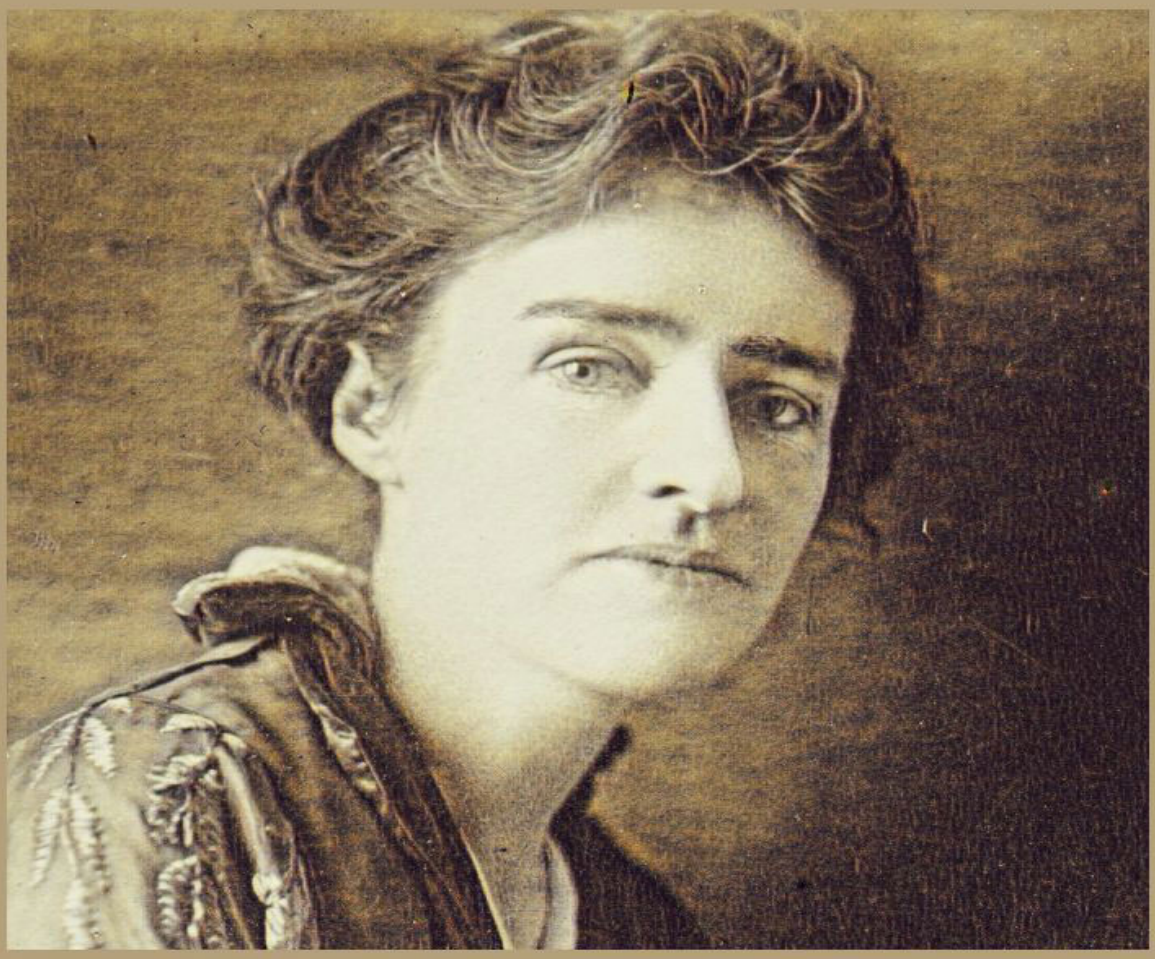

THE WHEAT PRINCESS

JEAN WEBSTER

The Wheat Princess

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The Wheat Princess, J. Webster
Jazzybee Verlag Jürgen Beck
86450 Altenmünster, Loschberg 9
Deutschland

ISBN: 9783849658762

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PROLOGUE

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

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

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

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

The lower slopes of the hill on which the village stands are well wooded and green with stone-pines and cypresses, olive orchards and vineyards. Here the princes built their villas when the wars with the popes were safely at an end and they could risk coming down from their stronghold on the mountain. The old villa was built about a mile below the town, and the gardens were laid out in terraces and parterres along the slope of the hill. It has long been in ruin, but its foundations still stand, and the plan of the

gardens may easily be traced. You will see the entrance at the left of the road—a massive stone gateway topped with moss-covered urns and a double row of cone-shaped cypresses bordering a once stately avenue now grown over with weeds. If you pause for a moment—and you cannot help doing so—you will see, between the portals at the end of the avenue, some crumbling arches, and even, if your eyes are good, the fountain itself.

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

You cannot wonder that the young prince (two centuries ago) did not build his new villa on the site of the old; for even had he, like the brave contadino, cared nothing for ghosts, still it was scarcely a hallowed spot, and lovers would not care to stroll by the fountain. So it happens that you must travel some distance further along the same road before you reach the gates of the new villa, built anno domini 1693, in the pontificate of his Holiness Innocent XII. Here you will find no gloomy cypresses: the approach is

bordered by spreading plane-trees. The villa itself is a rambling affair, and, though slightly time-worn, is still decidedly imposing, with its various wings, its balconies and loggia and marble terrace.

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

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

looked down on their full share of tragedies, and the Vivalanti annals are grim reading withal.

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

Then why, you may ask, if we are not concerned with the Vivalanti, have we lingered so long in their garden? Ah—but the garden does concern us, though the young prince may not; and it is a pleasant spot, you must acknowledge, in which to linger. The people with whom we are concerned are (I hesitate to say it for fear of destroying the glamour) an American family. Yes, it is best to confess it boldly—are American millionaires. It is out—the worst is told! But why, may I ask in my turn, is there anything so inherently distressing in the idea of an American family (of millionaires) spending the summer in a seventeenth-century Italian villa up in the Sabine hills—especially when the rightful heir prefers *trente-et-un* at Monte Carlo? Must they of necessity spoil the romance? They are human, and have their passions like the rest of us; and one of them at least is young, and men have called her beautiful—yes, in this very garden.

CHAPTER I

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘And who is the lady with her?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They paused at Mrs. Copley’s elbow with outstretched hands, and were received with a flattering show of cordiality from the aunt, though with but a fleeting nod

from the niece; she was, patently, too interested in her officers to have much attention left.

‘Where is your husband?’ Sybert asked.

The lady raised her eyebrows in a picturesque gesture.

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

The men smilingly murmured their commiserations.

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

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

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

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

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

as he talked to her suggested that her unkindness failed to hurt; that she was too young to count.

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

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

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

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

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

Sybert laughed. 'Poor Uncle Howard!' he murmured.

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

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

'Farther away than Frascati; at Castel Vivalanti.'

'Castel Vivalanti!'

'Up in the Sabine hills between Palestrina and Tivoli.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘How do you mean?’

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

‘Indeed it would!’ she agreed. ‘How pretty the studio looks this afternoon! I have seen it only by daylight before, and, like all the rest of us, it improves by candle-light.’ Her eyes wandered about the big room, with its furnishings of threadbare tapestry and antique carved chairs. The heavy curtains had been partly drawn over the windows, making a pleasant twilight within. A subtle odour of linseed oil and cigarette smoke, mingled with the fresh scent of violets, pervaded the air.

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

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

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

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

‘That’s not fair, Miss Copley,’ Dessart objected. ‘You’ve been going to functions at the Embassy, and one can absorb

politics there through one's skin. But I warn you, it isn't a safe subject to get interested in; it becomes a disease, like the opium habit.'

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

'Yes, I know him. What about him?'

'Oh—er—nothing, in that case.'

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

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

Marcia laughed with a certain sense of fellow-feeling.

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

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

'Too deep?' she queried.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘They’re practically interchangeable,’ said Dessart.

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Why Mr. Dessart’s?’ Melville inquired.

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

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

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

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

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

Laurence Sybert.’

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

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

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

‘Sybert’s all right,’ said Melville emphatically.

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

CHAPTER II

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

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

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

Laurence Sybert, as he advanced toward his hostess, threw a long thin shadow against the wall. He had a spare, dark, clean-shaven face with deep-set, sullen eyes; he was a delightfully perfected type of the cosmopolitan; it would have taken a second, or very possibly a third, glance to

determine his nationality. But if the expression of his face were Italian, Oriental, anything you please, his build was undoubtedly Anglo-Saxon. Further, a certain wiriness beneath his movements proclaimed him, to any one familiar with the loose-hung riders of the plains, unmistakably American.

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

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

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

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

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

Marcia nodded.

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

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

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

'Ah—that's true enough.'

'Do you know him?'

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

'I dare say they are pretty poor,' she conceded; 'but they are unbelievably picturesque! Every person there looks as if he had just walked out of a water-colour sketch. Even

Uncle Howard was pleased, and he has lived here so long that he is losing his enthusiasms.'

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

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

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

'The point of the pistol?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gerald abandoned his mother and entrenched himself behind Sybert. ''Cause Sybert's here, an' I like Sybert,' he

wailed desperately.

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

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

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

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

knowledge that from a humanitarian standpoint the money was not irreproachable. He had the feeling—which his brother characterized as absurd—that with his share of the fortune he would like, in a measure, to make it up to mankind.

Howard Copley's first move in the game of benefiting humanity had been, not very originally, an attempt at solving the negro problem; but the negroes were ever a leisurely race, and Copley was a man impatient for results. He finally abandoned them to the course of evolution, and engaged in a spasmodic orgy of East Side politics. Becoming disgusted, and failing of an election, he looked aimlessly about for a further object in life. It was at this point that Mrs. Copley breathlessly suggested a year in Paris for the sake of Gerald's French; the child was only four, but one could not, as she justly pointed out, begin the study of the languages too early. Her husband apathetically consenting, they embarked for Paris by the roundabout route of the Mediterranean, landed in Naples, and there they stayed. He had found a fascinating occupation ready to his hand—that of helping on the work of good government in this still turbulent portion of United Italy. After a year the family drifted to Rome, and settled themselves in the *piano nobile* of the Palazzo Rosicorelli with something of an air of permanence. Copley was at last thoroughly contented; he had no racial prejudices, and Rome was as fair a field of reform as New York—and infinitely more diverting. If the Italians did not always understand his motives, still they accepted his services with a fair show of gratitude.

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

the capital, with only an occasional plaintive reference to her friends in New York and to Gerald's French.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The guest refused the cup proffered him.

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

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

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

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

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

Both men laughed, and Marcia flushed slightly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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