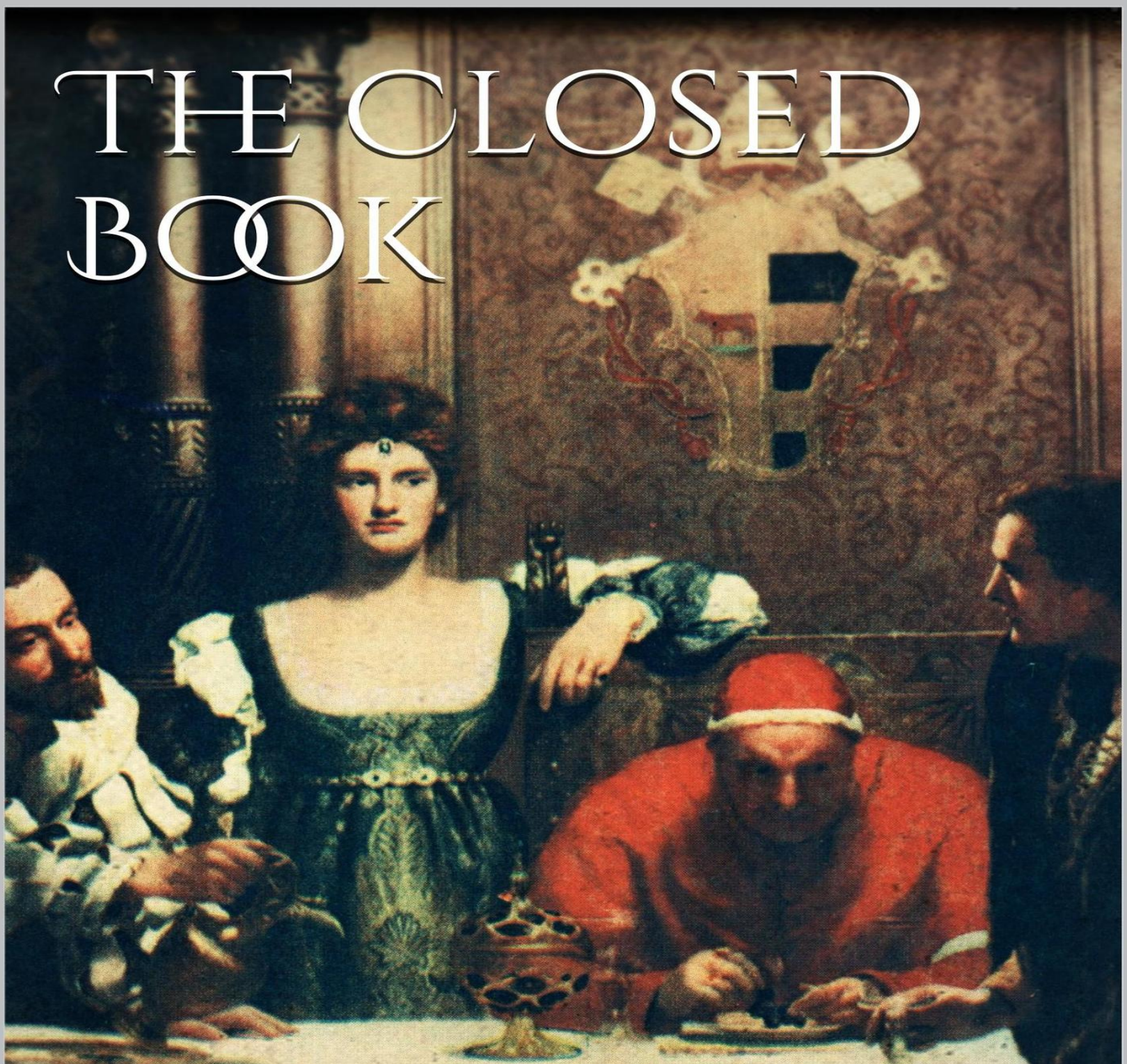
The Closed Book



Concerning the Secret of the Borgias

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Chapter One.

Which Mainly Concerns a Hunchback.

These strange facts would never have been placed on record, nor would this exciting chapter of an eventful life have been written, except for two reasons: first, because the discovery I made has been declared to be of considerable importance to scientists, bibliophiles, and the world at large; and, secondly, because it is my dear wife’s wish that in order to clear her in the eyes of both friends and foes nothing should be concealed, misrepresented, or withheld.

It was, indeed, a memorable day when I halted before the white, almost windowless house of the prior of San Sisto and knocked twice at its plain, green-painted door. The sun-blanched, time-mellowed city of Florence lay silent, glaring, and deserted in the blazing noon of a July day. The Florentines had fled to the mountains for air. The persiennes, or sun-shutters, were everywhere closed, the shops shut, the people slumbering, and the silence only broken by the heat-song of the chirping cicale in the scorched trees at the end of the Lung Arno.

Like many another Tuscan town, it stood with long rows of high, frescoed, and sculptured palaces facing the brown river, its magnificent Duomo and campanile, its quaint fourteenth-century streets, and its medieval Ponte Vecchio all forming a grim, imposing relic of long-past glory. In many places its aspect was little changed since the old

quattrocento days, when it was the centre of all the arts and the powerful rival of Venice and Genoa, although its trade has decayed and its power departed. The Lion and Lily of Florence upon a flag is no longer feared, as it once was, even by the bloodthirsty corsairs, and the rich Florentine brocades, velvets, and finely tempered arms are no longer in requisition in the markets of the world.

Save for the influx of scrambling tourists, it is one of the dead towns of Europe. Modern trade passes it by unnoticed; its very name would be forgotten were it not for those marvellous works of art in its galleries and in its very streets.

I had always loved the quaint old city, ever since a boy, when my father, a retired English naval officer, lived in that ancient house with the brown frescoes in the via di Pinti in the days before the shrieking steam trams ran to Prato or the splendid Palazzo Riccardi had been desecrated by the Government. At fourteen I left those quaint, quiet streets, with their cool loggias and silent, moss-grown courtyards, for the whirl of Paris, and subsequently lived and worked in London. Then, after an absence of nearly twenty years, I found myself living again in my beloved Tuscany by the Mediterranean, at Leghorn, forty miles distant from the medieval city of my childhood. Was it, therefore, surprising that the mood often seized me to go and revisit the old places I had known as a boy? I found them all unchanged—indeed, nothing changes in “Firenza la Bella” save the fortunes of her ruined nobility and the increase of garish hotels for the accommodation of the foreigner.

I was something of an antiquary, and through many years had been collecting medieval manuscripts on vellum, ancient chapters, diplomas, notarial deeds, and such-like documents, none being of later date than the fifteenth century. To decipher the work of the old scribes is, I admit, a dry-as-dust occupation; nevertheless, it is a work that grows on one, and the palaeographist is an enthusiast

always. In one’s hobbies one should always join advantage to amusement, and seek to gather profit with pleasure.
My collection of musty-smelling parchments and rolls of folded vellum documents, with their formidable seals of wax or lead; of heavy vellum books bound in oaken boards and brass bosses, or tiny illuminated books of hours, so minutely written that a microscope was almost necessary to read them, appeal to very few people. Most of my friends regarded them as so many old and undecipherable books and rolls, without interest and without value. They wondered that, being continually occupied at my desk writing novels, I should take up such an essentially dry study.
Yet it was this love of collecting that first brought me into contact with Francesco Graniani, a queer little old hunchback, who was a kind of itinerant dealer in antiques. Unshaven, very shabby, and not particularly clean, he dressed always in the same faded drab suit, and, summer or winter, wore the same battered, sun-browned straw hat through all the years I knew him.
Often this strange, rather tragic figure would meet me in the sun-baked streets of Leghorn, raise his battered hat respectfully, and, taking me aside, produce mysteriously from his pocket a parchment charter with its seal, some leaves from a medieval psalter, or perhaps an illuminated codex, or a book of hours with painted miniatures. Where le obtained such gems I have never to this day discovered. None knew who the old fellow was, or where he lived; he was a complete mystery.
One morning while crossing the great square I encountered him, and he informed me in his strange, mysterious manner of the existence of a very rare and interesting manuscript in the possession of the prior of the ancient church of San Sisto, at Florence.
“If the signore goes to Firenze, Father Landini will no doubt allow him to have sight of the parchment book,” he

said. “Tell him that Francesco Graniani wishes it.”
“But what is the character of the manuscript?”
I inquired.
“I know nothing of it,” he replied evasively, “except that I believe it once belonged to the Monastery of the Certosa. I heard of it only last night, and thought perhaps it might interest you.”
It certainly did. Any discovery of that kind always attracted me—ever on the lookout as I was for a single folio of the original Dante.
With the object of inspecting the palaeographic treasure I next day took train to Florence, and an hour after my arrival knocked in some trepidation at the prior’s green door.
The long grey church, one of the oldest in that ancient city, stood in its little piazza off the via San Gallao, and adjoining it the prior’s house, a long, low, fourteenth-century building, with high, cross-barred windows, and a wonderful old-world garden in the rear.
In answer to my summons there appeared a thin, yellow-faced, sharp-tongued house-woman, and on inquiry for the father I was at once invited into a big stone hall, cool and dim after the sun-glare outside.
“Body of a thousand anchovies! Teresa, who has come to worry me now?” I heard a man demand angrily from a door at the end of a darkened corridor. “Didn’t I tell you that I was not at home until after mass tomorrow? Plague you, Teresa?”
To the wizen-faced woman I stammered some apology, but at the same moment I saw a huge, almost gigantic figure in a long black cassock and biretta emerge from the room.
“Oh, signore?” he cried apologetically, the instant he caught sight of me. “Do pray excuse me. I have so many of my poor people here begging that I’m compelled to be out to them sometimes. Come in! Come in?” Then he added reproachfully, turning to his housekeeper, “Teresa, what

manners you have to leave this gentleman standing in the hall like a mendicant! I'm ashamed of you, Teresa! What must the signore think—and a foreigner, too!"

In an instant the Very Reverand Bernardo Landini and I were friends. I saw that he was thoroughly genuine, a strange admixture of good-fellowship and piety. His proportions were Gargantuan. His clean-shaven face was perfectly round, fresh, and almost boyish in complexion, his dark eyes twinkled with merriment, his stomach was huge and spoke mutely of a healthy appetite, his hand big and hearty in its shake, and in his speech he aspirated his "e's," which showed him to be a born Florentine.

After I had explained that my name was Allan Kennedy, and that I was introduced by the *gobbo* of Leghorn, he took out his great horn snuff-box, rapped it loudly, and offered me a pinch.

"Ah!" he remarked. "The signore is English, yet how well he speaks our Tuscan?"

I thanked him for his compliment, and went on to explain that I had passed the years of my youth in Florence, and was at heart almost a Florentino.

This pleased him mightily, and from the moment I hinted at my antiquarian tastes he began to chatter as an enthusiast will.

The apartment wherein I sat, darkened by its closed sun-shutters, was certainly a strange one, small, and so crammed with antiques of every kind and description that one could scarcely move in it. Upon the old Empire writing-table at which he had seated himself stood a small brass crucifix of exquisite design, while all around hung ancient pictures of a religious character—saints, pietas, pictures of the Redeemer, and several great canvases reaching from floor to ceiling, evidently from church-altars. The very chairs were of the fifteenth century, heavy, massive, and covered with stamped leather; the tables were of the Renaissance; and the perfect chaos of valuable objects of

art stored there was to me, a collector absolutely bewildering.

And amid it all, seated at his table, was the ponderous, beaming cleric, mopping his brow with his big red handkerchief from time to time, and leaning back in his chair to laugh and talk with me.

Yet when I mentioned that I had been sent by the mysterious old hunchback of Leghorn his face instantly grew serious, and with a low sigh he said: “Ah, poor Francesco! poor fellow?”

“You know him well, *signor priore* ,” I said. “Tell me about him. I’m very anxious to know who and what he really is. To me he has always been a mystery.”

But the stout prior shook his head, replying in a rather hard voice: “No, signore. I regret that my lips are closed.”

His response was a strange one, and led me at once to suspect that my new friend was a party to some grave secret. Therefore, seeing that his manner was firm, I dropped the subject, although more than ever interested in the queer, deformed old fellow who had so long mystified me.

My friend the priest took me around his wonderful collection, and showed me a veritable confusion of valuable antiques: a Madonna by Andrea del Sarto, a Holy Family by Tintoretto, a tiny but exquisite specimen of that lost art of della Robbia, and a quantity of old tapestries, medieval ironwork, and old, carved furniture.

In a room beyond was stored a splendid collection of Florentine armour: helmets, breastplates, gauntlets, and lances, with a heap of ancient swords, rapiers, and poniards. I took up several to examine them, and found that they were without exception splendid specimens of the Spanish armourer’s work, mostly bearing upon the finely tempered blades the well-known marks of Blanco, Martinez, Ruiz, Tomas, and Pedro de Lezama.

Some of the work was wonderfully inlaid with brass and

copper; and the collection appeared to be a representative one, ranging from the rusty crosshilts of the Etruscas down to the thin Spanish rapiers of the seventeenth century.
A third room, still beyond, was the priest's bedchamber, and even this was so packed with curios and bric-à-brac that there was scarcely room to enter.
Above the narrow little bed was an antique bronze crucifix, mounted upon a carved wooden background covered with old purple brocade, while the whitewashed walls were almost hidden by the profusion of religious pictures. The red-brick floor was carpetless, as were all the other apartments; but the furniture was all old, and upon the chairs were heaped quantities of silks and velvets from the Genoese looms of the seventeenth century—truly an amazing profusion of relics of Italy's past glory.
The prior smiled at my exclamations of surprise as I enthusiastically examined object after object with keen and critical eye. Then, when I remarked upon the value of the objects of art with which his unpretentious house was filled, he answered:
"I am delighted that you, signore, should feel so much interest in my few things. Like yourself, I am an enthusiast, and perhaps by my calling I am afforded unusual facilities for collecting. Here, in my poverty-stricken parish, are quantities of antiques stored in the cottages as well as in the palaces, and the *contadini* from all the countryside, even beyond Pistoja, prefer to bring me their treasures in secret rather than to offer them openly to the pawnbroker."
"But Graniani told me that you have discovered a manuscript of remarkable character. I possess a small collection; therefore may I be permitted to examine it?" I asked, carefully approaching the subject.
"Most certainly," he replied, after a moment's hesitation, it seemed. "It is in the safe in my study. Let us return there."
And I followed his ponderous form back to the small apartment wherein stood his writing-table with the crucifix

and heavily bound Bible and missal upon it.
But as I walked behind him, unable to see his face, I was surprised at the tone of the remark he made as though speaking to himself:
“So Francesco told you of the book, did he? Ah!”
He spoke as though in suppressed anger that the queer old hunchback had betrayed his confidence.

Chapter Two.

The Priest and the Book.

The prior mopped his round face again with his red handkerchief, and taking a key from his pocket fumbled at the lock of the small and old-fashioned safe, after some moments producing the precious manuscript for my inspection.

It proved to be a thick folio, bound in its original oaken boards covered with purple leather that had faded and in parts disappeared. For further protection there were added great bosses of tarnished brass, usual in fifteenth-century bindings, but the wood itself was fast decaying; the binding presented a sadly tattered and worn appearance, and the heavy volume seemed held together mainly by its great brass clasp.

He placed it before me on the table, and with eager fingers I undid the clasp and opened it. As soon as my eyes fell upon the leaves of parchment I recognised it to be a very rare and remarkable fourteenth-century manuscript, and a desire at once seized me to possess it.

Written by the monk Arnoldus of Siena, it was beautifully executed in even Gothic characters, with red and blue initials, and ornamented with a number of curious designs in gold and colours representing the seven deadly sins. Upon the first page was a long, square initial in gold; and although written with the contractions common at the time, I managed to make out the first few lines in Latin as

follows:
“Arnoldus Cenni de Senis, professus in monasterio Viridis vallis canon regul. S. Augustini in Zonie silva Camerac. dioec. Liber Gnotosolitos de septem peccatis mortalibus, de decem praeceptis, de duodecim consiliis evangelicis, de quinque sensibus, de simbolo fidei, de septem sacramentis, de octo beatitudinibus, de septem donis spiritus sancti, de quatuor peccatis ad Deum clamantibus,” etc.
Across the top of the first page, written in a cursive hand in brown ink of a somewhat later date, was the inscription: “Liber canonicor. regul. monasterii S. Maynulfi in Bodeke prope Paderborn. Qui rapit hunc librum rapiant sua viscera corvi.”
The introduction showed that the splendid manuscript had been written by the old Sienese monk himself in the Abbey of Saint Paul at Groenendale. The date was fixed by the “Explicit”: “Iste liber est mei Fris Arnoldi Cenni de Senis Frum ordis B’te Marie carmelo. Ouem ppria manu scripsi i anno dni MoCCCoXXXIX. die. XXVIII. Maij. Finito libro Reseram’ gra Xo.”
I really don’t know why I became so intensely interested in the volume, for the ornamentations were evidently by a Flemish illuminator, and I had come across many of a far more meritorious character in the work of the Norman scribes.
Perhaps it was owing to the quaintness of the design; perhaps because of the rareness of the work; but more probably because at the end of the book had been left fifty or so blank leaves, as was often the case in manuscripts of that period, and upon them, in a strange and difficult cursive hand, was inscribed a long record which aroused my curiosity.
As every collector of manuscripts knows, one sometimes finds curious entries upon the blank pages of vellum books. In the days before the art of printing was discovered, when the use of paper was not general, and when vellum and

parchment were costly, every inch of the latter was utilise and a record meant to be permanent was usually written in the front or back of some precious volume. Therefore, the sight of this hundred pages or so of strange-looking writing in faded brown ink, penned with its many downward flourishes, uneven and difficult as compared with the remarkable regularity of the old monk's treatise upon the Seven Sins, awakened within me an eagerness to decipher it.

Horaes, psalters, offices of the Virgin, and codexes of Saints Augustine, Bernard, Ambrose, and the others are to be found in every private collection; therefore it was always my object to acquire manuscript works that were original. The volume itself was certainly a treasure, and its interest was increased tenfold by those pages of close, half-faded handwriting, written probably a century later, and evidently in indifferent ink to that used by the old monk.

"Well, signore," inquired the prior after I had been bending over the ancient volume for some minutes in silence, "what is your opinion? You are of course an expert. I am not. I know nothing about manuscripts."

His frankness was pleasing. He did not seek to expound its merits or to criticise without being able to substantiate his statements.

"A most interesting codex," I declared, just as openly. "I don't remember ever having met with Arnoldus before; and, as far as I can recollect, Quain does not mention him. How did it come into your possession?"

Landini was silent. His huge, round face, so different from the pinched, grey countenances of most priests, assumed a mysterious look, and his lips pursed themselves up in an instant. I noticed his hesitation, and, recollecting that he had told me how many people in the neighbourhood came to him in secret and sold him their most treasured possessions, saw that my question was not an exactly fair one. Instead of replying, he merely remarked that if I

desired to acquire the volume he was open to an offer. Then he added:

“I think, my dear signore, that when we become better acquainted we shall like each other. Therefore I may as well tell you at once that, in addition to the holy office which I hold, I deal in antiques. Probably you will condemn me, just as half Florence has already done. But surely it is no disgrace to the habit I wear? From the sacriligious Government I receive the magnificent stipend of one thousand lire (forty pounds) annually;” and he laughed a trifle bitterly. “Can a man live on that? I have both father and mother still living, dear old souls! Babbo is eighty-one, and my mother seventy-eight; they live out at the five ways in the Val d’Ema, in the old farmhouse where I was born. With the profits I make on dealing in antiques I manage by great economy to keep them and myself, and have just a trifle to give to the deserving poor in my parish. Do *you* blame me, signore?”

How could I? His charming openness, so like the Tuscan priest, and yet so unlike the Tuscan tradesman, gave me an insight into his true character. The extreme simplicity of his carpetless, comfortless house, the frayed shabbiness of his cassock, and the cracked condition of his huge buckled shoes all spoke mutely for a struggle for life. Yet, on the other hand, his face was that of a supremely contented man. His collection was such that if sold at Christie’s it would fetch many thousands of pounds; yet, an antiquary himself, he clung, it seemed, to a greater portion of it, and would not part with many of his treasures.

I told him that I had admiration rather than reproach at his turning dealer, when he frankly explained that his method of selling was not to regard the marketable value of an object, but to obtain a small profit upon the sum he gave for it.

“I find that this method works best,” he said, “for by it I am able to render a service to those in straitened

circumstances, and at the same time gain sufficient for the wants of my family. Of the real value of many things I am utterly ignorant. This manuscript, for instance, I purchased for a hundred francs. If you give me a hundred and twenty-five, and you think it is worth it, I shall be quite contented. Does the price suit you?"

Suit me! My heart leaped to my mouth. If he had suggested fifty pounds instead of five I should have been prepared to consider it. Either Quaritch in London, Rosenthal in Munich, or Olschki in Florence would, I felt certain, be eager to give at the least a hundred pounds for it. Such manuscripts were not offered for sale every day.

"The price is not at all high," I answered. "Indeed, it is lower than I expected you would ask; therefore the book is mine." And taking my wallet from my pocket, I counted out and handed to him a dozen or so of those small, well-thumbed notes that constitute the paper currency of Italy, for which he scribbled a receipt upon a scrap of waste-paper which he picked up from the floor—a fact which showed him to be as unconventional as he was frank and honest in his dealing.

Dealers in any branch of antiques, whether in pictures, china, furniture, or manuscripts, are—except well-known firms—for the most part sharks of the worst *genus* ; hence it was pleasant to make a purchase with such charming openness of purpose.

When he handed me the receipt, however, I thought I detected a strange, mysterious look upon his big, beaming countenance as he said, "I thank you, my dear Signor Kennedy, for your patronage, and I hope that you will never regret your purchase—never."

He seemed to emphasise the words in a tone unusual to him. It flashed across my mind that the manuscript might, after all, be a clever German forgery, as a good many are, and that its genuineness had already been doubted. Yet if it were, I felt certain that such a man would never disgrace

his office by knowingly deceiving me.
Still, the mystery of his manner puzzled me, and I am fain to confess that my confidence in him became somewhat shaken.
His refusal to tell me anything of the ugly old hunchback whose orders he had obeyed in showing me the book, and his disinclination to tell me whence he had procured it, were both curious circumstances which occupied my mind. It also occurred to me as most probable that Graniani was merely an agent of the clerical antique-dealer, which accounted for his pockets being ever filled with precious manuscripts, bits of valuable china, miniatures, an such-like odds and ends.
Nevertheless, if the “Book of Arnoldus” were actually genuine I had secured a gem at a ridiculously low price. I did not for one moment doubt its authenticity; hence a feeling of intense satisfaction overcame everything.
He showed me several other manuscripts, including a fifteenth-century Petrarca *De Vita Solitaria* , an illuminated Horae of about the same date, and an *Evangelia quatuor* of a century earlier; but none of them attracted me so much as the heavy volume I had purchased.
Then, at my request, he took me along the dark corridor and through a side-door into the fine old church, where the light was dim and in keeping with the ancient, time-mellowed Raphaels and the dull gilding of ceiling and altar. The air was heavy with incense, and the only sound beyond the echo of our footsteps was the impudent chirp of a stray bird which had come in for shelter from the scorching sun. It was an ancient place, erected in 1089 by the Florentines to commemorate their victories on August sixth, the day of San Sisto.
For more than twenty years I had not entered there. I recollect going there in my youth, because I was enamoured of a dark-eyed little milliner from the via Dante who attended mass regularly. The past arose before me,

and I smiled at that forgotten love of my ardent youth. The prior pointed out to me objects of interest not mentioned in the red guide-books, they being known to him alone. He showed me the splendid sculptured tombs of the noble houses of Cioni and of Gherardesca, whereon lay the armoured knights in stone; the Madonna of Fra Bartolommeo; the curious frescoes in the sacristy, and other objects which to both of us were interesting; then, taking me back through his house, we passed out into the tangled, old-world garden—a weedy, neglected place, with orange and fig trees, broken moss-grown statuary, and a long, cool loggia covered with laden vines.

Together we sat upon a bench in the welcome shadow, and at our feet the lizards darted across those white flagstones hollowed by the tread of generations. Father Bernardo took the long Tuscan cigar which I offered him; and, on his calling old Teresa to bring a candle, we both lit up, for the ignition of a “Virginia” in Italy is, as you know, an art in itself. He confided to me that he loved to smoke—the only indulgence he allowed himself—and then, as we lolled back, overcome by the heat and burden of the day, we discussed antiques, and he told me some strange stories of the treasures that had on various occasions passed through his hands to the national galleries or the wealthy American visitors.

A dozen times I tried to obtain from him the history of the fine old parchment codex I had just bought, but without avail. He made it a rule, he told me frankly, never to divulge from whom he obtained the objects he had to sell, and had he *not* been a cleric I should really have suspected him of being a receiver of stolen property.

Old Teresa, in blue apron and shuffling over the stones, returned to her master presently, informing him that someone was waiting for confession; therefore my friend, excusing himself, flung away his cigar, crossed himself, and hurried back to his sacred duty. He was a strange man, it

was true; charming, yet at moments austere, reserved, and mysterious.

Alone, still smoking, I sat where he had left me. Opposite, the overgrown garden with its wealth of fruit and flowers was bounded by the ancient stucco wall of the church, around which, in a line above the windows, ran a row of beautiful della Robbia medallions hidden from the world. When I had remarked upon their beauty to Landini he had sighed, saying:

“Ah, signore, if I only might sell them and pay for the restoration of my church! Each one is worth at least a thousand pounds sterling, for they are even finer specimens than those upon the Foundling Hospital. The Louvre Museum in Paris offered me a year ago twenty thousand francs for the one to the right over there in the corner.” Yes; the old place breathed an air of a bygone age —the age of the Renaissance in Italy—and I sat there musing as I smoked, trying to fathom the character of the ponderous, heavy-breathing man who had that moment entered the confessional, and wondering what could be his connection with Francesco Graniani.

Across, straight before me, was a small, square, latticed window of old green glass, near which, I knew, stood the confessional-box; and suddenly—I know not why—my eye caught it, and what I noticed there riveted my attention. Something showed white for a single instant behind the glass, then disappeared. But not, however, before I recognised that some person was keeping secret watch upon my movements, and, further, that it was none other than the forbidding-looking little hunchback of Leghorn. In Italy one’s suspicion is easily aroused, and certainly mine was by that inexplicable incident. I determined then and there to trust neither Graniani nor his clerical friend. Therefore, with a feeling of anger at such impudent espionage, I rose, re-entered the prior’s house, and walked up the dark passage to the study, intending to obtain the

precious volume for which I had paid, and to wish my host a hurried adieu.

On entering the darkened study, however, I discovered, somewhat to my surprise, a neat-waisted, well-dressed lady in black standing there, evidently waiting, and idling the time by glancing over the vellum pages of my newly acquired treasure.

I drew back, begging her pardon for unceremonious intrusion, but she merely bowed in acknowledgment. Her manner seemed agitated and nervous, and she wore a veil, so that in the half-light I could not well distinguish her features.

She was entirely in black, even to her gloves, and was evidently the person to whom Father Bernardo had been called, and after confession had passed through the little side-door of the church in order to consult him upon some matter of extreme importance, the nature of which I could not possibly divine. In all this I scented mystery.

Chapter Three.

In which the Prior is Mysterious.

The prior entered his study behind me with a hurried word of excuse, expressing regret that he had been compelled to leave me alone, and promising to join me in a few moments. Therefore I turned, and, retracing my steps along the stone corridor wherein antique carved furniture was piled, went back again into the garden, glancing up at the window whereat I had detected the hunchback's face.

Landini had closed his study door after I had gone, thus showing that his consultation with his visitor was of a confidential nature. I regretted that I had not passed through into the church and faced Graniani, for I could not now go back and pass the closed door, especially as the keen eyes of the reverend's house-woman were upon me. So, impatiently I waited for the stout priest to rejoin me, which he did a few moments later, carrying my precious acquisition in his hand.

Perhaps you are a collector of coins or curios, monastic seals or manuscripts, birds' eggs, or butterflies? If you are, you know quite well the supreme satisfaction it gives you to secure a unique specimen at a moderate and advantageous price. Therefore, you may well understand the tenderness with which I took my treasured Arnoldus from him, and how carefully I wrapped it in a piece of brown paper which Teresa brought to her master. The priest's house-woman, shrewd, inquisitive, and a gossip, is an interesting

character the world over; and old Teresa, with the wizened face and brown, wrinkled neck, was no exception. She possessed a wonderful genius for making a *minestra* , or vegetable soup, Father Bernardo had already told me, and he had promised that I should taste her culinary triumph some day.

Nevertheless, although the prior was politeness itself, pleasant yet pious, laconic yet light-hearted, I entertained a distrust of him.

I referred to my intrusion in his study while he had a visitor, but he only laughed, saying:

“It was nothing, my dear signore—nothing, I assure you. Pray don’t apologise. My business with the lady, although serious, was brief. It is I who should apologise.”

“No,” I said; “I’ve been enjoying your garden. Enclosed here by the church and by your house, right in the very centre of Florence, it is so quiet and old-world, so full of antiquity, that I have much enjoyed lingering here.”

“Yes,” he answered reflectively; “back in the turbulent days of the Medici that remarkable figure in Italian history, Fra Savonarola, owned this garden and sat beneath this very loggia, on this very bench, thinking out those wonderful discourses and prophecies which electrified all Florence. Nothing changes here. The place is just the same today, those white walls on the four sides, only the statuary perhaps is in worse condition than it was in 1498 when he concluded his remarkable career by defying the commands of the Pope as well as the injunctions of the signoria, and was hanged and burned amid riot and bloodshed. Ah, this garden of mine has seen many vicissitudes, signore, and yonder in my church the divine Dante himself invoked the blessing of the Almighty upon his efforts to effect peace with the Pisans.”

“Your house is a truly fitting receptacle for your splendid collection,” I said, impressed by his words and yet wondering at his manner.

“Do you know,” he exclaimed a moment later, as though a thought had suddenly occurred to him, “I cannot help fearing that you may have acted imprudently in purchasing this manuscript. If you wish, I am quite ready to return you your money. Really, I think it would be better if you did so, signore.”
“But I assure you I have no wish to return it to you,” I declared, astonished at his words. If he believed he had made a bad bargain, I at least had his receipt for the amount and the book in my hand.
“But it would be better,” he urged. “Better for you—and for me, for the matter of that. Here are the notes you gave me;” and taking them from his pocket he held them towards me.
I failed utterly to comprehend his intention or his motive. I had made a good bargain, and why should I relinquish it? Place yourself in my position for a moment, and think what you would have done.
“Well, *signor reverendo* ,” I exclaimed, “I paid the price you asked, and I really cannot see why you should attempt to cry off the deal.” Truth to tell, I was a trifle annoyed.
“You have paid the price,” he repeated in a strange voice, looking at me seriously. “Yes; that is true. You have paid the price in the currency of my country; but there is yet a price to pay.”
“What do you mean?” I asked quickly, looking him squarely in the face.
“I mean that it would be best for us both if you gave me back my receipt and took back your money.”
“Why?”
“I cannot be more explicit,” he replied. “I am a man of honour,” he added, “and you may trust me.”
“But I am desirous of adding the codex to my collection,” I argued, mystified by his sudden desire to withdraw from his word. “I asked you your price, and have paid it.”
“I admit that. The affair has been but a matter of business

between two gentlemen," he replied, with just a touch of hauteur. "Nevertheless, I am anxious that you should not be possessor of that manuscript."
"But why? I am a collector. When you come to Leghorn I hope you will call and look through my treasures."
"Treasures?" he echoed. "That is no treasure—it is a curse, rather."
"A curse! How can a splendid old book be a curse in the hands of a palaeographical enthusiast like myself?"
"I am a man of my word," he said in a low, distinct tone. "I tell you, my dear signore, that your enthusiasm has led you away. You should not have purchased your so-called treasure. It was ill-advised; therefore I urge you to take back the sum you have paid."
"And on my part I object to do so," I said a little warmly.
He shrugged his broad shoulders, and a pained look crossed his big features.
"Will you not listen to me—for your own good?" he urged earnestly.
"I do not think that sentiment need enter into it," I replied. "I have purchased the book, and intend to retain it in my possession."
"Very well," he sighed. "I have warned you. One day, perhaps, you will know that at least Bernardo Landini acted as your friend."
"But I cannot understand why you wish me to give you back the book," I argued. "You must have some motive?"
"Certainly I have," was his frank response. "I do not wish you to be its possessor."
"You admit that the volume is precious, therefore of value. Yet you wish to withdraw from a bad bargain!"
His lips pursed themselves for a moment, and a look of mingled regret and annoyance crossed his huge face.
"I admit the first, but deny the second. The bargain is a good one for me, but a bad one for you."
"Very well," I replied with self-satisfaction. "I will abide by

it.”
“You refuse to hear reason?”
“I refuse, with all due deference to you, *signor reverendo* , to return you the book I have bought.”
“Then I can only regret,” he said in a voice of profound commiseration. “You misconstrue my motive, but how can I blame you? I probably should, if I were in ignorance, as you are.”
“Then you should enlighten me.”
“Ah?” he sighed again. “I only wish it were admissible. But I cannot. If you refuse to forego your bargain, I can do nothing. When you entered here I treated you as a stranger; and now, although you do not see it, I am treating you as a friend.”
I smiled. Used as I was to the subtleness of the trading Tuscan, I was suspicious that he regretted having sold the book to me at such a low price, and was trying to obtain more without asking for it point-blank.
“Well, *signor priore* ,” I said bluntly a moment later, “suppose I gave you an extra hundred francs for it, would that make any difference to your desire to retain possession of it?”
“None whatever,” he responded. “If you gave me ten thousand more I would not willingly allow you to have it in your possession.”
His reply was certainly a strange one, and caused me a few moments’ reflection.
“But why did you sell it if you wish to retain it?” I asked.
“Because at the time you were not my friend,” he replied evasively. “You are now—I know you, and for that reason I give you warning. If you take the book from this house, recollect it is at your risk, and you will assuredly regret having done so.”
I shook my head, smiling, unconvinced by his argument and suspicious of his manner. Somehow I had grown to dislike the man. If he were actually my friend, as he assured me,

he would certainly not seek to do me out of a bargain. So I laughed at his misgivings, saying:

“Have no fear, *signor reverendo* . I shall treasure the old codex in a glass case, as I do the other rare manuscripts in my collection. I have a number of biblical manuscripts quite as valuable, and I take care of them, I assure you.”

My eye caught the ancient window where I had seen the white, unshaven face of the old hunchback, and recollecting that there must be some mysterious connection between the two men, I tucked my precious parcel under my arm and rose to depart.

The prior knit his dark brows and crossed himself in silence.

“Then the signore refuses to heed me?” he asked in a tone of deep disappointment.

“I do,” I answered quite decisively. “I have to catch my train back to Leghorn; therefore I will wish you *addio* .”

“As you wish, as you wish,” sighed the ponderous priest. Then placing his big hand upon my shoulder in a paternal manner, he added, “I know full well how strange my request must appear to you, my dear signore, but some day perhaps you will learn the reason. Recollect, however, that, whatever may occur, Bernardo Landini is a friend to whom you may come for counsel and advice. *Addio* , and may He protect you, guard you from misfortune, and prosper you. *Addio* .”

I thanked him, and took the big, fat hand he offered. Then, in silence, I looked into his good-humoured face and saw there a strange, indescribable expression of mingled dread and sympathy. But we parted; and, with old Teresa shuffling before me, I passed through the house and out into the white sun glare of the open piazza, bearing with me the precious burden that was destined to have such a curious and remarkable influence upon my being and my life.

Chapter Four.

By the Tideless Sea.

When a man secures a bargain, be it in his commerce or in his hobbies, he always endeavours to secure a second opinion. As I hurried across to hug the shadow of the Palazzo Pandolfini I glanced at my watch, and found that I had still an hour and a half before the *treno lumaca* , or snail-train, as the Florentines, with sarcastic humour, term it, would start down the Arno valley for Leghorn. Therefore I decided to carry my prize to Signor Leo Olschki, who, as you know, is one of the most renowned dealers in ancient manuscripts in the world, and whose shop is situated on the Lung Amo Acciajoli, close to the Ponte Vecchio. Many treasures of our British Museum have passed through his hands, and among bibliophiles his name is a household word.

Fortunately I found him in: a short, fair-bearded, and exceedingly courteous man, who himself is a lover of books although a dealer in them. Behind those glass cases in his shop were some magnificent illuminated manuscripts waiting to be bought by some millionaire collector or national museum, and all around from floor to ceiling were shelves full of the rarest books extant, some of the *incunabula* being the only known copies existing.

I had made many purchases of him; therefore he took me into the room at the rear of the shop, and I displayed my bargain before his expert eyes.

In a moment he pronounced it a genuine Arnoldus, a manuscript of exceeding rarity, and unique on account of several technical reasons with which it is useless to trouble those who read this curious record.

“Well, now, Signor Olschki, what would you consider approximately its worth?”

The great bibliophile stroked his beard slowly, at the same time turning over the evenly-written parchment folios.

“I suppose,” he answered, after a little hesitation, “that you don’t wish to sell it?”

“No. I tell you frankly that I’ve brought it here to show you and ask your opinion as to its genuineness.”

“Genuine it is no doubt—a magnificent codex. If I had it here to sell I would not part with it under twenty-five thousand francs—a thousand pounds.”

“A thousand pounds?” I echoed, for the price was far above what I had believed the manuscript to be worth.

“Rosenthal had one in his catalogue two years ago priced at sixteen thousand francs. I saw it when I was in Munich, and it was not nearly so good or well preserved as yours. Besides—this writing at the end: have you any idea what it is about?”

“Some family record,” I answered. “The usual rambling statements regarding personal possessions, I expect.”

“Of course,” he answered. “In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries they habitually disfigured their books in this way, as you know. It was a great pity.”

Having obtained the information I desired, I repacked my treasured tome while he brought out several precious volumes for my inspection, including a magnificent French *Psalteriolum seu preces pia cum calendario* , with miniatures of the thirteenth century, which he had catalogued at four hundred and fifty pounds; and an Italian *Psalterium ad usum ord. S. Benedicti* , of two hundred leaves, written at Padua in 1428, that he had just sold to the National Museum at Berlin for fifteen thousand marks.