don't see how any sensible man can be interested in the contessa!' was her inward comment as she transferred her attention to the young Frenchman at her side.

Whenever the conversation showed a tendency to linger on politics, Mrs. Copley adroitly redirected it, as she knew from experience that the subject was too combustible by far for a dinner-party.

'Italy, Italy! These men talk nothing but Italy,' she complained to the young Frenchman on her right. 'Does it not make you homesick for the boulevards?'

'I suffered the nostalgie once,' he confessed, 'but Rome is a good cure.'

Marcia shook her head in mock despair. 'And you, too, M. Benoit! Patriotism is certainly dying out.'

'Not while you live,' said her uncle.

'Oh, I know I'm abnormally patriotic,' she admitted; 'but you're all so sluggish in that respect, that you force it upon one.'

'There are other useful virtues besides patriotism,' Sybert suggested.

‘Wait until you have spent a spring in the Sabine hills, Miss Copley,’ Melville put in, ‘and you will be as bad as the rest of us.’

‘Ah, mademoiselle,’ Benoit added fervently, ‘spring-time in the Sabine hills will be compensation sufficient to most of us for not seeing paradise.’

‘I believe, with my uncle, it’s a kind of Roman fever!’ she cried. ‘I never expected to hear a Frenchman renounce his native land.’

‘It is not that I renounce France,’ the young man remonstrated. ‘I love France as much as ever, but I open my arms to Italy as well. To love another land and peoples besides your own makes you, not littler, but, as you say, wider—broader. We are—we are— Ah, mademoiselle!’ he broke off, ‘if you would let me talk in French I could say what I mean; but how can one be eloquent in this halting tongue of yours?’

‘*Coraggio*, Benoit! You are doing bravely,’ Sybert laughed.

‘We are,’ the young man went on with a sudden inspiration, ‘what you call in English, citizens of the world. You, mademoiselle, are American, La Signora Contessa is Italian, Mr. Carthrope is English, I am French, but we are all citizens of the same world, and in whatever land we find ourselves, there we recognize one another for brothers, and are always at home; for it is still the world.’

The young man’s eloquence was received with an appreciative laugh. ‘And how about paradise?’ some one suggested.

‘Ah, my friends, it is there that we will be strangers!’ Benoit returned tragically.

‘Citizens of the world,’ Sybert turned the stem of his wine glass meditatively as he repeated the phrase. ‘It seems to me, in spite of Miss Marcia, that one can’t do much better than that. If you’re a patriotic citizen of the world, I should think you’d done your duty by mankind, and might reasonably expect to reap a reward in Benoit’s paradise.’

He laughed and raised his glass. ‘Here’s to the World, our fatherland! May we all be loyal citizens!’

‘I think,’ said Mrs. Melville, ‘since this is a farewell dinner and we are pledging toasts, we should drink to Villa Vivalanti and a happy spring in the Sabine hills.’

Copley bowed his thanks. ‘If you will all visit the villa we will pledge it in the good wine of Vivalanti.’

‘And here’s to the Vivalanti ghost!’ said the young Frenchman. ‘May it live long and prosper!’

‘Italy’s the place for such ghosts to prosper,’ Copley returned.

‘Here’s to the poor people of Italy—may they have enough to eat!’ said Marcia.

Sybert glanced up in sudden surprise, but she did not look at him; she was smiling across at her uncle.

CHAPTER IV

The announcement that a *principe Americano* was coming to live in Villa Vivalanti occasioned no little excitement in the village. Wagons with furnishings from Rome had been seen to pass on the road below the town, and the contadini in the wayside vineyards had stopped their work to stare, and had repeated to each other rumours of the fabulous wealth this signor *principe* was said to possess. The furniture they allowed to pass without much controversy. But they shook their heads dubiously when two wagons full of flowering trees and shrubs wound up the roadway toward the villa. This foreigner must be a grasping person—as if there were not trees enough already in the Sabine hills, that he must bring out more from Rome!

The dissection of the character of Prince Vivalanti's new tenant occupied so much of the people's time that the spring pruning of the vineyards came near to being slighted. The fountainhead of all knowledge on the subject was the landlord of the *Croce d'Oro*. He himself had had the honour of entertaining their excellencies at breakfast, on the occasion of their first visit to Castel Vivalanti, and with unvarying eloquence he nightly recounted the story to an interested group of loungers in the *trattoria* kitchen: of how he had made the omelet without garlic because princes have delicate stomachs and cannot eat the food one would cook for ordinary men; of how they had sat at that very table, and the young *signorina principessa*, who was beautiful as the holy angels in paradise, had told him with her own lips that it was the best omelet she had ever eaten; and of how they had paid fifteen lire for their breakfast without so much as a word of protest, and then of their own accord had given three lire more for *mancia*]. Eighteen lire. *Corpo di Bacco!* that was the kind of guests he wished would drop in every day.

But when Domenico Paterno, the baker of Castel Vivalanti, heard the story, he shrugged his shoulders and spread out his palms, and asserted that a prince was a prince all over the world; and that the *Americano* had allowed himself to be cheated from stupidity, not generosity. For his part, he thought the devil was the same, whether he talked American or Italian. But it was reported, on the other hand, that Bianca Rosini had also talked with the *forestieri* when she was washing clothes in the stream. They had stopped their horses to watch the work, and the signorina had smiled and asked if the water were not cold; for her part, she was sure American nobles had kind hearts.

Domenico, however, was not to be convinced by any such counter-evidence as this. 'Smiles are cheap,' he returned sceptically. 'Does any one know of their giving money?'

No one did know of their giving money, but there were plenty of boys to testify that they had run by the side of the carriage fully a kilometre asking for soldi, and the signore had only shaken his head to pay them for their trouble.

'*Si, si*, what did I tell you?' Domenico finished in triumph. 'American princes are like any others—perhaps a little more stupid, but for the rest, exactly the same.'

There were no facts at hand to confute such logic.

And one night Domenico appeared at the *Croce d'Oro* with a fresh piece of news; his son, Tarquinio, who kept an osteria in Rome, had told the whole story.

'His name is Copli—Signor Edoardo Copli—and it is because of him'—Domenico scowled—'that I pay for my flour twice the usual price. When the harvests failed last year, and he saw that wheat was going to be scarce, he sent to America and he bought all the wheat in the land and he put it in storehouses. He is holding it there now while the price goes up—up—up. And when the poor people in Italy get very, very hungry, and are ready to pay whatever he asks, then perhaps—very charitably—he will agree to sell. *Già*, that is the truth,' he insisted darkly. 'Everybody knows it in Rome. Doubtless he thinks to escape from his sin up here in the mountains—but he will see—it will follow him wherever he goes. *Maché!* It is the story of the Bad Prince over again.'

Finally one morning—one Friday morning—some of the children of the village who were in the habit of loitering on the highway in the hope of picking up stray soldi, reported that the American's horses and carriages had come out from Rome, and that the drivers had stopped at the inn of *Sant' Agapito* and ordered wine like gentlemen. It was further rumoured that the *principe* himself intended to follow in the afternoon. The matter was discussed with considerable interest before the usual noonday siesta.

'It is my opinion,' said Tommaso Ferri, the blacksmith, as he sat in the baker's doorway, washing down alternate mouthfuls of bread and onion with Vivalanti wine—'it is my opinion that the Signor Americano must be a very reckless man to venture on so important a journey on Friday—and particularly in Lent. It is well known that if a poor man starts for market on Friday, he will break his eggs on the way; and because a rich man has no eggs to break, is that any reason the *buon Dio* should overlook his sin? Things are more just in heaven than on earth,' he added solemnly; 'and in my opinion, if the foreigner comes to-day, he will not prosper in the villa.'

Domenico nodded approvingly.

'*Si, si*, Tommaso is right. The Americano has already tempted heaven far enough in this matter of the wheat, and it will not be the part of wisdom for him to add to the account. Apoplexies are as likely to fall on princes as on bakers, and a dead prince is no different from any other dead man—only that he goes to purgatory.'

It was evident, however, that the foreigner was in truth going to tempt Fate; for in the afternoon two empty carriages came back from the villa and turned toward Palestrina, obviously bound for the station. All the *ragazzi* of Castel Vivalanti waited on the road to see them pass and beg for coppers; and it was just as Domenico had foretold: they never received a single soldo.

The remarks about the *principe Americano* were not complimentary in Castel Vivalanti that night; but the little yellow-haired *principino* was handled more gently. The black-haired little Italian boys told how he had laughed when they turned somersaults by the side of the carriage, and how he had cried when his father would not let him throw soldi; and the general opinion seemed to be that if he died young, he at least had a chance of paradise.

CHAPTER V

Meanwhile, the unconscious subjects of Castel Vivalanti's 'apoplexies' were gaily installing themselves in their new, old dwelling. The happy hum of life had again invaded the house, and its walls once more echoed to the ring of a child's laughter. They were very matter-of-fact people—these Americans, and they took possession of the ancestral home of the Vivalanti as if it were as much their right as a seaside cottage at Newport. Upstairs Granton and Marietta were unpacking trunks and hampers and laying Paris gowns in antique Roman clothes-chests; in the villa kitchen François was rattling copper pots and kettles, and anxiously trying to adapt his modern French ideas to a mediaeval Roman stove; while from every room in succession sounded the patter of Gerald's feet and his delighted squeals over each new discovery.

For the past two weeks Roman workmen and Castel Vivalanti cleaning-women had been busily carrying out Mrs. Copley's orders. The florid furniture and coloured chandeliers of the latter Vivalanti had been banished to the attic (or what answers to an attic in a Roman villa), while the faded damask of a former generation had been dusted and restored. Tapestries covered the walls and hung over the balustrade of the marble staircase. Dark rugs lay on the red tile floors; carved chests and antique chairs and tables of coloured marble, supported by gilded griffins, were scattered through the rooms. In the bedrooms the heavy draperies had been superseded by curtains of an airier texture, while wicker chairs and chintz-covered couches lent an un-Roman air of comfort to the rooms.

In spite of his humorous grumbling about the trials of moving-day, Mr. Copley found himself very comfortable as he lounged on the parapet toward sunset, smoking a pre-prandial cigarette, and watching the shadows as they fell over the Campagna. Gerald was already up to his elbows in the fountain, and the ilex grove was echoing his happy shrieks as he prattled in Italian to Marietta about a marvellous two-tailed lizard he had caught in a cranny of the stones. Copley smiled as he listened, for—Castel Vivalanti to the contrary—his little boy was very near his heart.

Marcia in the house had been gaily superintending the unpacking, and running back and forth between the rooms, as excited by her new surroundings as Gerald himself.

'What time does Villa Vivalanti dine?' she inquired while on a flying visit to her aunt's room.

'Eight o'clock when any of us are in town, and half-past seven other nights.'

'I suppose it's half-past seven to-night, *alors!* Shall I make a *grande toilette* in honour of the occasion?'

'Put on something warm, whatever else you do; I distrust this climate after sundown.'

'You're such a distrustful person, Aunt Katherine! I can't understand how one can have the heart to accuse this innocent old villa of harbouring malaria.'

She returned to her own room and delightedly rummaged out a dinner-gown from the ancient wardrobe, with a little laugh at the thought of the many different styles it had held in its day. Perhaps some other girl had once occupied this room; very likely a young Princess Vivalanti, two hundred years before, had hung silk-embroidered gowns in this very wardrobe. It was a big, rather bare, delightfully Italian apartment with tall windows having solid barred shutters overlooking the terrace. The view from the windows revealed a broad expanse of Campagna and hills. Marcia dressed with her eyes on the landscape, and then stood a long time gazing up at the broken ridges of the Sabines, glowing softly in the afternoon light. Picturesque little mountain hamlets of battered grey stone were visible here and there clinging to the heights; and in the distance the walls and towers of a half-ruined monastery stood out clear against the sky. She drew a deep breath of pleasure. To be an artist, and to appreciate and reproduce this beauty, suddenly struck her as an ideal life. She smiled at herself as she recalled something she had said to Paul Dessart in the gallery the day before; she had advised him—an artist—to exchange Italy for Pittsburg!

Mr. Copley, who was strolling on the terrace, glanced up, and catching sight of his niece, paused beneath her balcony while he quoted:—

“‘But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.’”

Marcia brought her eyes from the distant landscape to a contemplation of her uncle; and then she stepped through the glass doors, and leaned over the balcony railing with a little laugh.

‘You make a pretty poor Romeo, Uncle Howard,’ she called down. ‘I’m afraid the real one never wore a dinner-jacket nor smoked a cigarette.’

Mr. Copley spread out his hands in protest.

‘For the matter of that, I doubt if Juliet ever wore a gown from—where was it—42, Avenue de l’Opéra? How does the new house go?’ he asked.

‘Beautifully. I feel like a princess on a balcony waiting for the hunters to come back from the chase.’

‘I can’t get over the idea that I’m a usurper myself, and that the rightful lord is languishing in a donjon somewhere in the cellar. Come down and talk to me. I’m getting lonely so far from the world.’

Marcia disappeared from the balcony and reappeared three minutes later on the loggia. She paused on the top step and slowly turned around in order to take in the whole affect. The loggia, in its rehabilitation, made an excellent lounging-place for a lazy summer morning. It was furnished with comfortably deep Oriental rush chairs, a crimson rug and awnings, and, at either side of the steps, white azaleas growing in marble cinerary urns.

‘Isn’t this the most fun you ever had, Uncle Howard?’ she inquired as she brought her eyes back to Mr. Copley waiting on the terrace below. ‘We’ll have coffee served out here in the morning, and then when it gets sunny in the afternoon we’ll move to the end of the terrace under the ilex trees. Villa Vivalanti is the most thoroughly satisfying place I ever lived in.’ She ran down the steps and joined him. ‘Aren’t those little trees nice?’ she asked, nodding toward a row of oleanders ranged at mathematical intervals along the balustrade. ‘I think that Aunt Katherine and I planned things beautifully!’

‘If every one were as well pleased with his own work as you appear to be, this would be a contented world. There’s nothing like the beautiful enthusiasm of youth.’

‘It’s a very good thing to have, just the same,’ said Marcia, good-naturedly; ‘and without mentioning any names, I know one man who would be less disagreeable if he had more of it.’

‘None of that!’ said her uncle. ‘Our pact was that if I stopped grumbling about the villa being so abominably far from Rome, you were not to utter any—er—’

‘Unpleasant truths about Mr. Sybert? Very well, I’ll not mention him again; and you’ll please not refer to the thirty-nine kilometres—it’s a bargain. Gerald, I judge, has found the fountain,’ she added as a delighted shriek issued from the grove.

‘And a menagerie as well.’

‘If he will only keep them out of doors! I shall dream of finding lizards in my bed.’

‘If you only dream of them you will be doing well. I dare say the place is full of bats and lizards and owls and all manner of ruin-haunting creatures.’

‘You’re such a pessimist, Uncle Howard. Between you and Aunt Katherine, the poor villa won’t have a shred of character left. For my part, I approve of it all—particularly the ruins. I am dying to explore them—do you think it’s too late to-night?’

‘Far too late; you’d get malaria, to say nothing of missing dinner. Here comes Pietro now to announce the event.’

As the family entered the dining-room they involuntarily paused on the threshold, struck by the contrast between the new and the old. In the days of Cardinal Vivalanti the room had been the chapel,

and it still contained its Gothic ceiling, appropriately redecorated to its new uses with grape-wreathed trellises, and, in the central panelling, Bacchus crowned with vines. The very modern dinner-table, with its glass and silver and shaded candles, looked ludicrously out of place in the long, dusky, vaulted apartment, which, in spite of its rakish frescoes, tenaciously preserved the air of a chapel. The glass doors at the end were thrown wide to a little balcony which overlooked the garden and the ilex grove; and the room was flooded with a nightingale's song.

Marcia clasped her hands ecstatically.

'Isn't this perfect? Aren't you glad we came, Aunt Katherine? I feel like forgiving all my enemies! Uncle Howard, I'm going to be lovely to Mr. Sybert.'

'Don't promise anything rash,' he laughed. 'You'll get acclimated in a day or two.'

Gerald, in honour of the occasion, and because Marietta, under the stress of excitement, had forgotten to give him his supper, was allowed to dine *en famille*. Elated by the unwonted privilege and by his new surroundings, he babbled gaily of the ride in the cars and the little boys who turned 'summersorts' by the roadside, and of the beautiful two-tailed lizard of the fountain, whose charms he dwelt on lovingly. But he had missed his noonday nap, and though he struggled bravely through the first three courses, his head nodded over the chicken and salad, and he was led away by Marietta still sleepily boasting, in a blend of English and Italian, of the *bellissimi animali* he would catch *domane* morning in the fountain.

'It is a pity,' said Marcia, as the sound of his prattle died away, 'Gerald hasn't some one his own age to play with.'

'Yes, it is a pity,' Copley returned. 'I passed a lonely childhood myself, and I know how barren it is.'

'That is the chief reason that would make me want to go back to New York,' said his wife.

Her husband smiled. 'I suppose there are children to be found outside of New York?'

'There are the Kirkups in Rome,' she agreed; 'but they are so boisterous; and they always quarrel with Gerald whenever they come to play with him.'

'I am not sure, myself, but that Gerald quarrels with them,' returned her husband. However fond he might be of his offspring, he cherished no motherly delusions. 'But perhaps you are right,' he added, with something of a sigh. 'It may be necessary to take him back to America before long. I myself have doubts if this cosmopolitan atmosphere is the best in which to bring up a boy.'

'I should have wished him to spend a winter in Paris for his French,' said Mrs. Copley, plaintively; 'but I dare say he can learn it later. Marcia didn't begin till she was twelve, and she has a very good accent, I am sure.'

Mr. Copley twisted the handle of his glass in silence.

'I suppose, after all,' he said finally, to no one in particular, 'if you manage to bring up a boy to be a decent citizen you've done something in the world.'

'I don't know,' Marcia objected, with a half-laugh. 'If one man, whom we will suppose is a decent citizen, brings up one boy to be a decent citizen, and does nothing else, I don't see that much is gained to the world. Your one man has merely shifted the responsibility.'

Mr. Copley shrugged a trifle. 'Perhaps the boy might be better able to bear it.'

'Of course it would be easier for the man to think so,' she agreed. 'But if everybody passed on his responsibilities there wouldn't be much progress. The boys might do the same, you know, when they grew up.'

Mrs. Copley rose, 'If you two are going to talk metaphysics, I shall go into the salon and have coffee alone.'

'It's not metaphysics; it's theology,' her husband returned. 'Marcia is developing into a terrible preacher.'

'I know it,' Marcia acknowledged. 'I'm growing deplorably moral; I think it must be the Roman air.'

‘It doesn’t affect most people that way,’ her uncle laughed. ‘I don’t care for any coffee, Katherine. I will smoke a cigarette on the terrace and wait for you out there.’

He disappeared through the balcony doors, and Marcia and her aunt proceeded to the salon.

Marcia poured the coffee, and her aunt said as she received her cup, ‘I really believe your uncle is getting tired of Rome and will be ready to go back before long.’

‘I don’t believe he’s tired of Rome, Aunt Katherine. I think he’s just a little bit—well, discouraged.’

‘Nonsense, child! he has nothing to be discouraged about; he is simply getting restless again. I know the signs! I’ve never known him to stay as long as this in one place before. I only hope now that he will not think of any ridiculous new thing to do, but will be satisfied to go back to New York and settle down quietly like other people.’

‘It seems to me,’ said Marcia, slowly, ‘as if he might do more good there, because he would understand better what the people need. There are plenty of things to be done even in New York.’

‘Oh, yes; when he once got settled he would find any amount of things to take up his time. He might even try yachting, for a change; I am sure that keeps men absorbed.’

Marcia sipped her coffee in silence and glanced out of the window at her uncle, who was pacing up and down the terrace with his hands in his pockets. He looked a rather lonely figure in the half-darkness. It suddenly struck her, as she watched him, that she did not understand him; she had scarcely realized before that there was anything to understand.

Mrs. Copley set her cup down on the table, and Marcia rose. ‘Let’s go out on the terrace, Aunt Katherine.’

‘You go out, my dear, and I will join you later. I want to see if Gerald is asleep. I neglected to have a crib sent out for him, and the dear child thrashes around so—what with a bed four feet high and a stone floor—’

‘It would be disastrous!’ Marcia agreed.

She crossed the loggia to the terrace and silently fell into step beside her uncle. It was almost dark, and a crescent moon was hanging low over the top of Guadagnolo. A faint lemon light still tinged the west, throwing into misty relief the outline of the Alban hills. The ilex grove was black—gruesomely black—and the happy song of the nightingales and the splashing of the fountain sounded uncannily coming from the darkness; but the white, irregular mass of the villa formed a cheerful contrast, with its shining lights, which threw squares of brightness on the marble terrace and the trees.

Marcia looked about with a deep breath. ‘It’s beautiful, isn’t it, Uncle Howard?’ They paused a moment by the parapet and stood looking down over the plain. ‘Isn’t the Campagna lovely,’ she added, ‘half covered with mist?’

‘Yes, it’s lovely—and the mist means death to the peasants who live beneath it.’

She exclaimed half impatiently:

‘Uncle Howard, *why* can’t you let anything be beautiful here without spoiling it by pointing out an ugliness beneath?’

‘I’m sorry; it isn’t my fault that the ugliness exists. Look upon the mist as a blessed dew from heaven, if it makes you any happier.’

‘Of course I should rather know the truth, but it seems as if the Italians are happy in spite of things. They strike me as the happiest people I have ever seen.’

‘Ah, well, perhaps they are happier than we think.’

‘I’m sure they are,’ said Marcia, comfortably. ‘Anglo-Saxons, particularly New Englanders, and most particularly Mr. Howard Copley, worry too much.’

‘It’s at least a fault the Italians haven’t learned,’ he replied. ‘But, after all, as you say, it may be the better fortune to have less and worry less—I’d like to believe it.’

CHAPTER VI

On the morning after their arrival, Marcia had risen early and set out on horseback to explore the neighbourhood. As Castel Vivalanti, accordingly, was engaged in its usual Saturday-morning sweeping, a clatter of horses' hoofs suddenly sounded on the tiny Corso (the paving is so villainous that a single horse, however daintily it may step, sounds like a cavalcade), and running to the door, the inhabitants of the village beheld the new *signorina Americana* gaily riding up the narrow way and smiling to the right and left, for all the world like the queen herself. The women contented themselves with standing in the doorways and staring open-mouthed, but the children ran boldly after, until the signorina presently dismounted and bidding the groom hold her horse, sat down upon a door-step and talked to them with as much friendliness as though she had known them all her life. She ended by asking them what in the world they liked best to eat, and they declared in a single voice for '*Cioccolata*.'

Accordingly they moved in a body to the baker's, and, to Domenico's astonishment, ordered all of the chocolate in the shop. And while he was excitedly counting it out the signorina kept talking to him about the weather and the scenery and the olive crop until he was so overcome by the honour that he could do nothing but bob his head and murmur, '*Si, si, eccellenza; si, si, eccellenza,*' to everything she said.

And as soon as she had mounted her horse again and ridden away, with a final wave of her hand to the little black-eyed children, Domenico hurried to the *Croce d'Oro* to inform the landlord that he also had had the honour of entertaining the *signorina Americana*, who had bought chocolate to the amount of five lire—five lire! And had given it all away! The blacksmith's wife, who had followed Domenico to hear the news, remarked that, for her part, she thought it a sin to spend so much for chocolate; the signorina might have given the money just as well, and they could have had meat for Sunday. But Domenico was more ready this time to condone the fault. '*Si, si,*' he returned, with a nod of his head: 'the signorina meant well, no doubt, but she could not understand the needs of poor people. He supposed that they lived on chocolate all the time at the villa, and naturally did not realize that persons who worked for their living found meat more nourishing.'

When Marcia returned home with the announcement that she had visited Castel Vivalanti, her uncle replied, with an elaborate frown, 'I suppose you scattered soldi broadcast through the streets, and have started fifty young Italians on the broad road to Pauperism.'

'Not a single soldo!' she reassured him. 'I distributed nothing more demoralizing than a few cakes of chocolate.'

'You'll make a scientific philanthropist if you keep on,' Mr. Copley laughed, but his inner reflections coincided somewhat with those of the blacksmith's wife.

Marcia's explorations were likewise extended in other directions, and before the first week was over she had visited most of the villages from Palestrina to Subiaco. As a result, the chief article of diet in the Sabine mountains bade fair to become sweet chocolate; while Domenico, the baker, instead of being grateful for this unexpected flow of custom, complained to his friends of the trouble it caused. No sooner would he send into Rome for a fresh supply than the signorina would come and carry the whole of it off. At that rate, it was clearly impossible to keep it in stock.

By means of largesses of chocolate to the children, or possibly by a smile and a friendly air, Marcia had established in a very short time a speaking acquaintance with the whole neighbourhood. And on sunny mornings, as she rode between the olive orchards and the wheat fields, more than one worker straightened his back to call a pleased '*Buona passeggiata, signorina,*' to the fair-haired stranger princess, who came from the land across the water where, it was rumoured, gold could be dug from the ground like potatoes and every one was rich.

All about that region the advent of the foreigners was the subject of chief interest—especially because they were Americani, for many of the people were thinking of becoming Americani

themselves. The servants of the villa, when they condescended to drink a glass of wine at the inn of the *Croce d'Oro*, were almost objects of veneration, because they could talk so intimately of the life these 'stranger princes' led—the stranger princes would have been astonished could they have heard some of the details of these recitals.

And so the Copley dynasty began at Castel Vivalanti. The life soon fell into a daily routine, as life in even the best of places will. Three meals and tea, a book in the shadiness of the ilex grove to the tune of the splashing fountain, a siesta at noon, a drive in the afternoon, and a long night's sleep were the sum of Vivalanti's resources. Marcia liked it. Italy had got its hold upon her, and for the present she was content to drift. But Mr. Copley, after a few days of lounging on the balustrade, smoking countless cigarettes and hungrily reading such newspapers as drifted out on the somewhat casual mails, had his horse saddled one morning and rode to Palestrina to the station. After that he went into Rome almost every day, and the peasants in the wayside vineyards came to know him as well as his niece; but they did not take off their hats and smile as they did to her, for he rode past with unseeing eyes. Rich men, they said, had no thought for such as they, and they turned back to their work with a sullen scowl. Work at the best is hard enough, and it is a pity when the smile that makes it lighter is withheld; Howard Copley would have been the last to do it had he realized. But his thoughts were bent on other things, and how could the peasants know that while he galloped by so carelessly his mind was planning a way to get them bread?

Marcia spent many half-hours the first few weeks in loitering about the ruins of the old villa. It was a dream-haunted spot which spoke pathetically of a bygone time with bygone ideals. She could never quite reconcile the crumbling arches, the fantastic rock-work, and the grass-grown terraces with the 'Young Italy' of Monte Citorio thirty miles away. To eyes fresh from the New World it seemed half unreal.

One afternoon she had started to walk across the fields to Castel Vivalanti, but the fields had proved too sunny and she had stopped in the shade of the cypresses instead. Even the ruins seemed to be revived by the warm touch of spring. Blue and white anemones, rose-coloured cyclamen, yellow laburnum, burst from every cranny of the stones. Marcia glanced about with an air of delighted approval. A Pan with his pipes was all that was needed to make the picture complete. She dropped down on the coping of the fountain, and with her chin in her hands gazed dreamily at the moss-bearded merman who, two centuries before, had spouted water from his twisted conch-shell. She was suddenly startled from her reverie by hearing a voice exclaim, '*Buon giorno, signorina!*' and she looked up quickly to find Paul Dessart.

'Mr. Dessart!' she cried in amazement. 'Where in the world did you come from?'

'The inn of *Sant' Agapito* at Palestrina. Benoit and I are making it the centre of a sketching expedition. We get a sort of hill fever every spring, and when the disease reaches a certain point we pack up and set out for the Sabines.'

'And how did you manage to find us?'

'Purely chance,' he returned more or less truthfully. 'I picked out this road as a promising field, and when I came to the gateway, being an artist, I couldn't resist the temptation of coming in. I didn't know that it was Villa Vivalanti or that I should find you here.' He sat down on the edge of the fountain and looked about.

'Well?' Marcia inquired.

'I don't wonder that you wanted to exchange Rome for this! May I make a little sketch, and will you stay and talk to me until it is finished?'

'That depends upon how long it takes you to make a little sketch. I shall subscribe to no *carte-blanche* promises.'

He got out a box of water-colours from one pocket of his Norfolk jacket and a large pad from the other, and having filled his cup at the little rush-choked stream which once had fed the fountain, set to work without more ado.

'I heard from the Roystons this morning,' said Marcia, presently, and immediately she was sorry that she had not started some other subject. In their former conversations Paul's relations with his family had never proved a very fortunate topic.

'Any bad news?' he inquired flippantly.

'They will reach Rome in a week or so.'

'Holy Week—I might have known it! Miss Copley,' he looked at her appealingly, 'you know what an indefatigable woman my aunt is. She will make me escort her to every religious function that blessed city offers; it isn't her way to miss anything.'

Marcia smiled slightly at the picture; it was lifelike.

'I shall be stopping in Palestrina when they come,' he added.

She let this observation pass in a disapproving silence.

'Oh, well,' he sighed, 'I'll stay and tote them around if you think I ought. The Bible says, you know, "Love your relatives and show mercy unto them that despitefully use you."'

Marcia flashed a sudden laugh and then looked grave.

Paul glanced up at her quickly. 'I suppose my aunt told you no end of bad things about me?'

'Was there anything to tell?'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'I've committed the unpardonable sin of preferring art in Rome to coal in Pittsburg.'

He dropped the subject and turned back to his picture, and Marcia sat watching him as he industriously splashed in colour. Occasionally their eyes met when he raised his head, and if his own lingered a moment longer than convention warranted—being an artist, he was excusable, for she was distinctly an addition to the moss-covered fountain. The young man may have prolonged the situation somewhat; in any case, the sun's rays were beginning to slant when he finally pocketed his colours and presented the picture with a bow. It was a dainty little sketch of a ruined grotto and a broken statue, with the sunlight flickering through the trees on the flower-sprinkled grass.

'Really, is it for me?' she asked. 'It's lovely, Mr. Dessart; and when I go away from Rome I can remember both you and the villa by it.'

'When you go away?' he asked, with an audible note of anxiety in his voice. 'But I thought you had come to live with your uncle.'

'Oh, for the present,' she returned. 'But I'm going back to America in the indefinite future.'

He breathed an exaggerated sigh of relief.

'The indefinite future doesn't bother me. Before it comes you'll change your mind—everybody does. It's merely the present I want to be sure of.'

Marcia glanced at him a moment with a half-provocative laugh; and then, without responding, she turned her head and appeared to study the stone village up on the height. She was quite conscious that he was watching her, and she was equally conscious that her pale-blue muslin gown and her rosebud hat formed an admirable contrast to the frowning old merman. When she turned back there was a shade of amusement in her glance. Paul did not speak, but he did not lower his eyes nor in any degree veil his visible admiration. She rose with a half-shrug and brushed back a stray lock of hair that was blowing in her eyes.

'I'm hungry,' she remarked in an exasperatingly matter-of-fact tone. 'Let's go back and get some tea.'

'Will Mrs. Copley receive a jacket and knickerbockers?'

'Mrs. Copley will be delighted. Visitors are a godsend at Villa Vivalanti.'

They passed from the deep shade of the cypresses to the sun-flecked laurel path that skirted the wheat field. As they strolled along, in no great hurry to reach the villa, they laughed and chatted lightly; but the most important things they said occurred in the pauses when no words were spoken. The young man carried his hat in his hand, carelessly switching the branches with it as he passed. His shining light-brown hair—almost the colour of Marcia's own—lay on his forehead in a tangled mass

and stirred gently in the wind. She noted it in an approving sidewise glance, and quickly turned away again lest he should look up and catch her eyes upon him.

In the ilex grove they paused for a moment as the sound of mingled voices reached them from the terrace.

‘Listen,’ Marcia whispered, with her finger on her lips; and as she recognized the tones she made a slight grimace. ‘My two enemies! The Contessa Torrenieri and Mr. Sybert. The contessa has a villa at Tivoli. This is very kind of her, is it not? Nine miles is a long distance just to pay a call.’

As they advanced toward the tea-table, placed under the trees at the end of the terrace, they found an unexpectedly august party—not only the Contessa Torrenieri and the secretary of the Embassy, but the American consul-general as well. The men had evidently but just arrived, as Mrs. Copley was still engaged with their welcome.

‘Mr. Melville, you come at exactly the right time. We are having mushroom ragoût to-night, which, if I remember, is your favourite dish—but why didn’t you bring your wife?’

‘My wife, my dear lady, is at present in Capri and shows no intention of coming home. Your husband, pitying my loneliness, insisted on bringing me out for the night.’

‘I am glad that he did—we shall hope to see you later, however, when Mrs. Melville can come too. Mr. Sybert,’ she added, turning toward the younger man, ‘you can’t know how we miss not having you drop in at all hours of the day. We didn’t realize what a necessary member of the family you had become until we had to do without you.’

Marcia, overhearing this speech, politely suppressed a smile as she presented the young painter. He was included in the general acclaim.

‘This is charming!’ Mrs. Copley declared. ‘I was just complaining to the Contessa Torrenieri that not a soul had visited us since we came out to the villa, and here are three almost before the words are out of my mouth!’

Pietro, appearing with a trayful of cups, put an end to these amenities; and, reinforced by Gerald, they had an unusually festive tea-party. Mr. Copley had once remarked concerning Paul Dessart that he would be an ornament to any dinner-table, and he undoubtedly proved himself an ornament to-day.

Melville, introducing the subject of a famous monastery lately suppressed by the government, gave rise to a discussion involving many and various opinions. The contessa and Dessart hotly defended the homeless monks; while the other men, from a political point of view, were inclined to applaud the action of the premier. Their arguments were strong, but the little contessa, two slender hands gesticulating excitedly, stanchly held her own; though a ‘White’ in politics, her sympathies, on occasion, stuck persistently to the other side. The church had owned the property for five centuries, the government for a quarter of a century. Which had the better right? And aside from the justice of the question—Dessart backed her up—for ascetic reasons alone, the monks should be allowed to stay. Who wished to have the beauties of frescoed chapels and carved choir-stalls pointed out by blue-uniformed government officials whose coats didn’t fit? It spoiled the poetry. Names of cardinals and prelates and Italian princes passed glibly; and the politicians finally retired beaten. Marcia, listening, thought approvingly that the young artist was a match for the diplomats, and she could not help but acknowledge further that whatever faults the contessa might possess, dullness was not among them.

It was Gerald, however, who furnished the chief diversion that afternoon. Upon being forbidden to take a third *maritozzo*, he rose reluctantly, shook the crumbs from his blouse, and drifted off toward the ilex grove to occupy himself with the collection of lizards which he kept in a box under a stone garden seat. The group about the tea-table was shortly startled by a splash and a scream, and they hastened with one accord to the scene of the disaster. Mr. Copley, arriving first, was in time to pluck his son from the fountain, like Achilles, by a heel.

‘What’s the matter, Howard?’ Mrs. Copley called as the others anxiously hurried up.

‘Nothing serious,’ he reassured her. ‘Gerald has merely been trying to identify himself with his environment.’

Gerald, dripping and sputtering, came out at this point with the astounding assertion that Marietta had pushed him in. Marietta chimed into the general confusion with a volley of Latin ejaculations. She push him in! *Madonna mia*, what a fib! Why should she do such a thing as that when it would only put her to the trouble of dressing him again? She had told him repeatedly not to fall into the fountain, but the moment her back was turned he disobeyed.

Amid a chorus of laughter and suggestions, of wails and protestations, the nurse, the boy, and his father and mother set out for the house to settle the question, leaving the guests at the scene of the tragedy. As they strolled back to the terrace the contessa very adroitly held Sybert on one side and Dessart on the other, while with a great deal of animation and gesture she recounted a diverting bit of Roman gossip. Melville and Marcia followed after, the latter with a speculative eye on the group in front, and an amused appreciation of the fact that the young artist would very much have preferred dropping behind. Possibly the contessa divined this too; in any case, she held him fast. The consul-general was discussing a criticism he had recently read of the American diplomatic service, and his opinion of the writer was vigorous. Melville’s views were likely to be both vigorously conceived and vigorously expressed.

‘In any case,’ he summed up his remarks, ‘America has no call to be ashamed of her representative to Italy. His Excellency is a fine example of the right man in the right place.’

‘And his Excellency’s nephew?’ she inquired, her eyes on the lounging figure in front of them.

‘Is an equally fine example of the right man in the wrong place.’

‘I thought you were one of the people who stood up for him.’

‘You thought I was one of the people who stood up for him? Well, certainly, why not?’ Melville’s tone contained the suggestion of a challenge; he had fought so many battles in Sybert’s behalf that a belligerent attitude over the question had become subconscious.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Marcia vaguely. ‘Lots of people don’t like him.’

Melville struck a match, lit a cigar, and vigorously puffed it into a glow; then he observed: ‘Lots of people are idiots.’

Marcia laughed and apologized—

‘Excuse me, but you are all so funny about Mr. Sybert. One day I hear the most extravagant things in his praise, and the next, the most disparaging things in his dispraise. It’s difficult to know what to believe of such a changeable person as that.’

‘Just let me tell you one thing, Miss Marcia, and that is, that in this world a man who has no enemies is not to be trusted—I don’t know how it may be in the world to come. At for Sybert, you may safely believe what his friends say of him.’

‘In that case he certainly does not show his best side to the world.’

‘He probably thinks his best side nobody’s business but his own.’ And then, as a thought re-occurred to him, he glanced at her a moment in silence, while a brief smile flickered across his aggressively forceful face. She could not interpret the smile, but it was vaguely irritating, and as he did not have anything further to say, she pursued her theme rough-shod.

‘When you see a person who doesn’t take any interest in his own country; whose only aim is to be thought a cosmopolitan, a man of the world; whose business in life is to attend social functions and make after-dinner speeches—well, naturally, you can’t blame people for not taking him very seriously.’ She finished with a gesture of disdain.

‘You were telling me a little while ago, Miss Marcia, about some of the people in Castel Vivalanti. You appear to be rather proud of your broad-mindedness in occasionally being able to detect the real man underneath the peasant—don’t you think you might push your penetration just one step further and discover a real man, a personality, beneath the man of the world? Once in a while it exists.’

‘You can’t argue me into liking Mr. Sybert,’ she laughed; ‘Uncle Howard has tried it and failed.’

Mr. and Mrs. Copley returned shortly to their guests; and the contessa, bemoaning the nine miles, announced that she must go. Mr. Copley suggested that nine miles would be no longer after dinner than before, but the lady was obdurate and her carriage was ordered. She took her departure amid a graceful flurry of farewell. The contessa had an unerring instinct for effect, and her exits and her entrances were divertingly spectacular. She bade Mrs. Copley, Marcia, and the consul-general good-bye upon the terrace, and trailed across the marble flagging, attended—at a careful distance from her train—by the three remaining men. Sybert handed her into the carriage, Dessart arranged the lap-robe, while Copley brought up the rear, gingerly bearing her lace parasol. With a gay little tilt of her white-plumed hat toward the group on the terrace and an all-inclusive flash of black eyes, she was finally off, followed by the courtly bows of her three cavaliers.

Marcia, with Sybert and Dessart on either hand, continued to stroll up and down the terrace, while her aunt and uncle entertained Melville amid the furnished comfort of the loggia. Sybert would ordinarily have joined the group on the loggia, but he happened to be in the middle of a discussion with Dessart regarding the new and, according to most people, scandalous proposition for levelling the Seven Hills. The two men seemed to be diametrically opposed to all their views, and were equally far apart in their methods of arguing. Dessart would lunge into flights of exaggerated rhetoric, piling up adjectives and metaphors until by sheer weight he had carried his listeners off their feet; while Sybert, with a curt phrase, would knock the corner-stone from under the finished edifice. The latter’s method of fencing had always irritated Marcia beyond measure. He had a fashion of stating his point, and then abandoning his adversary’s eloquence in mid-air, as if it were not worth his while to argue further. To-day, having come to a deadlock in the matter of the *piano regolatore*, they dropped the subject, and pausing by the terrace parapet, they stood looking down on the plain below.

Dessart scanned it eagerly with eyes quick to catch every contrast and tone; he noted the varying purples of the distance, the narrow ribbon of glimmering gold where sky and plain met the sea, the misty whiteness of Rome, the sharply cut outline of Monte Soracte. It was perfect as a picture—composition, perspective, colour-scheme—nothing might be bettered. He sighed a contented sigh.

‘Even I,’ he murmured, ‘couldn’t suggest a single change.’

A slight smile crept over Sybert’s sombre face.

‘I could suggest a number.’

The young painter brought a reproachful gaze to bear upon him.

‘Ah,’ he agreed, ‘and I can imagine the direction they’d take! Miss Copley,’ he added, turning to Marcia, ‘let me tell you of the thing I saw the other day on the Roman Campagna: a sight which was enough to make a right-minded man sick. I saw—’ there was a tragic pause—a McCormick reaper and binder!’

Sybert uttered a short laugh.

‘I am glad that you did; and I only wish it were possible for one to see more.’

‘Man! Man! You don’t know what you are saying!’ Paul cried. There were tears in his voice. ‘A McCormick reaper, I tell you, painted red and yellow and blue—the man who did it should have been compelled to drink his paint.’

Marcia laughed, and he added disgustedly: ‘The thing sows and reaps and binds all at once. One shudders to think of its activities—and that in the Agra Romana, which picturesque peasants have spaded and planted and mowed by hand for thousands of years.’

‘Not, however, a particularly economical way of cultivating the Campagna,’ Sybert observed.

‘Economical way of cultivating the Campagna!’ Dessart repeated the words with a groan. ‘Is there no place in the world sacred to beauty? Must America flood every corner of the habitable globe with reapers and sewing-machines and trolley-cars? The way they’re sophisticating these adorably antique peasants is criminal.’

‘That’s the way it seems to me,’ Marcia agreed cordially. ‘Uncle Howard says they haven’t enough to eat; but they certainly do look happy, and they don’t look thin. I can’t help believing he exaggerates the trouble.’

‘An Italian, Miss Copley, who doesn’t know where his next meal is coming from, will lie on his back in the sunshine, thinking how pretty the sky looks; and he will get as much pleasure from the prospect as he would from his dinner. If that isn’t the art of being happy, I don’t know what is. And that is why I hate to have Italy spoiled.’

‘Well, Dessart, I fancy we all hate that,’ Sybert returned. ‘Though I am afraid we should quarrel over definitions.’ He stretched out his hand toward the west, where the plain joined the sea by the ruins of Ostia and the Pontine Marshes. It was a great, barren, desolate waste; unpeopled, uncultivated, fever-stricken.

‘Don’t you think it would be rather a fine thing,’ he asked, ‘to see that land drained and planted and lived on again as it was perhaps two thousand years ago?’

Marcia shook her head. ‘I should rather have it left just as it is. Possibly a few might gain, but think of the poetry and picturesqueness and romance that the many would lose! Once in a while, Mr. Sybert, it seems as if utility might give way to poetry—especially on the Roman Campagna. It is more fitting that it should be desolate and bare, with only a few wandering shepherds and herds, and no buildings but ruined towers and Latin tombs—a sort of burial-place for Ancient Rome.’

‘The living have a few rights—even in Rome.’

‘They seem to have a good many,’ Dessart agreed. ‘Oh, I know what you reformers want! You’d like to see the city full of smoke-stacks and machinery, and the Campagna laid out in garden plots, and everybody getting good wages and six per cent. interest; with all the people dressed alike in ready-made clothing instead of peasant costume, and nobody poor and nobody picturesque.’

Sybert did not reply for a moment, as with half-shut eyes he studied the distance. He was thinking of a ride he had taken three days before. He had gone out with a hunting-party to one of the great Campagna estates, owned by a Roman prince whose only interest in the land was to draw from it every possible *centesimo* of income. They had stopped to water their horses at a cluster of straw huts where the farm labourers lived, and Sybert had dismounted and gone into one of them to talk to the people. It was dark and damp, with a dirt floor and rude bunks along the sides. There, fifty human beings lived crowded together, breathing the heavy, pestilential air. They had come down to bands from their mountain homes, searching for work, and had sold their lives to the prince for thirty cents a day.

The picture flashed across him now of their pale, apathetic faces, of the dumb reproach in their eyes, and for a second he felt tempted to describe it. But with the reflection that neither of the two before him would care any more about it than had the landlord prince, he changed his expression into a careless shrug.

‘It will be some time before we’ll see that,’ he answered Dessart’s speech.

‘But you’d like it, wouldn’t you?’ Marcia persisted.

‘Yes; wouldn’t you?’

‘No,’ she laughed, ‘I can’t say that I should! I decidedly prefer the peasants as they are. They are far more attractive when they are poor, and since they are happy in spite of it, I don’t see why it is our place to object.’

Sybert eyed the pavement impassively a moment: then he raised his head and turned to Marcia. He swept her a glance from head to foot which took in every detail of her dainty gown, her careless grace as she leaned against the balustrade, and he made no endeavour to conceal the look of critically cold contempt in his eyes. Marcia returned his glance with an air of angry challenge; not a word was spoken, but it was an open declaration of war.

CHAPTER VII

The Roystons approached Rome by easy stages along the Riviera, and as their prospective movements were but vaguely outlined even to themselves, they suffered their approach to remain unheralded. Paul Dessart, since his talk with Marcia, had taken a little dip into the future, with the result that he had decided to swallow any hurt feelings he might possess and pay dutiful court to his relatives. The immediate rewards of such a course were evident.

One sunny morning early in April (he had been right in his forecast of the time: Palm Sunday loomed a week ahead) a carriage drew up before the door of his studio, and Mrs. Royston and the Misses Royston alighted, squabbled with the driver over the fare, and told him he need not wait. They rang the bell, and during the pause that followed stood upon the door-step, dubiously scanning the neighbourhood. It was one of the narrow, tortuous streets between the Corso and the river; a street of many colours and many smells, with party-coloured washings fluttering from the windows, with pretty tumble-haired children in gold ear-rings and shockingly scanty clothing sprawling underfoot. The house itself presented a blank face of peeling stucco to the street, with nothing but the heavily barred windows below and an ornamental cornice four stories up to suggest that it had once been a palace and a stronghold.

Mrs. Royston turned from her inspection of the street to ring the bell again. There was, this time, a suggestion of impatience in her touch. A second wait, and the door was finally opened by one of the fantastic little shepherd models, who haunt the Spanish steps. He took off his hat with a polite '*Permesso, signore,*' as he darted up the stairs ahead of them to point the way and open the door at the top. They arrived at the end of the five flights somewhat short of breath, and were ushered into a swept and garnished workroom, where Paul, in a white blouse, his sleeves rolled to the elbows, was immersed in a large canvas, almost too preoccupied to look up. He received his relatives with an air of delighted surprise, stood quite still while his aunt implanted a ponderous kiss upon his cheek, and after a glance at his cousins, kissed them of his own accord.

Mrs. Royston sat down and surveyed the room. It was irreproachably workmanlike, and had been so for a week. Visibly impressed, she transferred her gaze to her nephew.

'Paul, you *are* improved,' she said at length.

'My dear aunt, I am five years older than I was five years ago.'

'Well,' with a sigh of relief, 'I actually believe you are!'

'Paul, I had no idea you were such a desirable cousin,' was Margaret's frank comment, as she returned from an inspection of the room to a reinspection of him. 'Eleanor said you wore puffed velveteen trousers. You don't, do you?'

'Never had a pair of puffed velveteen trousers in my life.'

'Oh, yes, you did!' said Eleanor. 'You can't fib down the past that way. Mamma and I met you in the Luxembourg gardens in broad daylight wearing puffed blue velveteen trousers, with a bottle of wine in one pocket and a loaf of bread in the other.'

'Let the dead past bury its dead!' he pleaded. 'I go to an English tailor on the Corso now.'

'Marcia Copley wrote that she was very much pleased with you, but she didn't tell us how good-looking you were,' said Margaret, still frank.

Paul reddened a trifle as he repudiated the charge with a laughing gesture.

'Don't you think Miss Copley's nice?' pursued Margaret. 'You'd better think so,' she added, 'for she's one of our best friends.'

Paul reddened still more, as he replied indifferently that Miss Copley appeared very nice. He hadn't seen much of her, of course.

'I hope,' said his aunt, 'that you have been polite.'

‘My dear aunt,’ he objected patiently, ‘I really don’t go out of my way to be impolite to people,’ and he took the Baedeker from her hand and sat down beside her. ‘What places do you want to see first?’ he inquired.

They were soon deep in computations of the galleries, ruins, and churches that should be visited in conjunction, and half an hour later, Paul and Margaret in one carriage, with Mrs. Royston and Eleanor in a second, were trotting toward the Colosseum; while Paul was reflecting that the path of duty need not of necessity be a thorny one.

During the next week or so Villa Vivalanti saw little more of Marcia than of her uncle. She spent the greater part of her time in Rome, visiting galleries and churches, with studio teas and other Lenten relaxations to lighten the rigour of sight-seeing. Paul Dessart proved himself an attentive cicerone, and his devotion to duty was not unrewarded; the dim crypts and chapels, the deep-embrasured windows of galleries and palaces afforded many chances for stolen scraps of conversation. And Paul was not one to waste his opportunities. The spring was ideal; Rome was flooded with sunshine and flowers and the Italian joy of being alive. The troubles of Italy’s paupers, which Mr. Copley found so absorbing, received, during these days, little consideration from his niece. Marcia was too busy living her own life to have eyes for any but happy people. She looked at Italy through rose-coloured glasses, and Italy, basking in the spring sunshine, smiled back sympathetically.

One morning an accident happened at the villa, and though it may not seem important to the world in general, still, as events turned out, it proved to be the pivot upon which destiny turned. Gerald fell over the parapet, landing eight feet below—butter-side down—with a bleeding nose and a broken front tooth. He could not claim this time that Marietta had pushed him over, as it was clearly proven that Marietta, at the moment, was sitting in the scullery doorway, smiling at François. In consequence Marietta received her wages, a ticket to Rome, and fifty lire to dry her tears. A new nurse was hastily summoned from Castel Vivalanti. She was a niece of Domenic, the baker, and had served in the household of Prince Barberini at Palestrina, which was recommendation enough.

As to the broken tooth, it was a first tooth and shaky at that. Most people would have contented themselves with the reflection that the matter would right itself in the course of nature. But Mrs. Copley, who perhaps had a tendency to be over-solicitous on a question involving her son’s health or beauty, decided that Gerald must go to the dentist’s. Gerald demurred, and Marcia, who had previously had no thought of going into Rome that afternoon, offered to accompany the party, for the sake—she said—of keeping up his courage in the train. As they were preparing to start, she informed Mrs. Copley that she thought she would stay with the Roystons all night, since they had planned to visit the Forum by moonlight some evening, and this appeared a convenient time. In the Roman station she abandoned Gerald to his fate, and drove to the *Hôtel de Londres et Paris*.

She found the ladies just sitting down to their midday breakfast and delighted to see her. It developed, however, that they had an unbreakable engagement for the evening, and the plan of visiting the Forum was accordingly out of the question.

‘No matter,’ said Marcia, drawing off her gloves; ‘I can come in some other day; it’s always moonlight in Rome’; and they settled themselves to discussing plans for the afternoon. The hotel porter had given Margaret a permesso for the royal palace and stables, and being interested in the domestic arrangements of kings, she was insistent that they visit the Quirinal. But Mrs. Royston, who was conscientiously bent on first exhausting the heavier attractions set forth in Baedeker, declared for the Lateran museum. The matter was still unsettled when they rose from the table and were presented with the cards of Paul Dessart and M. Adolphe Benoit.

Paul’s voice settled the question: the city was too full of pilgrims for any pleasure to be had within the walls; why not take advantage of the pleasant weather to drive out to the monastery of Tre Fontane? But the matter did not eventually arrange itself as happily as he had hoped, since he found himself in one carriage and Marcia in the other. At the monastery the monks were saying office in the main chapel when they arrived, and they paused a few minutes to listen to the deep rise and fall of

the Gregorian chant as it echoed through the long, bare nave. The dim interior, the low, monotonous music, the unseen monks, made an effective whole. Paul, awake to the possibilities of the occasion, did his best to draw Marcia into conversation, but she was tantalizingly unresponsive. The guide-book in Mrs. Royston's hands and the history of the order appeared to absorb her whole attention.

Fortune, however, was finally on his side. Mrs. Royston elected to stop, on their way back to the city, at St. Paul's without the Walls, and the whole party once more alighted. Within the basilica, Mrs. Royston, guide-book in hand, commenced her usual conscientious inspection, while Eleanor and the young Frenchman strolled about, commenting on the architecture. Margaret had heard that one of the mosaic popes in the frieze had diamond eyes, and she was insistently bent on finding him. Marcia and Paul followed her a few minutes, but they had both seen the church many times before, and both were at present but mildly interested in diamond-eyed popes.

The door of the cloisters stood ajar, and they presently left the others and strolled into the peaceful enclosure with its brick-flagged floor and quaintly twisted columns. It was tranquil and empty, with no suggestion of the outside world. They turned and strolled down the length of the flagging, where the shadow of the columns alternated with gleaming bars of sunshine. The sleepy, old-world atmosphere cast its spell about them; Marcia's tantalizing humour and Paul's impatience fell away. They walked on in silence, until presently the silence made itself awkward and Marcia began to talk about the carving of the columns, the flowers in the garden, the monks who tended them. Paul responded half abstractedly, and he finally broke out with what he was thinking of: a talk they had had that afternoon several weeks before in the Borghese gardens.

'Most men wouldn't care for this,' he nodded toward the prim little garden with its violets and roses framed in by the pillared cloister and higher up by the dull grey walls of the church and monastery. 'But a few do. Since that is the case, why not let the majority mine their coal and build their railroads, and the very small minority who do care stay and appreciate it? It is fortunate that we don't all like the same things, for there's a great variety of work to be done. Of course,' he added, 'I know well enough I'm never going to do anything very great; I don't set up for a genius. But to do a few little things well—isn't that something?'

They had reached the opposite end of the cloisters, and paused by one of the pillars, leaning against the balustrade.

'You think it's shirking one's duty not to live in America?' he asked.

'I don't know,' Marcia smiled vaguely. 'I think—perhaps I'm changing my mind.'

'I only know of one thing,' he said in a low tone, 'that would make me want to be exiled from Italy.'

Marcia had a quick foreboding that she knew what he was going to say, and for a moment she hesitated; then her eyes asked: 'What is that?'

Paul looked down at the sun-barred pavement in silence, and then he looked up in her face and smiled steadily. 'If you lived out of Italy.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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