

Le Queux William

The Day of Temptation



William Le Queux

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Содержание

Chapter One	5
Chapter Two	10
Chapter Three	13
Chapter Four	17
Chapter Five	20
Chapter Six	24
Chapter Seven	29
Chapter Eight	33
Chapter Nine	37
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	38

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Chapter One

Aliens

“One fact is plain. Vittorina must not come to England.”

“Why? She, a mere inexperienced girl, knows nothing.”

“Her presence here will place us in serious jeopardy. If she really intends to visit London, then I shall leave this country at once. I scent danger.”

“As far as I can see, we have nothing whatever to fear. She doesn’t know half a dozen words of English, and London will be entirely strange to her after Tuscany.”

The face of the man who, while speaking, had raised his wine-glass was within the zone of light cast by the pink-shaded lamp. He was about twenty-eight, with dark eyes, complexion a trifle sallow, well-arched brows, and a dark moustache carefully waxed, the points being trained in an upward direction. In his well-cut evening clothes, Arnaldo Romanelli was a handsome man, a trifle foppish perhaps; yet his features, with their high cheek-bones, bore the unmistakable stamp of Southern blood, while in his eyes was that dark brilliance which belongs alone to the sons of Italy.

He selected some grapes from the silver fruit-dish, filled a glass with water and dipped them in – true-bred Tuscan that he was – shook them out upon his plate, and then calmly contemplated the old blue Etruscan scarabaeus on the little finger of his left hand. He was waiting for his companion to continue the argument.

The other, twenty years his senior, was ruddy-faced and clean-shaven, with a pair of eyes that twinkled merrily, square jaws denoting considerable determination, altogether a typical Englishman of the buxom, burly, sport-loving kind. Strangely enough, although no one would have dubbed Doctor Filippo Malvano a foreigner, so thoroughly British was his appearance, yet he was an alien. Apparently he was in no mood for conversation, for the habitual twinkle in his eyes had given place to a calm, serious look, and he slowly selected a cigar, while the silence which had fallen between them still remained unbroken.

The man who had expressed confidence again raised his glass to his lips slowly, regarded his companion curiously across its edge, and smiled grimly.

The pair were dining together in a large, comfortable but secluded house lying back from the road at the further end of the quaint, old-world village of Lyddington, in Rutland. The long windows of the dining-room opened out upon the spacious lawn, the extent of which was just visible in the faint mystic light of the August evening, showing beyond a great belt of elms, the foliage of which rustled softly in the fresh night wind, and still further lay the open, undulating country. Ever and anon the wind, in soft gusts, stirred the long lace curtains within the room, and in the vicinity the sweet mellow note of the nightingale broke the deep stillness of rural peace.

Romanelli ate his grapes deliberately, while the Doctor, lighting his long Italian cigar at the candle the servant handed him, rested both elbows on the table and puffed away slowly, still deep in contemplation.

“Surely this girl can be stopped, if you really think there is danger,” the younger man observed at last.

At that instant a second maid entered, and in order that neither domestics should understand the drift of their conversation, the Doctor at once dropped into Italian, answering —

“I don’t merely think there’s danger; I absolutely know there is.”

“What? You’ve been warned?” inquired Arnaldo quickly.

The elder man raised his brows and slowly inclined his head.

Romanelli sprang to his feet in genuine alarm. His face had grown pale in an instant.

“Good heavens!” he gasped in his own tongue. “Surely the game has not been given away?”

The Doctor extended his palms and raised his shoulders to his ears. When he spoke Italian, he relapsed into all his native gesticulations, but in speaking English he had no accent, and few foreign mannerisms.

The two maid-servants regarded the sudden alarm of their master’s guest from London with no little astonishment; but the Doctor, quick-eyed, noticed it, and, turning to them, exclaimed in his perfect English —

“You may both leave. I’ll ring, if I require anything more.”

As soon as the door had closed, Arnaldo, leaning on the back of his chair, demanded further details from his host. He had only arrived from London an hour before, and, half famished, had at once sat down to dinner.

“Be patient,” his host said in a calm, strained tone quite unusual to him. “Sit down, and I’ll tell you.” Arnaldo obeyed, sinking again into his chair, his dark brows knit, his arms folded on the table, his eyes fixed upon those of the Doctor.

Outwardly there was nothing very striking about either, beyond the fact that they were foreigners of a well-to-do class. The English of the elder man was perfect, but that of Romanelli was very ungrammatical, and in both faces a keen observer might have noticed expressions of cunning and craftiness. Any Italian would have at once detected, from the manner Romanelli abbreviated his words when speaking Italian, that he came from the Romagna, that wild hot-bed of lawlessness and anarchy lying between Florence and Forli, while his host spoke pure Tuscan, the language of Italy. The words they exchanged were deep and earnest. Sometimes they spoke softly, when the Doctor would smile and stroke his smooth-shaven chin, at others they conversed with a volubility that sounded to English ears as though they were quarrelling.

The matter under discussion was certainly a strangely secret one.

The room was well-furnished in genuine old oak, which bore no trace of the Tottenham Court Road; the table was adorned with exotics, and well laid with cut-glass and silver; while the air which entered by the open windows was refreshing after the heat and burden of the August day.

“The simple fact remains, that on the day Vittorina sets foot in London the whole affair must become public property,” said Malvano seriously.

“And then?”

“Well, safety lies in flight,” the elder man answered, slowly gazing round the room. “I’m extremely comfortable here, and have no desire to go wandering again; but if this girl really comes, England cannot shelter both of us.”

Romanelli looked grave, knit his brows, and slowly twirled the ends of his small waxed moustache.

“But how can we prevent her?”

“I’ve been endeavouring to solve that problem for a fortnight past,” his host answered. “While Vittorina is still in Italy, and has no knowledge of my address, we are safe enough. She’s the only person who can expose us. As for myself, leading the life of a country practitioner, I’m respected by the whole neighbourhood, dined by the squire and the parson, and no suspicion of mystery attaches to me. I’m buried here as completely as though I were in my grave.”

The trees rustled outside, and the welcome breeze stirred the curtains within, causing the lamp to flicker.

“Yet you fear Vittorina!” observed the younger man, puzzled.

"It seems that you have no memory of the past," the other exclaimed, a trifle impatiently. "Is it imperative to remind you of the events on a certain night in a house overlooking the sea of Livorno; of the mystery –"

"Basta!" cried the younger man, frowning, his eyes shining with unnatural fire. "Can I ever forget them? Enough! All is past. It does neither of us good to rake up that wretched affair. It is over and forgotten."

"No, scarcely forgotten," the Doctor said in a low, impressive tone. "Having regard to what occurred, don't you think that Vittorina has sufficient incentive to expose us?"

"Perhaps," Romanelli answered in a dry, dubious tone. "I, however, confess myself sanguine of our success. Certainly you, as an English country doctor, who is half Italian, and who has practised for years among the English colony in Florence, have but very little to fear. You are eminently respectable."

The men exchanged smiles. Romanelli glanced at his ring, and thought the ancient blue scarabaeus had grown darker – a precursory sign of evil.

"Yes," answered Malvano, with deliberation, "I know I've surrounded myself with an air of the most severe respectability, and I flatter myself that the people here little dream of my true position; but that doesn't effect the serious turn events appear to be taking. We have enemies, my dear fellow – bitter enemies – in Florence, and as far as I can discern, there's absolutely no way of propitiating them. We are, as you know, actually within an ace of success, yet this girl can upset all our plans, and make English soil too sultry for us ever to tread it again." A second time he glanced around his comfortable dining-room, and sighed at the thought of having to fly from that quiet rural spot where he had so ingeniously hidden himself.

"It was to tell me this, I suppose, that you wired this morning?" his guest said.

The other nodded, adding, "I had a letter last night from Paolo. He has seen Vittorina at Livorno. She's there for the sea-bathing."

"What did she say?"

"That she intended to travel straight to London."

"She gave him no reason, I suppose?" Arnolfo asked anxiously.

"Can we not easily guess the reason?" the Doctor replied. "If you reflect upon the events of that memorable night, you will at once recognise that she should be prevented from coming to this country."

"Yes. You are right," Romanelli observed in a tone of conviction. "I see it all. We are in peril. Vittorina must not come."

"Then the next point to consider is how we can prevent her," the Doctor said.

A silence, deep and complete, fell between them. The trees rustled, the clock ticked slowly and solemnly, and the nightingale filled the air with its sweet note.

"The only way out of the difficulty that I can see is for me to hazard everything, return to Livorno, and endeavour by some means to compel her to remain in Italy."

"But can you?"

Romanelli shrugged his shoulders. "There is a risk, of course, but I'll do my best," he answered. "If I fail – well, then the game's up, and you must fly."

"I would accompany you to Italy," exclaimed the other, "but, as you are aware, beyond Modane the ground is too dangerous."

"Do you think they suspect anything at the Embassy?"

"I cannot tell. I called the other day when in London, and found the Ambassador quite as cordial as usual."

"But if he only knew the truth?"

“He can only know through Vittorina,” answered the Doctor quickly. “If she remains in Italy, he will still be in ignorance. The Ministry at Rome knows nothing, but her very presence here will arouse suspicion.”

“Then I’ll risk all, and go to Italy,” said the younger man decisively. “I don’t relish that long journey from Paris to Pisa this weather. Thirty-five hours is too long to be cramped up in that horribly stuffy sleeping-car.”

“If you go, you must start to-morrow, and travel straight through,” urged the Doctor earnestly. “Don’t break your journey, or she may have started before you reach Livorno.”

“Very well,” his young companion answered. “I’ll go right through, as you think it best. If I start from here at six to-morrow morning, I shall be in Livorno on Monday morning. Shall I wire to Paolo?”

“No. Take him by surprise. You’ll have a far better chance of success,” urged the other; and, pushing the decanter towards him, added, “Help yourself, and let’s drink luck to your expedition.”

Romanelli obeyed, and both men, raising their glasses, saluted each other in Italian. The younger man no longer wore the air of gay recklessness habitual to him, but took a gulp of the drink with a forced harsh laugh. In the eyes of the usually merry village doctor there was also an expression of doubt and fear. Romanelli was too absorbed in contemplating the risk of returning to Italy to notice the strange sinister expression which for a single instant settled upon his companion’s face, otherwise he might not have been so ready to adopt all his suggestions. Upon the countenance of Doctor Malvano was portrayed at that moment an evil passion, and the strange glint in his eyes would in itself have been sufficient proof to the close observer that he intended playing his companion false.

“Then you’ll leave Seaton by the six-thirty, eh?” he inquired at last.

Romanelli nodded.

The Doctor touched the gong, and the maid entered. “Fletcher,” he said, “the Signore must be called at half-past five to-morrow. Tell Goodwin to have the trap ready to go to Seaton Station to catch the six-thirty.”

The maid withdrew, and when the door had closed, Malvano, his elbows on the table, his cold gaze fixed upon his guest, suddenly asked in a low, intense voice, “Arnoldo, in this affair we must have no secrets from each other. Tell me the truth. Do you love Vittorina?” The foppish young man started slightly, but quickly recovering himself, answered —

“Of course not. What absurd fancy causes you to suggest that?”

“Well – she is very pretty, you know,” the Doctor observed ambiguously.

The young man looked sharply at his host. “You mean,” he said, “that I might make love to her, and thus prevent her from troubling us, eh?”

The other nodded in the affirmative, adding, “You might even marry her.”

At that instant the maid entered, bearing a telegram which a lad on a cycle had brought from Uppingham for the Doctor’s guest. The latter opened it, glanced at its few faintly-written words, then frowned and placed it in his pocket without comment.

“Bad news?” inquired Malvano. “You look a bit scared.”

“Not at all; not at all,” he laughed. “Merely a little affair of the heart, that’s all;” and he laughed in a happy, self-satisfied way. Arnoldo was fond of the society of the fair sex, therefore the Doctor, shrewd and quick of observation, was fully satisfied that the message was from one or other of his many feminine acquaintances.

“Well, induce Vittorina to believe that you love her, and all will be plain sailing,” he said. “You are just the sort of fellow who can fascinate a woman and compel her to act precisely as you wish. Exert on her all the powers you possess.”

“I’m afraid it will be useless,” his companion answered in a dry, hopeless tone.

“Bah! Your previous love adventures have already shown you to be a past-master in the arts of flattery and flirtation. Make a bold bid for fortune, my dear fellow, and you’re bound to succeed. Come, let’s take a turn across the lawn; it’s too warm indoors to-night.” Romanelli uttered no word,

but rose at his host's bidding, and followed him out. He felt himself staggering, but, holding his breath, braced himself up, and, struggling, managed to preserve an appearance of outward calm. How, he wondered, would Doctor Malvano act if he knew the amazing information which had just been conveyed to him? He drew a deep breath, set his lips tight, and shuddered.

Chapter Two

The Silver Greyhound

On the same night as the Doctor and his guest were dining in the remote rural village, the express which had left Paris at midday was long overdue at Charing Cross. Presently a troop of porters assembled and folded their arms to gossip, Customs officers appeared, and at last the glaring headlights of the express were seen slowly crossing the bridge which spans the Thames. Within a couple of minutes all became bustle and confusion. The pale faces and disordered appearance of alighting passengers told plainly how rough had been the passage from Calais. Many were tweed-coated tourists returning from Switzerland or the Rhine, but there were others who, by their calm, unruffled demeanour, were unmistakably experienced travellers.

Among the latter was a smart, military-looking man of not more than thirty-three, tall, dark, and slim, with a merry face a trifle bronzed, and a pair of dark eyes beaming with good humour. As he alighted from a first-class carriage he held up his hand and secured a hansom standing by, then handed out his companion, a well-dressed girl of about twenty-two, whose black eyes and hair, rather aquiline features and sun-browned skin, were sufficient evidence that she was a native of the South. Her dress, of some dark blue material, bore the stamp of the first-class costumier; attached to her belt was the small satchel affected by foreign ladies when travelling; her neat toque became her well; and her black hair, although a trifle awry after the tedious, uncomfortable journey, still presented an appearance far neater than that of other bedraggled women around her.

“Welcome to London!” he exclaimed in good Italian.

For a moment she paused, gazing wonderingly about her at the great vaulted station, dazed by its noise, bustle, and turmoil.

“And this is actually London!” she exclaimed. “Ah! what a journey! How thankful I am that it’s all over, and I am here, in England at last!”

“So am I,” he said, with a sigh of relief as he removed his grey felt hat to ease his head. They had only hand-baggage, and this having been quickly transferred to the cab, he handed her in. As he placed his foot upon the step to enter the vehicle after her, a voice behind him suddenly exclaimed —

“Hullo, Tristram! Back in London again?”

He turned quickly, and recognised in the elderly, grey-haired, well-groomed man in frock-coat and silk hat his old friend Major Gordon Maitland, and shook him heartily by the hand.

“Yes,” he answered. “London once again. But you know how I spend my life – on steamboats or in sleeping-cars. To-morrow I may start again for Constantinople. I’m the modern Wandering Jew.”

“Except, that you’re not a Jew – eh?” the other laughed. “Well, travelling is your profession; and not a bad one either.”

“Try it in winter, my dear fellow, when the thermometer is below zero,” answered Captain Frank Tristram, smiling. “You’d prefer the fireside corner at the club.”

“Urgent business?” inquired the Major, in a lower tone, and with a meaning look.

The other nodded.

“Who’s your pretty companion?” Maitland asked in a low voice, with a quick glance at the girl in the cab.

“She was placed under my care at Leghorn, and we’ve travelled through together. She’s charming. Let me introduce you.”

Then, approaching the conveyance, he exclaimed in Italian: “Allow me, signorina, to present my friend Major Gordon Maitland, – the Signorina Vittorina Rinaldo.”

“Your first visit to our country, I presume?” exclaimed the Major, in rather shaky Italian, noticing how eminently handsome she was.

"Yes," she answered, smiling. "I have heard so much of your great city, and am all anxiety to see it."

"I hope your sojourn among us will be pleasant. You have lots to see. How long shall you remain?"

"Ah! I do not know," she answered. "A week – a month – a year – if need be."

The two men exchanged glances. The last words she uttered were spoken hoarsely, with strange intonation. They had not failed to notice a curious look in her eyes, a look of fierce determination.

"Terribly hot in Leghorn," observed Tristram, turning the conversation after an awkward pause of a few moments. Vittorina held her breath. She saw how nearly she had betrayed herself.

"It has been infernally hot here in London these past few days. I think I shall go abroad tomorrow. I feel like the last man in town."

"Go to Wiesbaden," Tristram said. "I was at the Rose ten days ago, and the season is in full swing. Not too hot, good casino, excellent cooking, and plenty of amusement. Try it."

"No, I think I'll take a run through the Dolomites," he said. "But why have you been down to Leghorn? Surely it's off your usual track."

"Yes, a little. The Ambassador is staying a few weeks for the sea-bathing at Ardenza, close to Leghorn, and I had important despatches."

"She's exceedingly good-looking," the Major said in English, with a smiling glance at the cab. "I envy you your travelling companion. You must have had quite an enjoyable time."

"Forty hours in a sleeping-car is scarcely to be envied this weather," he answered, as a porter, recognising him in passing, wished him a polite "Good journey, I hope, sir?"

Continuing, Tristram said, "But we must be off. I'm going to see her safe through to her friends before going to the office, and I'm already nearly three hours late in London. So good-bye."

"Good-bye," the other said. "Shall I see you at the club to-night?"

"Perhaps. I'm a bit done up by the heat, but I want my letters, so probably I'll look in."

"Buona sera, signorina," Maitland exclaimed, bending towards the cab, shaking her hand and raising his hat politely.

She smiled, returning his salute in her own sweet, musical Tuscan, and then her companion, shouting an address in Hammersmith, sprang in beside her, and they drove off.

"You must be very tired," he said, turning to her as they emerged from the station-yard into the busy Strand.

"No, not so fatigued as I was when we arrived in Paris this morning," she answered, gazing wonderingly at the long line of omnibuses and cabs slowly filing down the brightly lit thoroughfare. "But what confusion! I thought the Via Calzaiuoli in Florence noisy, but this – !" and she waved her small hand with a gesture far more expressive than any words.

Frank Tristram, remarking that she would find London very different to Florence, raised his hand to his throat to loosen his collar, and in doing so displayed something which had until that moment remained concealed. A narrow ribbon was hidden beneath his large French cravat of black silk tied in a bow. The colour was royal blue, and from it was suspended the British royal arms, surmounted by the crown, with a silver greyhound pendant, the badge known on every railway from Calais to Ekaterinbourg, and from Stockholm to Reggio, as that of a King's Foreign Service Messenger. Captain Frank Tristram was one of the dozen wanderers on the face of the earth whose swift journeys and promptness in delivering despatches have earned for them the title of "The Greyhounds of Europe."

So engrossed was the dark-haired girl in contemplating her strange surroundings that she scarcely uttered a word as the cab sped on swiftly through the deepening twilight across Trafalgar Square, along Pall Mall, and up the Haymarket. Suddenly, however, the blaze of electricity outside the Criterion brought to Frank Tristram's mind cherished recollections of whisky and soda, and, being thirsty after the journey, he shouted to the man to pull up there.

“You, too, must be thirsty,” he said, turning to her. “At this café, I think, they keep some of your Italian drinks – vermouth, menthe, or muscato.”

“Thank you – no,” she replied, smiling sweetly. “The cup of English tea I had at Dover did me good, and I’m really not thirsty. You go and get something. I’ll remain here.”

“Very well,” he said. “I won’t be more than a minute;” and as the cab drew up close to the door of the bar, he sprang out and entered the long saloon.

His subsequent movements were, however, somewhat curious.

After walking to the further end of the bar, he ordered a drink, idled over it for some minutes, his eyes glancing furtively at the lights of the cab outside. Suddenly, when he had uttered a few words to a passing acquaintance, he saw the vehicle move slowly on, probably under orders from the police; and the instant he had satisfied himself that neither Vittorina nor the cabman could observe him, he drained his glass, threw down a shilling, and without waiting for the change turned and continued through the bar, making a rapid exit by the rear door leading into Jermyn Street.

As he emerged, a hansom was passing, and, hailing it, he sprang in, shouted an address, and drove rapidly away.

Meanwhile the cabman who had driven him from Charing Cross sat upon his box patiently awaiting his return, now and then hailing the plethoric drivers of passing vehicles with sarcasm, as cab and ’bus drivers are wont to do, until fully twenty minutes had elapsed. Then, there being no sign of the reappearance of his fare, he opened the trap-door in the roof, exclaiming —

“Nice evenin’ miss.”

There was no response. The man peered down eagerly for a moment in surprise then cried aloud —

“By Jove! She’s fainted!”

Unloosing the strap which held him to his seat, he sprang down and entered the vehicle.

The young girl was lying back in the corner inert and helpless, her hat awry, her pointed chin upon her chest. He pressed his hand to her breast, but there was no movement of the heart. He touched her ungloved hand. It was chilly, and the fingers were already stiffening. Her large black eyes were still open, glaring wildly into space, but her face was blanched to the lips.

“Good heavens!” the cabman cried, stupefied, as in turning he saw a policeman standing on the kerb. “Quick, constable!” he shouted, beckoning the officer. “Quick! Look here!”

“Well, what’s the matter now?” the other inquired, approaching leisurely, his thumbs hitched in his belt.

“The matter!” cried the cabman. “Why, this lady I drove from Charin’ Cross is dead?”

Chapter Three

One of a Crowd

Within half a minute a crowd had gathered around the cab.

The instant the cabman raised the alarm the constable was joined by the burly door-opener of the Criterion in gaoler-like uniform and the round-faced fireman, who, lounging together outside, were ever on the look-out for some diversion. But when the constable agreed with the cab-driver that the lady was dead, their ready chaff died from their lips.

“What do you know of her?” asked the officer of the cab-driver.

“Nothing, beyond the fact that I drove ’er from Charin’ Cross with a gentleman. She’s a foreigner, but he was English.”

“Where is he?” demanded the constable anxiously, at that moment being joined by two colleagues, to whom the fireman in a few breathless words explained the affair.

“He went into the bar there ’arf an hour ago, but he ain’t come out.”

“Quick. Come with me, and let’s find him,” the officer said.

Leaving the other policemen in charge of the cab, they entered, and walked down, the long, garish bar, scrutinising each of the hundred or so men lounging there. The cabman, however, saw nothing of his fare.

“He must have escaped by the back way,” observed the officer disappointedly. “It’s a strange business, this.”

“Extremely,” said the cab-driver. “The fellow must have murdered her, and then entered the place in order to get away. He’s a pretty cute ’un.”

“It seems a clear case of murder,” exclaimed the other in a sharp, precise, business-like tone. “We’ll take her to the hospital first; then you must come with me to Vine Street at once.”

When they emerged, they found that the crowd had already assumed enormous proportions. The news that a woman had been murdered spread instantly throughout the whole neighbourhood, and the surging crowd of idlers, all curiosity, pressed around the vehicle to obtain a glimpse of the dead woman’s face. Amid the crowd, elbowing his way fiercely and determinedly, was a man whose presence there was a somewhat curious coincidence, having regard to what had previously transpired that evening. He wore a silk hat, his frock-coat was tightly buttoned and he carried in his gloved hand a silver-mounted cane. After considerable difficulty, he obtained a footing in front of the crowd immediately behind the cordon the police had formed around the vehicle, and in a few moments, by craning his neck forward, obtained nil uninterrupted view of the lady’s face.

His teeth were firmly set, but his calm countenance betrayed no sign of astonishment. For an instant he regarded the woman with a cold, impassive look, then quickly he turned away, glancing furtively right and left, and an instant later was lost in the surging, struggling multitude which a body of police were striving in vain to “move on.”

The man who had thus gazed into the dead woman’s face was the man to whom she had been introduced at the station. Major Gordon Maitland.

Almost at the same moment when the Major turned away, the constable sprang into the cab beside the woman, and the driver, at once mounting the box, drove rapidly to Charing Cross Hospital.

To the small, bare, whitewashed room to the left of the entrance hall, where casualties are received, the dark-haired girl was carried, and laid tenderly upon the father-covered divan.

The dresser, who attended to minor accidents, gave a quick glance at the face of the new patient, and at once sent for the house-surgeon. He saw it was a grave case.

Very soon the doctor, a thin, elderly man, entered briskly, asked a couple of questions of the constable outside in the corridor, unloosened her dress, cut the cord of her corsets, laid his hands upon her heart, felt her pulse, slowly moved her eyelids, and then shook his head.

“Dead!” he exclaimed. “She must have died nearly an hour ago.”

Then he forced open her mouth, and turning the hissing gas-jet to obtain a full light, gazed into it.

His grey, shaggy eyebrows contracted, and the dresser standing by knew that his chief had detected something which puzzled him. He felt the glands in her neck carefully, and pushing back the hair that had fallen over her brow, reopened her fast-glazing eyes, and peered into them long and earnestly.

He carefully examined the palm of her right hand, which was ungloved, then tried to remove the glove from the left, but in vain. He was obliged to rip it up with a pair of scissors. Afterwards he examined the hand minutely, giving vent to a grunt of dissatisfaction.

“Is it murder, do you think, sir?” the constable inquired as the doctor emerged again.

“There are no outward signs of violence,” answered the house-surgeon. “You had better take the body to the mortuary, and tell your inspector that I’ll make the post-mortem to-morrow morning.”

“Very well, sir.”

“But you said that the lady was accompanied from Charing Cross Station by a gentleman, who rode in the cab with her,” the doctor continued. “Where is he?”

“He alighted, entered the Criterion, and didn’t come back,” explained the cabman.

“Suspicious of foul play – very suspicious,” the doctor observed. “To-morrow we shall know the truth. She’s evidently a lady, and, by her dress, a foreigner.”

“She arrived by the Paris mail to-night,” the cabman observed.

“Well, it must be left to the police to unravel whatever mystery surrounds her. It is only for us to ascertain the cause of her death – whether natural, or by foul means;” and he went back to where the dead woman was lying still and cold, her dress disarranged, her dark hair fallen dishevelled, her sightless eyes closed in the sleep that knows no awakening until the Great Day.

The cabman stood with his hat in his hand; the constable had hung his helmet on his forearm by its strap.

“Then, outwardly, there are no signs of murder?” the latter asked, disappointed perhaps that the case was not likely to prove so sensational as it had at first appeared.

“Tell your inspector that at present I can give no opinion,” the surgeon replied. “Certain appearances are mysterious. To-night I can say nothing more. At the inquest I shall be able to speak more confidently.”

As he spoke, his cold, grey eyes were still fixed upon the lifeless form, as if held by some strange fascination. Approaching the cupboard, he took from a case a small lancet, and raising the dead woman’s arm, made a slight incision in the wrist. For a few moments he watched it intently, bending and holding her wrist full in the glaring gaslight within two inches of his eyes.

Suddenly he let the limp, inert arm drop, and with a sigh turned again to the two men who stood motionless, watching, and said: “Go. Take the body to the mortuary. I’ll examine her to-morrow;” and he rang for the attendants, who came, lifted the body from the couch, and conveyed it out, to admit a man who lay outside groaning, with his leg crushed.

Half an hour later the cab-driver and the constable stood in the small upper room at Vine Street Police Station, the office of the Inspector of the Criminal Investigation Department attached to that station. Inspector Elmes, a dark-bearded, stalwart man of forty-five, sat at a table, while behind him, arranged over the mantelshelf, were many photographs of criminals, missing persons, and people who had been found dead in various parts of the metropolis, and whose friends had not been traced. Pinned against the grey-painted walls were several printed notices offering rewards, some with portraits of

absconding persons, others with crude woodcuts of stolen jewels. It was a bare, carpetless loom, but eminently business-like.

“Well,” the inspector was saying to the constable as he leant back in his chair, “there’s some mystery about the affair, you think – eh? Are there any signs of murder?”

“No, sir,” the man answered. “At present the doctor has discovered nothing.”

“Then, until he has, our Department can’t deal with it,” replied the detective. “Why has your Inspector sent you up here?”

“Because it’s so mysterious, I suppose, sir.”

“She may have had a fit – most probable, I should think. Until the doctor has certified, I don’t see any necessity to stir. It’s more than possible that when the man who left her at the Criterion reads of her death in the papers, he’ll come forward, identify her, and clear himself.” Then, turning to the cabman, he asked, “What sort of a man was he – an Englishman?”

“Well, I really don’t know, sir. He spoke to the dead girl in her own language, yet I thought, when he spoke to his friend at the station, that his English was that of a foreigner. Besides, he looked like a Frenchman, for he wore a large bow for a tie, which no Englishman wears.”

“You think him a foreigner because of his tie – eh?” the detective observed, smiling. “Now, if you had noticed his boots with a critical eye, you might perhaps have accurately determined his nationality. Look at a man’s boots next time.”

Then, taking up his pen, he drew a piece of pale yellow official paper before him, noted the number of the cabman’s badge, inquired his name and address, and asked several questions, afterwards dismissing both men with the observation that until a verdict had been given in the Coroner’s Court, he saw no reason to institute further inquiries.

Two days later the inquest was held in a small room at St. Martin’s Town Hall, the handsome building overlooking Trafalgar Square, and, as may be imagined, was largely attended by representatives of the Press. All the sensationalism of London evening journalism had, during the two days intervening, been let loose upon the mysterious affair, and the remarkable “latest details” had been “worked up” into an amazing, but utterly fictitious story. One paper, in its excess of zeal to outdistance all its rivals in sensationalism, had hinted that the dead woman was actually the daughter of an Imperial House, and this had aroused public curiosity to fever-heat.

When the usual formalities of constituting the Court had been completed, the jury had viewed the body, and the cabman had related his strange story, the Coroner, himself a medical man, dark-bearded and middle-aged, commenced a close cross-examination.

“Was it French or Italian the lady spoke?” he asked.

“I don’t know the difference, sir,” the cabman admitted. “The man with her spoke just as quickly as she did.”

“Was there anything curious in the demeanour of either of them?”

“I noticed nothing strange. The gentleman told me to drive along Pall Mall and the Haymarket, or of course I’d ’ave taken the proper route, up Charin’ Cross Road and Leicester Square.”

“You would recognise this gentleman again, I suppose?” the Coroner asked.

“I’d know him among a thousand,” the man promptly replied.

Inspector Elmes, who was present on behalf of the Criminal Investigation Department, asked several questions through the Coroner, when the latter afterwards resumed his cross-examination.

“You have told us,” he said, “that just before entering the cab the gentleman was accosted by a friend. Did you overhear any of their conversation?”

“I heard the missing man address the other as ‘Major,’” the cabman replied. “He introduced the Major to the lady, but I was unable to catch either of their names. The two men seemed very glad to meet, but, on the other hand, my gentleman seemed in a great hurry to get away.”

“You are certain that this man you know as the Major did not arrive by the same train, eh?” asked the Coroner, glancing sharply up from the paper whereon he was writing the depositions of this important witness.

“I am certain; for I noticed him lounging up and down the platform fully 'arf an hour before the train came in.”

“Then you think he must have been awaiting his friend?”

“No doubt he was, sir, for as soon as I drove the lady and gentleman away, he, too, started to walk out of the station.”

Then the Coroner, having written a few more words upon the foolscap before him, turned to the jury, exclaiming – “This last statement of the witness, gentlemen, seems, to say the least, curious.”

In an instant all present were on tip-toe with excitement, wondering what startling facts were likely to be revealed.

Chapter Four

“The Major.”

No further questions were put to the cab-driver at this juncture, but medical evidence was at once taken. Breathless stillness pervaded the court, for the statement about to be made would put an end to all rumour, and the truth would be known.

When the dapper elderly man had stepped up to the table and been sworn, the Coroner, in the quick, business-like tone which he always assumed toward his fellow medical men, said —

“You are Doctor Charles Wyllie, house-surgeon, Charing Cross Hospital?”

“I am,” the other answered in a correspondingly dry tone.

“The woman was brought to the hospital, I suppose?”

“Yes, the police brought her, but she had already been dead about three-quarters of an hour. There were no external marks of violence, and her appearance was as though she had died suddenly from natural causes. In conjunction with Doctor Henderson, I yesterday made a careful post-mortem. The body is that of a healthy woman of about twenty-three, evidently an Italian. There was no trace whatever of organic disease. From what I noticed when the body was brought to the hospital, however, I asked the police to let it remain untouched until I was ready to make a post-mortem.”

“Did you discover anything which might lead to suspicion of foul play?” inquired the Coroner.

“I made several rather curious discoveries,” the doctor answered, whereat those in court shifted uneasily, prepared for some thrilling story of how the woman was murdered. “First, she undoubtedly died from paralysis of the heart. Secondly, I found around the left ankle a curious tattoo-mark in the form of a serpent with its tail in its mouth. It is beautifully executed, evidently by an expert tattooist. Thirdly, there was a white mark upon the left breast, no doubt the scar of a knife-wound, which I judged to have been inflicted about two years ago. The knife was probably a long narrow-bladed one, and the bone had prevented the blow proving fatal.”

“Then a previous attempt had been made upon her life, you think?” asked the Coroner, astonished.

“There is no doubt about it,” the doctor answered. “Such a wound could never have been caused by accident. It had no doubt received careful surgical attention, judging from the cicatrice.”

“But this had nothing to do with her death?” the Coroner suggested.

“Nothing whatever,” replied the doctor. “The appearance of the body gives no indication of foul play.”

“Then you assign death to natural causes – eh?”

“No, I do not,” responded Dr Wyllie deliberately, after a slight pause. “The woman was murdered.”

These words produced a great sensation in the breathlessly silent court.

“By what means?”

“That I have utterly failed to discover. All appearances point to the fact that the deceased lost consciousness almost instantly, for she had no time even to take out her handkerchief or smelling-salts, the first thing a woman does when she feels faint. Death came very swiftly, but the ingenious means by which the murder was accomplished are at present entirely a mystery. At first my suspicions were aroused by a curious discoloration of the mouth, which I noticed when I first saw the body; but, strangely enough, this had disappeared yesterday when I made the post-mortem. Again, in the centre of the left palm, extending to the middle finger, was a dark and very extraordinary spot. This I have examined microscopically, and submitted the skin to various tests, but have entirely failed to determine the cause of the mark. It is dark grey in colour, and altogether mysterious.”

“There was no puncture in the hand?” inquired the Coroner.

“None whatever. I examined the body thoroughly, and found not a scratch,” the doctor answered quickly. “At first I suspected a subcutaneous injection of poison; but this theory is negated by the absence of any puncture.”

“But you adhere to your first statement that she was murdered?”

“Certainly. I am confident that the paralysis is not attributable to natural causes.”

“Have you found any trace of poison?”

“The contents of the stomach were handed over by the police to the analyst. I cannot say what he has reported,” the doctor answered sharply.

At once the Coroner’s officer interposed with the remark that the analyst was present, and would give evidence.

The foreman of the jury then put several questions to the doctor.

“Do you think, doctor,” he asked, “that it would be possible to murder a woman while she was sitting in a cab in so crowded a place as Piccadilly Circus?”

“The greater the crowd, the less the chance of detection, I believe.”

“Have you formed no opinion how this assassination was accomplished? Is there absolutely nothing which can serve as clue to the manner in which this mysterious crime was perpetrated?”

“Absolutely nothing beyond what I have already explained,” the witness answered. “The grey mark is on the palm of the left hand, which at the time of the mysterious occurrence was gloved. On the hand which was ungloved there is no mark. I therefore am of opinion that this curious discoloration is evidence in some way or other of murder.”

“Was she a lady?”

“She had every evidence of being so. All her clothing was of first-class quality, and the four rings she wore were of considerable value. When I came to make the post-mortem, I found both hands and feet slightly swollen, therefore it was impossible to remove her rings without cutting.”

The evidence of Dr Slade, Analyst to the Home Office, being brief, was quickly disposed of. He stated that he had submitted the contents of the stomach to analysis for poison, but had failed to find trace of anything baneful. It was apparent that the woman had not eaten anything for many hours, but that was, of course, accounted for by the fact that she had been travelling. His evidence entirely dismissed the theory of poison, although Dr Wyllie had asserted most positively that death had resulted from the administration of some substance which had proved so deadly as to cause her to lose consciousness almost instantly, and produce paralysis of the heart.

Certainly the report of the analyst did not support the doctor’s theory. Dr Wyllie was one of the last persons to indulge unduly in any sensationalism, and the Coroner, knowing him well through many years, was aware that there must be some very strong basis for his theory before he would publicly express his conviction that the woman had actually been murdered. Such a statement, when published in the Press in two or three hours’ time, would, he knew, give the doctor wide notoriety as a sensation-monger – the very thing he detested above everything. But the fact remained that on oath Dr Wyllie had declared that the fair, unknown foreigner had been foully and most ingeniously murdered. If this were really so, then the culprit must be a past-master in the art of assassination. Of all the inquiries the Coroner had held during many years of office, this certainly was one of the most sensational and mysterious.

When the analyst had concluded, a smartly-dressed young woman, named Arundale, was called. She stated that she was a barmaid at the Criterion, and related how the unknown man, whose appearance she described, had entered the bar, called for a whisky and soda, chatted with her for a few minutes, and then made his exit by the other door.

“Did he speak to any one else while in the bar?” asked the Coroner.

“Yes, while he was talking to me, an older, well-dressed man entered rather hurriedly. The gentleman speaking to me appeared very surprised – indeed, almost alarmed. Then, drawing aside so that I should not overhear, they exchanged a few hurried words, and the elder left by the back exit,

refusing the other's invitation to drink. The younger man glanced at his watch, then turned, finished his whisky leisurely, and chatted to me again. I noticed that he was watching the front door all the time, but believing him to be expecting a friend when, suddenly wishing me a hasty 'Good-night,' he threw down a shilling and left."

"What sort of man was it who spoke to him?" inquired the Coroner quickly.

"He was a military man, for I heard him addressed as 'Major.'"

"Curious!" the Coroner observed, turning to the jury. "The cab-driver in his evidence says that a certain Major met the pair at Charing Cross Station. It may have been the same person. This coincidence is certainly striking, and one which must be left to the police to investigate. We have it in evidence that the woman and her companion drove away in the cab, leaving the Major – whoever he may be – standing on the platform. The pair drove straight to the Criterion; yet five minutes later the woman's companion was joined by another Major, who is apparently one and the same."

The constable who took the body to the hospital then related how, while on duty in Piccadilly Circus, he had been called to the cab, and found the woman dead. Afterwards he had searched the pockets of the deceased, and taken possession of the lady's dressing-case and the man's hand-bag – all the luggage they had with them in addition to their wraps. He produced the two bags, with their contents, objects which excited considerable interest throughout the room. In the man's bag was a suit of dress-clothes, a small dressing-case, and one or two miscellaneous articles, but nothing by which the owner could be traced.

"Well, what did you find in the lady's pockets? Anything to lead to her identity?" the Coroner asked at last.

"No, sir. In addition to a purse containing some English money, I found a key, a gentleman's card bearing the name 'Arnoldo Romanelli,' and a small crucifix of ivory and silver. In the dressing-case, which you will see is fitted with silver and ivory fittings," he continued, opening it to the gaze of the jury, "there are a few valuable trinkets, one or two articles of attire, and a letter written in Italian – "

"I have the letter here," interrupted the Coroner, addressing the jury. "Its translation reads as follows: —

"Dear Vittorina,

"Be extremely cautious if you really mean to go to England. It is impossible for me to accompany you, or I would; but you know my presence in Italy is imperative. You will easily find Bonciani's Café, in Regent Street. Remember, at the last table on the left every Monday at five.

"With every good wish for a pleasant journey,

"*Egisto.*"

"The letter, which has no envelope," added the Coroner, "is dated from Lucca, a town in Tuscany, a week ago. It may possibly assist the police in tracing friends of the deceased." Then, turning to the constable, he asked, "Well, what else was in the lady's bag?"

"This photograph," answered the officer, holding up a cabinet photograph.

"Why!" cried the cab-driver, who had taken a seat close to where the policeman was standing. "Why, that's a photograph of the Major!"

"Yes," added the barmaid excitedly, "that's the same man who came up to the gentleman while he was speaking to me. Without doubt that's the Major, and an excellent portrait, too."

"Strange that this, of all things, should be in the dead woman's possession, when we have it in evidence that she was introduced to him only half an hour before her death," observed the Coroner. "Very strange indeed. Every moment the mystery surrounding this unknown woman seems to grow more impenetrable."

Chapter Five

Tristram at Home

The jury, after a long deliberation, returned an open verdict of “Found dead.” In the opinion of the twelve Strand tradesmen, there was insufficient evidence to justify a verdict of murder, therefore they had contented themselves in leaving the matter in the hands of the police. They had, in reality, accepted the evidence of the analyst in preference to the theory of the doctor, and had publicly expressed a hope that the authorities at Scotland Yard would spare no pains in their endeavours to discover the deceased’s fellow traveller, if he did not come forward voluntarily and establish her identity.

This verdict practically put an end to the mystery created by the sensational section of the evening Press, for although it was not one of natural causes, actual murder was not alleged. Therefore, amid the diversity of the next day’s news, the whirling world of London forgot, as it ever forgets, the sensation of the previous day. All interest had been lost in the curious circumstances surrounding the death of the unknown Italian girl in the most crowded of London thoroughfares by reason of this verdict of the jury.

The police had taken up the matter actively, but all that had been discovered regarding the identity of the dead woman was that her name was probably Vittorina – beyond that, absolutely nothing. Among the millions who had followed the mystery with avidity in the papers, one man alone recognised the woman by her description, and with satisfaction learnt how ingeniously her death had been encompassed.

That man was the eminently respectable doctor in the remote rural village of Lyddington. With his breakfast untouched before him, he sat in his cosy room eagerly devouring the account of the inquest; then, when he had finished, he cast the paper aside, exclaiming aloud in Italian —

“Dio! What good fortune! I wonder how it was accomplished? Somebody else, besides ourselves, apparently, feared her presence in England. Arnold is in Livorno by this time, and has had his journey for nothing.”

Then, with his head thrown back in his chair, he gazed up at the panelled ceiling deep in thought.

“Who, I wonder, could that confounded Englishman have been who escorted her to London and who left her so suddenly? Some Jackanapes or other, I suppose. And who’s the Major? He’s evidently English too, whoever he is. Only fancy, on the very night we discussed the desirability of the girl’s death, some unknown person obligingly did the work for us!” Then he paused, set his teeth, and, frowning, added, “But that injudicious letter of Egisto’s may give us some trouble. What an idiot to write like that! I hope the police won’t trace him. If they do, it will be awkward – devilish awkward.”

A few minutes later the door opened, and a younger man, slim and pale-faced, entered and wished him “good-morning.”

“No breakfast?” the man, his assistant, inquired, glancing at the table. “What’s the matter?”

“Liver, my boy, liver,” Malvano answered with his usual good-humoured smile. “I shall go to town to-day. I may be absent the whole week; but there’s nothing really urgent. That case of typhoid up at Craig’s Lodge is going on well. You’ve seen it once, haven’t you?”

“Yes. You’re treating it in the usual way, I suppose?”

“Of course;” and the doctor, advancing to the table, poured out a cup of coffee and drank it, at the same time calling to his man Goodwin to pack his bag, and be ready to drive him to the London train at ten-twenty.

His assistant being called to the surgery a few minutes later, Malvano sat down at his writing-table, hastily scribbled a couple of telegrams, which he folded and carefully placed in his pocket-

book, and half an hour later drove out of the quiet old-world village, with its ancient church spire and long, straggling street of thatched cottages, on his way to catch the train.

Beside the faithful Goodwin he sat in silence the whole way, for many things he had read that morning sorely puzzled him. It was true that the lips of Vittorina were sealed in death, but the letter signed “Egisto,” discovered by the police in her dressing-bag, still caused him the most intense anxiety.

At the same hour that Malvano had been reading the account of the previous day’s inquest, Frank Tristram was sitting in his handsome, well-furnished chambers in St. James’s Street. He had breakfasted early, as was his wont, and had afterwards started his habitual cigarette. The room in which he sat was a typical bachelor’s quarter, filled with all sorts of curios and bric-à-brac which its owner had picked up in the various corners of the earth he had visited bearing despatches from the Foreign Office. Upon the floor lay a couple of fine tiger-skins, presents from an Indian rajah, while around were inlaid coffee-stools and trays of beaten brass from Constantinople, a beautiful screen from Cairo, a rare statuette from Rome, quaint pictures and time-yellowed ivories from the curiosity shops of Florence and Vienna, savage weapons from Africa and South America, and a bright, shining samovar from St. Petersburg. In a corner stood the much-worn travelling-bag which he kept always ready packed, and hanging upon a nail above the mantelshelf was the blue ribbon with its silver greyhound, the badge which carried its owner everywhere with the greatest amount of swiftness, and the least amount of personal discomfort. Over the fireplace, too, were many autographed portraits of British ambassadors and distinguished foreign statesmen, together with those of one or two ladies of this constant traveller’s acquaintance.

As he lay back in a wicker deck-chair – the same in which he had taken his after-luncheon nap on board many an ocean steamer – well-shaven, smart, and spruce, his legs stretched out lazily, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, he sighed deeply.

“Italy again!” he grumbled to himself as he took up a scribbled note on official paper. “Just my infernal luck. Italy is the very last place I want to visit just now, yet, by Jove! the Chief sends me a message to start this morning.” And rousing himself, he stretched his arms and glanced wearily at the little carriage clock. The discarded newspaper on the floor recalled all that he had read half an hour before.

“I wonder,” he went on – “I wonder if any one on Charing Cross platform except the porter spotted the girl?” Then he remained silent for a moment. “No. I oughtn’t to go to Italy; it’s far too risky. There’s plenty of time yet for Marvin to be called. I must feign illness, and await my chance to go on a long trip to Peking, Teheran, or Washington. Yes, a touch of fever will be a good excuse.” But, after a moment’s further consideration, he added, “Yet, after all, to be ill will be to arouse suspicion. No, I’ll go;” and he pressed the electric bell.

In answer to the summons his man-servant, a smart, tall ex-private of Dragoons, entered.

“A foreign telegraph form, Smayle,” he said.

The man obeyed with military promptitude, and his master a minute later scribbled a few hasty words on the yellow form, securing a berth in the through sleeping-car leaving Paris that night for Rome.

“Take this to the telegraph office in Regent Street,” he said. “I’m leaving this morning, and if anybody calls, tell them I’ve gone to Washington, to Timbuctoo, or to the devil, if you like – anyhow, I shan’t be back for a month. You understand?”

“Yes, sir,” answered the man with a smile. “Shall I forward any letters?”

“Yes, Poste Restante, Leghorn.”

At that moment the bell of the outer door rang out sharply, and Smayle went in response, returning a moment later, saying —

“Major Maitland, sir.”

“Show him in,” answered his master in a tone of suppressed excitement.

The man disappeared, and a second later the Major entered jauntily, his silk hat slightly askew, extended his well-gloved hand, greeted his friend profusely with the easy air of a man about town, and sank into one of the comfortable saddle-bag chairs.

"Well, my dear fellow," he exclaimed as soon as they were alone. "Why do you risk London after the events of the other night? I never dreamed that I should find you at home."

"I'm leaving for Italy again by the eleven train," the other answered. "Have you read this morning's paper?"

"Of course I have," answered the Major. "It's an infernally awkward bit of business for both of us, I'm afraid. That introduction at the station was the greatest mistake possible, for the cabman will no doubt identify us. Besides, he overheard you address me by rank."

"But the police have no suspicion," Tristram observed. "At present we are safe enough."

"If I were you I wouldn't arrive or depart from Charing Cross for a few months at least," the Major suggested. "The business is far too ugly for us to run any unnecessary risks, you know."

"No; I shall make a habit of departing from London Bridge and arriving at Cannon Street. I never have more than hand-baggage with me."

"Where are you going to-day?"

"To Leghorn again. Right into the very midst of the enemy's camp," he laughed.

"Suppose any facts regarding the mystery have been published in the local papers, don't you think you'd stand a good chance of being arrested? The police in Italy are very arbitrary."

"They dare not arrest me with despatches in my possession. I have immunity from arrest while on official business," His Majesty's messenger answered.

"That may be so," replied the Major. "But you'd have a considerable difficulty in persuading the police of either London or Leghorn that you were not the amiable young man who arrived at Charing Cross with Vittorina."

"And you would have similar difficulty, my dear old chap, in convincing the detectives that you were not the person who waited for us on the platform," the other replied. "You're so well known about town that, if I were you, I should leave London at once, and not take a return ticket."

"I leave to-night."

"By what route?"

"By a rather round-about one," the Major answered, slowly striking a vesta. "The ordinary Channel passage might disagree with me, you know, so I shall travel this evening to Hull, and sail to-morrow morning for Christiania. Thence I shall get down into Germany via Hamburg."

"A very neat way of evading observation," observed the Captain in a tone of admiration.

"I booked my passage a fortnight ago, in case I might require it," the elder man observed carelessly. "When one desires to cover one's tracks, the ordinary Channel services are worse than useless. I call the Norwegian the circular route. I've used it more than once before. They know me on the Wilson liners."

Tristram glanced at his watch. "I must be off in five minutes. What will be your address?"

"Portland before long, if I'm not wary," the other replied, with a grim smile.

"This is no time for joking, Maitland," Tristram said severely. "Reserve your witticisms for the warders, if you really anticipate chookie. They'll no doubt appreciate them."

"Then address me Poste Restante, Brussels. I'm certain to drift to the Europe there sooner or later within the next three months," the Major said.

"Very well, I must go;" and the King's messenger quickly obtained his soft grey felt hat and heavy travelling coat from the hall, filled a silver flask from a decanter, took down the blue ribbon, deftly fastened it around his neck out of sight beneath his cravat, and snatched up his travelling-bag.

"I'm going along to the Foreign Office for despatches. Can I drop you anywhere from my cab?" he asked as they made their way down the stairs together.

"No, my dear fellow," the Major replied. "I'm going up Bond Street."

Then, on gaining St. James's Street, the Captain sprang into a cab, and shouting a cheery adieu to his friend, drove off on the first stage of his tedious thousand-mile journey to the Mediterranean shore.

Chapter Six

In Tuscany

Leghorn, the gay, sun-blached Tuscan watering-place known to Italians as Livorno, is at its brightest and best throughout the month of August. To the English, save those who reside permanently in Florence, Pisa, or Rome, its beauties are unknown. But those who know Italy – and to know Italy is to love it – are well aware that at “cara Livorno,” as the Tuscans call it, one can obtain perhaps the best sea-bathing in Europe, and enjoy a perfectly delightful summer beside the Mediterranean.

It is never obtrusive by its garishness, never gaudy or inartistic; for it makes no pretension to being a first-class holiday resort like Nice or Cannes. Still, it has its long, beautiful *Passeggio* extending the whole of the seafront, planted with tamarisks, ilexes, and flowing oleanders; it has its wide, airy piazzas, its cathedral, its Grand Hotel, its pensions, and, lastly, its little open cabs in which one can drive two miles for the not altogether ruinous fare of sixpence halfpenny. Its baths, ingeniously built out upon the bare brown rocks into the clear, bright sea, take the place of piers at English seaside resorts, and here during the afternoon everybody, clad in ducks and muslins, lounge in chairs to gossip beneath the widespread awnings, while the waves beat with musical cadence up to their very feet. At evening there are gay, well-lit open-air cafés and several theatres, while the musical can sit in a stall at the opera and hear the best works performed by the best Italian artists for the sum of one and threepence.

But life at Livorno is purely Tuscan. As yet it is unspoilt by English-speaking tourists; indeed, it is safe to say that not three Cookites set foot within the city in twelve months. In its every aspect the town is beautiful. From the sea it presents a handsome appearance, with its lines of high white houses with their red roofs and closed sun-shutters, backed by the distant blue peaks of the Lucca Mountains, and the serrated spurs of the purple Apennines, while in its sun-whitened streets the dress of the Livornesi, with their well-made skirts of the palest and most delicate tints of blue, grey, and rose, and with their black silk scarves or lace mantillas twisted about their handsome heads, is the most artistic and tasteful in all fair Italy. The men are happy, careless, laughing fellows, muscular, and bronzed by the sun; the women dark-eyed, black-haired, and notable throughout the length and breadth of Europe for their extreme beauty and their grace of carriage.

Little wonder is it that stifled Florentines, from shopkeepers to princes, unable to bear the heat and mosquitoes beside the muddy Arno, betake themselves to this bright little watering-place during August and September, where, even if the heat is blazing at midday, the wind is delightfully cool at evening, and the sea-baths render life really worth living. Unless one has spent a summer in Tuscany, it is impossible to realise its stifling breathlessness and its sickening sun-glare. Unless one has lived among the sly, secretive, proud but carelessly happy Livornesi, has shared their joys, sympathised with their sorrows, fraternised with them and noted their little peculiarities, one can never enjoy Livorno.

At first the newly arrived foreigner is pointed at by all as one apart, and considered an imbecile for preferring Livorno to Florence, or Milano; every shopkeeper endeavours to charge him double prices, and for every trifling service performed he is expected to disburse princely tips. But the Tuscan heart is instantly softened towards him as soon as he seems likely to become a resident; all sorts and conditions of men do him little kindnesses without monetary reward; grave-faced monks will call at his house and leave him presents of luscious fruits and fresh-cut salads; and even his cabman, the last to relent, will one day, with profuse apology for previous extortions, charge only his just fare.

The Italians are indeed an engaging people. It is because they are so ingenuous, so contented, so self-denying, so polite yet so sarcastic, that one learns to love them so well.

Along the *Viale Regina Margherita*, or esplanade – better known perhaps by its ancient name, the *Passeggio* – are a number of baths, all frequented by different grades of society, the one most

in vogue among the better-class residents and visitors being a handsome establishment with café and skating-rink attached, known as Pancaldi's.

It was here, one evening soon after the mysterious death of Vittorina in London, that two persons, a man and a woman, were sitting, watching the ever-changing hues of one of those glorious blazing sunsets seen nowhere else in the world but in the Mediterranean. The broad, asphalted promenade, covered by its wide canvas awnings, was almost blocked by the hundreds of gaily dressed persons sitting on chairs chattering and laughing, and it seemed as though all the notable people of Florence and Bologna had assembled there to enjoy the cool breeze after the terrific heat of the August day. Along the Viale the road was sun-bleached, the wind-swept tamarisks were whitened by the dust, and the town that day had throbbed and gasped beneath the terrible, fiery August glare. But here, at Pancaldi's, was light, happy chatter – in Italian of various dialects, of course – a cool, refreshing breeze, and that indefinable air of delicious laziness which Italy alone claims as her birthright.

The pair sitting together at the end of the asphalted walk, at some distance from the crowd, were young and, to a casual observer, well matched. Unlike all others round about her, the woman was of fair complexion, about twenty-five, with that gold-brown hair that Titian loved to paint, eyes of a deep and wondrous blue, a small, adorable mouth, the upper lip of which possessed that rare attribute, the true Cupid's bow, a face sweet, almost childlike in expression, perfect in its purity. Her great beauty was well set off by her black dress and tiny black bonnet, but from the crown of her head to the toe of her pointed patent-leather shoe there was a chic and daintiness about her which, to an English eye, stamped her as foreign, even though her face bore no trace of Italian blood.

Half that gay, gossiping crowd, attracted by her beauty, had already set her down as English, perhaps because her fairness was uncommon in Tuscany, perhaps because they detected by the cut of her companion's clothes that he was English. But Gemma Fanetti was really a native of Florence, a true-bred Tuscan, who knew not half a dozen words of English. She could chatter French a little, and could gabble the nasal Milanese dialect, but it always amused her to be taken for an Englishwoman.

Her dress, although black, and only relieved by a little white lace at the throat and wrists, was made in the latest mode, and fitted her perfectly. On her slim wrist was a single bangle of diamonds, which flashed in the dying sunlight with all the colours of the spectrum as, in chatting idly with her companion, she slowly traced semicircles on the ground with the point of her black sunshade. Undoubtedly she was strikingly beautiful, for men in twos and threes were passing and repassing solely for the purpose of obtaining a glance at her.

Utterly unconscious of their admiration, of the whisperings of those about her, or of the glorious wealth of colour spread before them as the sun sank deep into the grey, glittering sea, they both chatted on, glancing now and then into each other's eyes.

Her companion was about twenty-eight, good-looking, dark-eyed, with a merry face and an air of carelessness as, in a suit of cool, white ducks, and his straw hat tilted slightly over his brow to shade his eyes, he sat back in his chair, joining in her low, well-bred laughter. Truth to tell, Charles Armytage was desperately in love.

For seven years – ever since he came of age and succeeded to his father's property in Wales – he had led a wild, rather dissipated life on the Continent, and had found himself world-weary before his time. His college career had terminated somewhat ignominiously, for he had been “sent down” on account of a rather serious practical joke; he had studied for the Bar, and failed; he had done the whole round of the public gaming establishments, Monte Carlo, Ostend, Spa, Dinant, Namur, and Trouville, losing heavily at each; he had idled on the sands of Scheveningen, flirted on the Promenade des Anglais at Nice, tasted the far-famed oysters at Arcachon, the bouillabaisse at Marseilles, and bathed on San Sebastian's golden sands. Once he had taken a fit into his head to visit all the spas, and, beginning with Royat, he made a tour of all the principal ones as far as Carlsbad. Thus had he developed into a thorough cosmopolitan, travelling hither and thither just as his fancy led him, his

only hobby being in occasionally writing a short story or travel article for one or other of the English magazines.

It was in his restless, dejected mood that, six months before, he had arrived in Florence, and by mere chance had first met the woman who was now beside him. He had one morning been walking along the Via Tornabuoni when he first saw her, accompanied by her servant. Suddenly something fell to the pavement, and an urchin instantly snatched it up. Armytage ran after him, recovered the little golden charm, and handed it to its owner, being rewarded by a few words of thanks. Her grace, her beauty, her soft, musical voice rekindled within him a desire for life. Instantly he became fascinated by her wondrous beauty, and she, too, seemed content to chat with him, and to listen to his very faulty Italian, which must have been exceedingly difficult for her to understand.

They did not meet often, but always casually. Once or twice he encountered her cycling in the Cascine, and had joined her in a spin along the shady avenues. They had exchanged cards, but she had never invited him to call, and he, living at a hotel, could scarcely invite her. Italian manners strictly preserve the *convenances*. No unmarried lady in any Tuscan city, not even a woman of the people, ever dreams of going out alone. Even the poorest girl is chaperoned whenever she takes an airing.

Suddenly, just when Armytage found himself hopelessly infatuated, he one morning received an urgent telegram calling him to London, and he had been compelled to leave without a word of farewell, or any knowledge of her address.

As soon as he could, he returned to Florence, but the weather had then grown hot, and all who were able had left the sun-baked city. Then, disappointed at not finding her after an active search, he drifted down to the sea at Livorno, and within three days was delighted to see her strolling in the Passeggio with her ugly, cross-eyed serving woman. The recognition was mutual, and after one or two meetings she explained that she had a flat for the season in one of the great white houses opposite, and expressed a hope that he would call.

He lost no time in renewing the acquaintance, and now they were inseparable. He loved her.

"Do you know, Gemma," he was saying seriously, "when I left Florence in March, I left my heart behind – with you."

She blushed slightly beneath her veil, and raising her clear blue eyes to his, answered with a slight sigh in her soft Italian —

"You say you love me, caro; but can I really believe you?"

"Of course you can, dearest," he answered earnestly, speaking her tongue with difficulty. "I love no other woman in the whole world but you."

"Ah!" she exclaimed sadly, gazing blankly away across the sea, now glittering crimson in the blaze of the dying day. "I sometimes fear to love you, because you may tire of me one day, and go back to some woman of your own people."

"Never," he answered fervently. "As I told you yesterday, Gemma, I love you; and you, in return, have already given me your pledge."

"And you can actually love me like this, blindly, without inquiring too deeply into my past?" she whispered, regarding him gravely with those calm, clear eyes, which seemed to penetrate his very soul.

"Your past matters not to me," he answered in a deep, intense voice under his breath, so that passers-by should not overhear. "I have asked you nothing; you have told me nothing. I love you, Gemma, and trust to your honour to tell me what I ought to know."

"Ah! you are generous!" she exclaimed; and he saw beneath her veil a single tear upon her cheek. "The past life of a man can always be effaced; that of a woman never. A false step, alas! lives as evidence against her until the grave."

"Why are you so melancholy this evening?" he asked, after a pause.

"I really don't know," she answered. "Perhaps it is because I am so happy and contented. My peace seems too complete to be lasting."

“While you love me, Gemma, I shall love you always,” he exclaimed decisively. “You need never have any doubt about my earnestness. I adore you.”

Her breast heaved and fell beneath its black lace and jet, and she turned her fine eyes upon him with an expression more eloquent than any words of assurance and affection.

Then, after a brief silence, he glanced around at the crowd about them, saying —

“It is impossible to speak further of our private affairs here. You will dine with me to-night. Where shall it be?”

“Let’s dine at the Eden. There’s plenty of air there. We can get a table facing the sea, and stay to the performance afterwards. Shall we?” she asked, her face brightening.

“Certainly,” he replied. “I’ll go across to the hotel and dress, while you go along home and put on another frock. I know you won’t go in black to a *café chantant*,” he added, laughing.

“You’ll call for me?” she asked.

“Yes, at eight.”

As these words fell from his lips a man’s voice in English exclaimed —

“Hulloa, Charlie! Who’d have thought of finding you here?”

Armytage looked up quickly, and, to his surprise, found standing before him his old college chum and fellow clubman, Frank Tristram.

“Why, Frank, old fellow!” he cried, jumping up and grasping the other’s hand warmly. “We haven’t met for how long? The last time was one night in the Wintergarden at Berlin, fully two years ago – eh?”

“Yes. Neither of us are much in London nowadays, therefore we seldom meet. But what are you doing here?” asked the King’s messenger, looking cool and smart in his suit of grey flannel.

“Killing time, as usual,” his friend replied, with a smile.

“Lucky devil!” Tristram exclaimed. “While I’m compelled to race from end to end of Europe for a paltry eight hundred a year, you laze away your days in an out-of-the-world place like this.” And he glanced significantly at the sweet, fair-faced woman who, having given him a swift look, was now sitting motionless, her hands idly crossed upon her lap, her eyes fixed blankly upon the sunlit sea.

“Let me introduce you,” Armytage exclaimed in Italian, noticing his friend’s look of admiration. “The Signorina Gemma Fanetti – my friend, Captain Frank Tristram.”

The latter bowed, made a little complimentary speech in excellent Italian, and seated himself with Armytage beside her.

“Well,” Tristram said, still speaking in Italian, “this is quite an unexpected pleasure. I thought that in addition to the Ambassador out at Ardenza, and the jovial Jack Hutchinson, the Consul, I was the only Englishman in this purely Tuscan place.” Then turning to his friend’s companion, he asked, “Are you Livornese?”

“Oh, no,” she replied, with a gay, rippling laugh, “I live in Florence; only just now the place is stifling, so I’m down here for fresh air.”

“Ah, Florence!” he said. “The old city is justly termed ‘La Bella.’ I sometimes find myself there in winter, and it is always interesting, always delightful.”

At that moment an English lady, the wife of an Italian officer, bowed in passing, and Armytage sprang to his feet and began to chat to her. He had known her well during his stay in Florence earlier in the year.

As soon as Gemma noticed that her lover was no longer listening, her manner at once changed, and bending quickly towards the Captain, she exclaimed in rapid Italian, which she knew Armytage could not understand —

“Well, did you see Vittorina safely to London?”

Tristram started at the unexpected mention of that name.

“Yes,” he answered, with slight hesitation. “I saw her safely as far as Charing Cross, but was compelled to leave her there, and put her in a cab for Hammersmith.”

“How far is that?”

“About five kilometres,” he replied.

“I have had no telegram from her,” she observed. “She promised to wire to me as soon as she arrived, and I am beginning to feel anxious about her.”

“Worry is useless,” he said calmly. “She is no doubt quite safe with her friends. I gave the cabman the right address. My official business was pressing, or I would have gone out to Hammersmith with her.”

“You remember what I told you on the night we parted in Florence?” she said mysteriously.

He nodded, and his dark face grew a shade paler.

“Well, I have discovered that what I suspected was correct,” she said, her eyes flashing for an instant with a strange glint. “Some one has betrayed the secret.”

“Betrayed you!” he gasped.

She shrugged her shoulders. Her clear eyes fixed themselves fiercely upon him.

“You alone knew the truth,” she said. “And you have broken your promise of silence.”

He flinched.

“Well?” he said. “You are, of course, at liberty to make any charge you like against me, but I can only declare that I have not divulged one single word.” Then he added quickly, “But what of Armytage? Does he know anything?”

“Absolutely nothing,” she answered quickly. “I love him. Remember that you and I have never met before our introduction this afternoon.”

“Of course,” the Captain answered.

“Curious that Vittorina has disappeared! If I hear nothing of her, I shall go to London and find her,” Gemma observed, after a few moments’ silence.

“Better not, if you really have been betrayed,” he answered quickly.

“I have been betrayed, Captain Tristram,” she said rapidly, with withering scorn, her face flushing instantly, her large, luminous eyes flashing. “You are well aware that I have; and, further, you know that you yourself are my bitterest enemy. I spare you now, mean, despicable coward that you are, but utter one word to the man I love, and I will settle accounts with you swiftly and relentlessly.”

She held her breath, panting for an instant, then turning from him, greeted her lover with a sweet, winning smile, as at that moment he returned to her side.

Chapter Seven

Doctor Malvano

Among the thousand notable dining-places in London, Bonciani's Restaurant, in Regent Street, is notable for its *recherché* repasts. It is by no means a pretentious place, for its one window displays a few long-necked, rush-covered flasks of Tuscan wine, together with some rather sickly looking plants, a couple of framed menus, and two or three large baskets of well-selected fruit.

Yet to many, mostly clubmen and idlers about town, the Bonciani is a feature of London life. In the daytime the passer-by sees no sign of activity within, and even at night the place presents an ill-lit, paltry, and uninviting appearance. But among the few in London who know where to dine well, the little unpretentious place halfway up Regent Street, on the left going toward Oxford Street, is well known for its unrivalled cuisine, its general cosiness, and its well-matured wines. The interior is not striking. There are no gilt-edged mirrors, as is usual in Anglo-Italian restaurants, but the walls are frescoed, as in Italy, with lounges upholstered in red velvet, a trifle shabby, extending down the long, rather low room. Upon the dozen little marble-topped tables, with their snow-white cloths, are objects seen nowhere else in London, namely, silver-plated holders for the wine-flasks; for with the dinner here wine is inclusive, genuine Pompino imported direct from old Galuzzo in the Val d'Ema beyond Firenze, a red wine of delicate bouquet which connoisseurs know cannot be equalled anywhere in London.

One evening, about a week after the meeting between Gemma and Tristram at Livorno, nearly all the tables were occupied, as they usually are at the dining hour, but at the extreme end sat two men, eating leisurely, and taking long draughts from the great rush-covered flask before them. They were Tristram and Romanelli.

Four days ago the pair had met late at night at the railway station at Leghorn, and the one hearing the other demand a ticket for London, they got into conversation, and travelled through together, arriving at Victoria on the previous evening. During the three days of travelling they had become very friendly, and now, at the Italian's invitation, Tristram was dining previous to his return on the morrow to Livorno, for at that period Italy was approaching England on the subject of a treaty, and the correspondence between our Ambassador and the Foreign Office was considerable, necessitating despatches being sent to Italy almost daily.

"So you return to-morrow?" Romanelli exclaimed, twirling his tiny black moustache affectedly. To men his foppishness was nauseating; but women liked him because of his amusing gossip.

"Yes," the other answered, sighing. "I expected to get a few days' rest in London, but this afternoon I received orders to leave again to-morrow."

"Your life must be full of change and entertainment," the young Italian said.

"Rather too full," the other laughed. "Already this year I've been to Italy more than twenty times, besides three times to Constantinople, once to Stockholm, twice to Petersburg, and innumerable trips to Brussels and Paris. But, by the way," he added, putting down his glass as if a sudden thought had occurred to him, "you know Leghorn well, I think you said?"

"I'm not Livornese, but I lived there for ten years," the other answered. "I came to London a year ago to learn English, for they said it was impossible to get any sort of good pronunciation in Italy."

"I've passed through Pisa hundreds of times, but have only been in Leghorn once or twice," observed the King's messenger. "Charming place. Full of pretty girls."

"Ah! yes," cried Romanelli. "The English always admire our Livornesi girls."

Tristram paused for a few seconds, then, raising his eyes until they met those of his new acquaintance, asked —

"Do you happen to know a girl there named Fanetti — Gemma Fanetti?"

Romanelli started perceptibly, and for an instant held his breath. He was utterly unprepared for this question, and strove vainly not to betray his surprise.

"Fanetti," he repeated aloud, as if reflecting. "I think not. It is not a Livornese name."

"She lives in Florence, I believe, but always spends the bathing season at Leghorn," Tristram added. His quick eyes had detected the Italian's surprise and anxiety when he had made the unexpected inquiry, and he felt confident that his foppish young friend was concealing the truth.

"I've never, to my recollection, met any one of that name," Romanelli answered with well-feigned carelessness. "Is she a lady or merely a girl of the people?"

"A lady."

"Young?"

"Quite. She's engaged to be married to a friend of mine."

"Engaged to be married?" the young man repeated with a smile. "Is the man an Englishman?"

"Yes, a college chum of mine. He's well off, and they seem a most devoted pair."

There was a brief silence.

"I have no recollection of the name in Florentine society, and I certainly have never met her in Livorno," Romanelli said. "So she's found a husband? Is she pretty?"

"Extremely. The prettiest woman I've ever seen in Italy."

"And there are a good many in my country," the Italian said. "The poor girl who died so mysteriously – or who, some say, was murdered – outside the Criterion was very beautiful. I knew her well – poor girl!"

"You knew her?" gasped the Captain, in turn surprised. "You were acquainted with Vittorina Rinaldo?"

"Yes," replied his companion slowly, glancing at him with some curiosity. "But, tell me," he added after a pause, "how did you know her surname? The London police have failed to discover it?"

Frank Tristram's brow contracted. He knew that he had foolishly betrayed himself. In an instant a ready lie was upon his lips.

"I was told so in Livorno," he said glibly. "She was Livornese."

"Yes," Romanelli observed, only half convinced. "According to the papers, it appears as if she were accompanied by some man from Italy. But her death and her companion's disappearance are alike unfathomable mysteries."

"Extraordinary!" the Captain acquiesced. "I've been away so much that I haven't had a chance to read the whole of the details. But the scraps I have read seem remarkably mysterious."

"There appears to have been absolutely no motive whatever in murdering her," Arnoldo said, glancing sharply across the table at his companion.

"If it were really murder, there must have been some hidden motive," Tristram declared. "Personally, however, in the light of the Coroner's verdict, I'm inclined to the opinion that the girl died suddenly in the cab, and the man sitting beside her, fearing that an accusation of murder might bring about some further revelation, made good his escape."

"He must have known London pretty well," observed Romanelli.

"Of course. The evidence proves that he was an Englishman; and that he knew London was quite evident from the fact that he gave instructions to the cabman to drive up the Haymarket, instead of crossing Leicester Square."

Again a silence fell between them, as a calm-faced elderly waiter, in the most correct garb of the Italian *cameriere* – a short jacket and long white apron reaching almost to his feet – quickly removed their empty plates. He glanced swiftly from one man to the other, polished Tristram's plate with his cloth as he stood behind him, and exchanged a meaning look with Romanelli. Then he turned suddenly, and went off to another table, to which he was summoned by the tapping of a knife upon a plate. The glance he had exchanged with the young Italian was one of recognition and mysterious significance.

This man, the urbane head-waiter, known well to frequenters of the Bonciani as Filippo, was known equally well in the remote Rutlandshire village as Doctor Malvano, the man who had expressed fear at the arrival of Vittorina in England, and who, truth to tell, led the strangest dual existence of doctor and waiter.

None in rural Lyddington suspected that their jovial doctor, with his merry chaff and imperturbable good humour, became grave-faced and suddenly transformed each time he visited London; none dreamed that his many absences from his practice were due to anything beyond his natural liking for theatres and the gaiety of town life; and none would have credited, even had it ever been alleged, that this man who could afford that large, comfortable house, rent shooting, and keep hunters in his stables, on each of his visits to London, assumed a badly starched shirt, black tie, short jacket, and long white apron, in order to collect stray pence from diners in a restaurant. Yet such was the fact. Doctor Malvano, who had been so well known among the English colony in Florence, was none other than Filippo, head-waiter at the obscure little café in Regent Street.

"It is still a mystery who the dead girl was," Tristram observed at last. "The man who told me her name only knew very little about her."

"What did he know?" Romanelli inquired quickly. "I had often met her at various houses in Livorno, but knew nothing of her parentage."

"Nobody seems to know who she really was," Tristram remarked pensively; "and her reason for coming to England seems to have been entirely a secret one."

"A lover, perhaps," Arnoldo said.

"Perhaps," acquiesced his friend.

"But who told you about her?"

"There have been official inquiries through the British Consulate," the other answered mysteriously.

"Inquiries from the London police?"

The King's messenger nodded in the affirmative, adding —

"I believe they have already discovered a good many curious facts."

"Have they?" asked Romanelli quickly, exchanging a hasty glance with Filippo, who at that moment had paused behind his companion's chair.

"What's the nature of their discoveries?"

"Ah!" Tristram answered, with a provoking smile. "I really don't know, except that I believe they have discovered something of her motive for coming to England."

"Her motive!" the other gasped, a trifle pale. "Then there is just a chance that the mystery will be elucidated, after all."

"More than a chance, I think," the Captain replied. "The police, no doubt, hold a clue by that strange letter written from Lucca which was discovered in her dressing-case. And, now that I recollect," he added in surprise, "this very table at which we are sitting is the one expressly mentioned by her mysterious correspondent. I wonder what was meant by it?"

"Ah, I wonder!" the Italian exclaimed mechanically, his brow darkened by deep thought. "It was evident that the mysterious Egisto feared that some catastrophe might occur if she arrived in England, and he therefore warned her in a vague, veiled manner."

Filippo came and went almost noiselessly, his quick ears constantly on the alert to catch their conversation, his clean-shaven face grave, smileless, sphinx-like.

"Well," the Captain observed in a decisive manner, "you may rest assured that Scotland Yard will do its utmost to clear up the mystery surrounding the death of your friend, for I happen to know that the Italian Ambassador in London has made special representation to our Home Office upon the subject, and instructions have gone forth that no effort is to be spared to solve the enigma."

"Then our Government at Rome have actually taken up the matter?" the Italian said in a tone which betrayed alarm.

Tristram smiled, but no word passed his lips. He saw that his new acquaintance had not the slightest suspicion that it was he who had accompanied Vittorina from Italy to London; that it was he who had escaped so ingeniously through the bar of the Criterion; that it was for him the police were everywhere searching.

At last, when they had concluded their meal, Romanelli paid Filippo, giving him a tip, and the pair left the restaurant to pass an hour at the Empire before parting.

Once or twice the young Italian referred to the mystery, but found his companion disinclined to discuss it further.

“In my official capacity, I dare not say what I know,” Tristram said at last in an attitude of confidence, as they were sitting together in the crowded lounge of the theatre. “My profession entails absolute secrecy. Often I am entrusted with the exchange of confidences between nations, knowledge of which would cause Europe to be convulsed by war from end to end, but secrets entrusted to me remain locked within my own heart.”

“Then you are really aware of true facts?” inquired the other.

“Of some,” he replied vaguely, with a mysterious smile.

The hand of his foppish companion trembled as he raised his liqueur-glass to his pale lips. But he laughed a hollow, artificial laugh, and then was silent.

Chapter Eight

Her Ladyship's Secret

Filippo, grey-faced, but smart nevertheless, continued to attend to the wants of customers at the Bonciani until nearly ten o'clock. He took their orders in English, transmitted them in Italian through the speaking tube to the kitchen, and deftly handed the piles of plates and dishes with the confident air of the professional waiter.

Evidence was not wanting that to several elderly Italians he was well known, for he greeted them cheerily, advised them as to the best dishes, and treated them with fatherly solicitude from the moment they entered until their departure.

At ten o'clock only two or three stray customers remained, smoking their long rank cigars and sipping their coffee, therefore Filippo handed over his cash, assumed his shabby black overcoat, and wishing "buona notte" to his fellow-waiters, and "good-night" to the English check-taker at the small counter, made his way out and eastward along Regent Street. It was a bright, brilliant night, cool and refreshing after the heat of the day. As he crossed Piccadilly Circus, the glare of the Criterion brought back to him the strange occurrence that had recently taken place before that great open portal, and, with a glance in that direction, he muttered to himself —

"I wonder if the truth will ever be discovered? Strange that Arnoldo's friend knows so much, yet will tell so little! That the girl was killed seems certain. But how, and by whom? Strange," he added, after a pause as he strode on, deep in thought — "very strange."

Engrossed in his own reflections, he passed along Wardour Street into Shaftesbury Avenue, and presently entered the heart of the foreign quarter of London, a narrow, dismal street of high, dingy, uninviting-looking houses known as Church Street, a squalid, sunless thoroughfare behind the glaring Palace of Varieties, inhabited mostly by French and Italians.

He paused before a dark, dirty house, a residence of some importance a century ago, judging from its deep area, its wide portals, and its iron extinguishers, once used by the now-forgotten linkman, and, taking out a latchkey, opened the door, ascending to a small bed-sitting-room on the third floor, not over clean, but nevertheless comfortable. Upon the small side-table, with its cracked and clouded mirror, stood the removable centre of his dressing-bag with its silver fittings, and hanging behind the door were the clothes he wore when living his other life.

He lit the cheap paraffin lamp, pulled down the faded crimson blind, threw his hat and coat carelessly upon the bed, and, after glancing at his watch, sank into the shabby armchair.

"Still time," he muttered. "I wonder whether she'll come? If she don't — if she refuses —"

And sighing, he took out a cigarette, lit it, and throwing back his head, meditatively watched the smoke rings as they curled upwards.

"I'd give something to know how much the police have actually discovered," he continued, speaking to himself. "If they've really discovered Vittorina's object in visiting London, then I must be wary not to betray my existence. Already the Ambassador must have had his suspicions aroused, but, fortunately, her mouth is closed for ever. She cannot now betray the secret which she held, nor can she utter any wild denunciations. Our only fear is that the police may possibly discover Egisto in Lucca, make inquiries of him, and thus obtain a key to the whole matter. Our only hope, however, is that Egisto, hearing of the fatal termination of Vittorina's journey, and not desiring to court inquiry, has wisely fled. If he has remained in Lucca after writing that most idiotic letter, he deserves all the punishment he'll get for being such a confounded imbecile."

Then, with an expression of disgust, he smoked on in a lazy, indolent attitude, regardless of the shabbiness and squalor of his surroundings.

“It is fortunate,” he continued at last, speaking slowly to himself – “very fortunate, indeed, that Anioldo should have met this cosmopolitan friend of his. He evidently knows something, but does not intend to tell us. One thing is evident – he can’t have the slightest suspicion of the real facts as we know them; but, on the other hand, there seems no doubt that the police have ascertained something – how much, it is impossible to tell. That the Italian Ambassador has made representations to the Home Office is quite correct. I knew it days ago. Therefore his other statements are likely to be equally true. By Jove!” he added, starting suddenly to his feet. “By jove! If Egisto should be surprised by the police, the fool is certain to make a clean breast of the whole thing in order to save his own neck. Then will come the inevitable crisis! Dio! Such a catastrophe is too terrible to contemplate.”

He drew a deep breath, murmured some inaudible words, and for a long time sat consuming cigarette after cigarette. Then, glancing at his watch again, and finding it past eleven, he rose and stretched himself, saying —

“She’s not coming. Well, I suppose I must go to her.” Quickly he took from his bag a clean shirt, and assuming a light covert-coat and a crush hat, he was once again transformed into a gentleman. By the aid of a vesta he found his way down the dark carpetless stairs, and, hurrying along, soon gained Shaftesbury Avenue, where he sprang into a hansom and gave the man instructions to drive to Sussex Square, Hyde Park.

In twenty minutes the conveyance pulled up before the wide portico of a handsome but rather gloomy-looking house. His summons was answered by a footman who, recognising him at once, exclaimed, “Her ladyship is at home, sir;” and ushered him into a well-furnished morning-room.

A few moments elapsed, when the man returned, and Malvano, with the air of one perfectly acquainted with the arrangements of the house, followed him up the wide, well-lit staircase to the drawing-room, a great apartment on the first floor resplendent with huge mirrors, gilt furniture, and costly bric-à-bric.

Seated in an armchair at the farther end of the room beside a table whereon was a shaded lamp, sat a small, ugly woman, whose aquiline face was wizened by age, whose hair was an unnatural flaxen tint, and whose cheeks were not altogether devoid of artificial colouring.

“So you are determined to see me?” she exclaimed petulantly.

“I am,” he answered simply, seating himself without hesitation in a chair near her.

Her greeting was the reverse of cordial. As she spoke her lips parted, displaying her even rows of false teeth; as she moved, her dress of rich black silk rustled loudly; and as she placed her book upon the table with a slight sigh, the fine diamonds in her bony, claw-like hand sparkled with a thousand fires.

“Well, why have you come – at this hour, too?” she inquired with a haughtiness which she always assumed towards her servants and inferiors. She sat rigid, immovable; and Malvano, student of character that he was, saw plainly that she had braced herself for an effort.

“I asked you to come to me, and you have refused,” he said, folding his arms calmly and looking straight into her rouged and powdered face; “therefore I have come to you.”

“For what purpose? Surely we could have met at the Bonciani?”

“True, but it was imperative that I should see you to-night.”

“More complications – eh?”

“Yes,” he replied, “more complications – serious ones.”

“Serious!” her ladyship gasped, turning instantly pale. “Is the truth known?” she demanded quickly. “Tell me at once; don’t keep me in suspense.”

“Be patient for a moment, and I’ll explain my object in calling,” the Doctor said gravely. “Compose yourself, and listen.”

The Countess of Marshfield drew her skirts around her and moved uneasily in her chair. She was well known in London society, a woman whose eccentricities had for years afforded plenty of food for the gossips, and whose very name was synonymous with senile coquetry. Her age was fully

sixty-five, yet like many other women of position, she delighted in the delusion that she was still young, attractive, and fascinating. Her attitude towards young marriageable men would have been nauseating were it not so absolutely ludicrous; and the way in which she manipulated her fan at night caused her to be ridiculed by all the exclusive set in which she moved.

The dead earl, many years her senior, had achieved brilliant success in the Army, and his name was inscribed upon the roll of England's heroes. Ever since his death, twenty years ago, however, she had been notable on account of her foolish actions, her spasmodic generosity to various worthless institutions, her wild speculations in rotten companies, and her extraordinary eccentricities. As she sat waiting for her visitor to commence, her thin blue lips twitched nervously, and between her eyes was the deep furrow that appeared there whenever she was unduly agitated. But even then she could not resist the opportunity for coquetry, for, taking up her small ivory fan, she opened it, and, slowly waving it to and fro, glanced at him across it, her lips parted in a smile.

But of all men Malvano was one of the least susceptible to feminine blandishments, especially those of such a painfully ugly, artificial person as Lady Marshfield; therefore, heedless of her sudden change of manner towards him, he said bluntly —

"The police have already discovered some facts regarding Vittorina."

"Of her past?" she cried, starting forward.

"No, of her death," he answered.

"Have they discovered whether or not it was murder?" she inquired, her bejewelled hand trembling perceptibly.

"They have no doubt that it was murder," he replied. "They accept the doctor's theory, and, moreover, as you already know, the Italian Embassy in London are pressing the matter."

"They suspect at the Embassy — eh?"

"Without doubt. It can scarcely come as a surprise that they are endeavouring to get at the truth. One thing, however, is in our favour; and that is, she cannot tell what she knew. If she were still alive, I'm confident the whole affair would have been exposed before this."

"And you would have been under arrest."

He raised his shoulders to his ears, exhibited his palms, grinned, but did not reply.

"How have you ascertained this about the police?" her ladyship continued.

"Arnoldo is acquainted with the King's Messenger who carries dispatches between the Foreign Office and the British Ambassador in Italy. The messenger knows everything, but refuses to say much."

"Knows everything!" she cried in alarm. "What do you mean? Has our secret really been divulged?"

"No," answered he. "He is not aware of the true facts, but he knows how far the knowledge of Scotland Yard extends."

"What's his name?"

"Tristram. Captain Tristram."

"Do you know him?"

"No."

"Then don't make his acquaintance," the eccentric woman urged with darkening countenance. "He's no doubt a dangerous friend."

"But we may obtain from him some useful knowledge. You know the old saying about being forewarned."

"Our warnings must come from Livorno," she answered briefly.

"That will be impossible."

"Why?"

"Gemma has unfortunately fallen in love."

"Love! Bah! With whom?"

“With an Englishman,” he answered. “Arnoldo saw them together several times when in Livorno last week.”

“Who is he?”

“His name is Armytage – Charles Armytage. He – ”

“Charles Armytage!” her ladyship echoed, starting from her chair. “And he is in love with Gemma?”

“No doubt he is. He intends to marry her.”

“But they must never marry – never!” she cried quickly. “They must be parted immediately, or our secret will at once be out.”

“How? I don’t understand,” he said, with a puzzled expression. “Surely Gemma, of all persons, is still friendly disposed? She owes much to us.”

“Certainly,” Lady Marshfield answered. “But was she not present with Vittorina on that memorable night in Livorno? Did she not witness with her own eyes that which we witnessed?”

“Well, what of that? We have nothing to fear from her.”

“Alas! we have. A word from her would expose the whole affair,” the wizen-faced woman declared. “By some means or other we must part her from Armytage.”

“And by doing so you will at once make her your enemy.”

“No, your own enemy, Doctor Malvano,” she exclaimed, correcting him haughtily. “I am blameless in this matter.”

He looked straight into her dark, sunken eyes, and smiled grimly.

“It is surely best to preserve her friendship,” he urged. “We have enemies enough, in all conscience.”

“Reflect,” she answered quickly. “Reflect for a moment what exposure means to us. If Gemma marries Armytage, then our secret is no longer safe.”

“But surely she has no object to attain in denouncing us, especially as in doing so she must inevitably implicate herself,” he observed.

“No,” she said gravely, after a brief pause. “In this matter I have my own views. They must be parted, Filippo. Armytage has the strongest motive – the motive of a fierce and terrible vengeance – for revealing everything.”

“But why has Armytage any motive in denouncing us? You speak in enigmas.”

“The secret of his motive is mine alone,” the haggard-eyed woman answered. “Seek no explanation, for you can never gain knowledge of the truth until too late, when the whole affair is exposed. It is sufficient for me to tell you that he must be parted from Gemma.”

Her wizened face was bloodless and brown beneath its paint and powder, her blue lips were closed tight, and a hard expression showed itself at the corners of her cruel mouth.

“Then Gemma is actually as dangerous to us as Vittorina was?” Malvano said, deeply reflecting.

“More dangerous,” she declared in a low, harsh voice. “She must be parted from Armytage at once. Every moment’s delay increases our danger. Exposure and disgrace are imminent. In this matter we must risk everything to prevent betrayal.”

Chapter Nine

Beneath the Red, White, and Blue

August passed slowly but gaily in lazy Leghorn. The town lay white beneath the fiery sun-glare through those blazing, breathless hours; the cloudless sky was of that intense blue which one usually associates with Italy, and by day the deserted Passeggio of tamarisks and ilexes, beside the most waveless sea, was for ever enlivened by the chirp of that unseen harbinger of heat, the cicale. Soon, however, the season waned, the stormy libeccio blew frequently, rendering outdoor exercise impossible; but Charles Armytage still lingered on at Gemma's side, driving with her in the morning along the sea-road to Ardenza and Antignano, or beyond as far as the high-up villa in which lived and died Smollet, the English historian, or ascending to the venerated shrine of the Madonna of Montenero, where the little village peeps forth white and scattered on the green hill-side overlooking the wide expanse of glassy sea. Their afternoons were usually spent amid the crowd of chatterers at Pancaldi's baths, and each evening they dined together at one or other of the restaurants beside the sea.

One morning late in September, when Armytage's coffee was brought to his room at the Grand Hotel, the waiter directed his attention to an official-looking note lying upon the tray. He had just risen, and was standing at the window gazing out upon the distant islands indistinct in the morning haze, and thinking of the words of assurance and affection his well-beloved had uttered before he had parted from her at the door, after the theatre on the previous night. Impatiently he tore open the note, and carelessly glanced at its contents. Then, with an expression of surprise, he carefully re-read the letter, saying aloud —

“Strange! I wonder what he wants?”

The note was a formal one, bearing on a blue cameo official stamp the superscription, “British Consulate, Leghorn,” and ran as follows: —

“Dear Sir, —

“I shall be glad if you can make it convenient to call at the Consulate this morning between eleven and one, as I desire to speak to you upon an important and most pressing matter.

“Yours faithfully, —

“John Hutchinson, His Majesty's Consul.”

“Hutchinson,” he repeated to himself. “Is the Consul here called Hutchinson? It must be the Jack Hutchinson of whom Tristram spoke. He called him ‘jovial Jack Hutchinson.’ I wonder what's the ‘pressing matter’? Some infernal worry, I suppose. Perhaps some dun or other in town has written to him for my address.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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