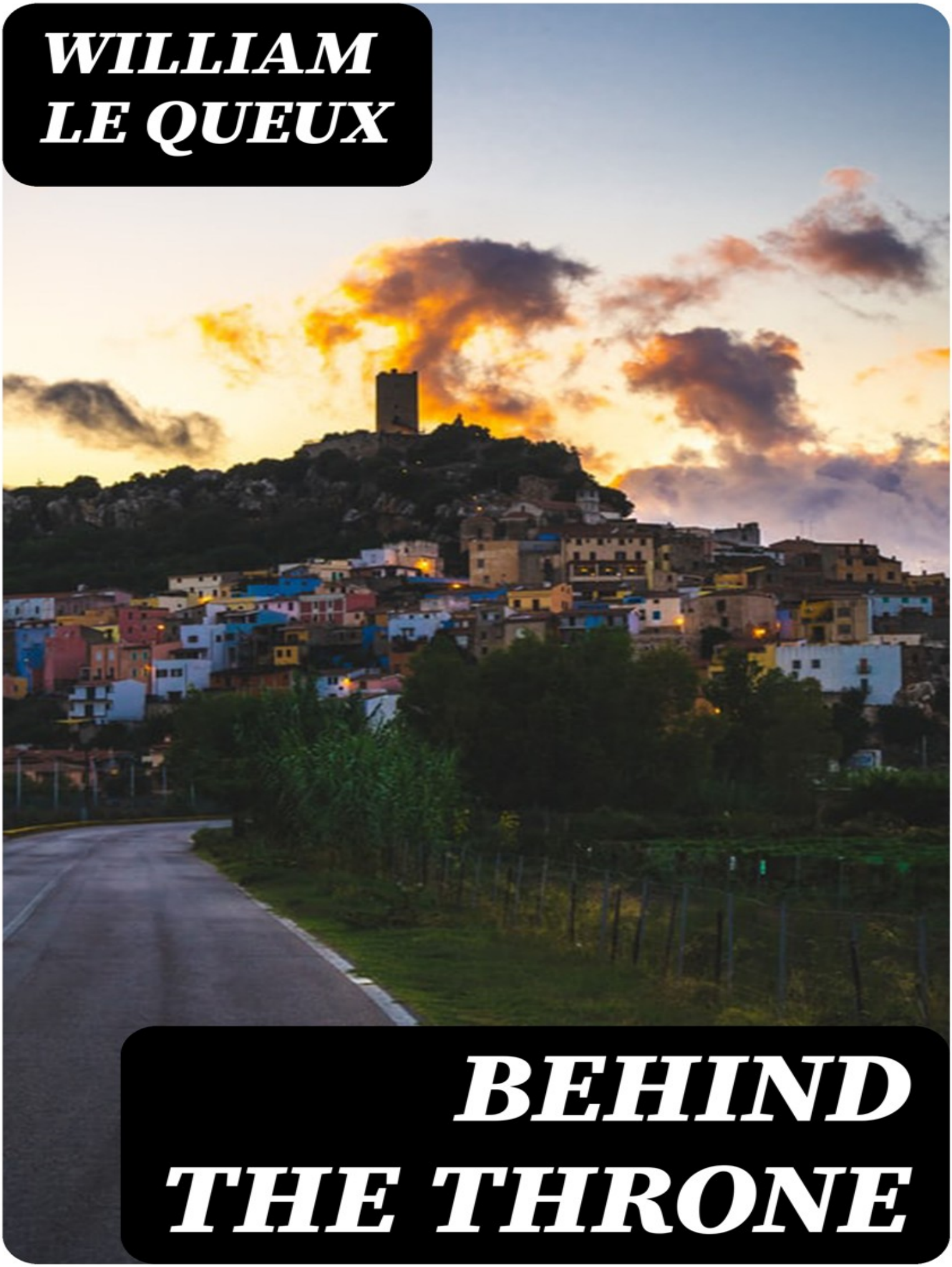
WILLIAM LE QUEUX



BEHIND THE THRONE

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"Behind the Throne"

Chapter One.

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The Cat’s-Paw.

“Of course the transaction is a purely private one. There is, I suppose, no chance of the truth leaking out? If so, it might be very awkward, you know.”

“None whatever. Your Excellency may rely upon me to deal with these people cautiously. Besides, they have their own reputation to consider—as well as ours.”

“And how much do you say they offer?” asked His Excellency in Italian, so that the English servants, if they were listening, should not understand.

“If you accept their conditions as they stand, they pay one hundred thousand francs—four thousand pounds sterling—into your account at the Pall Mall branch of the Credit Lyonnais on Monday next,” replied the other in the same language.

“And your share, my dear Angelo?”

“That is apart. I have arranged it.”

“And they’ll profit a million, and dress our unfortunate infantry in shoddy?”

“Possibly, but what does it really matter? A soldier’s clothes are of little concern, as long as he is well armed.”

“But the boots?—the contract is for boots as well.”

“Your Excellency forgets that the English soldiers have more than once been sent into the field in boots made of brown paper. And they were of English make! Ours are German—and we must expect the foreigner to take advantage of us.”

“Yes, but we know well the reputation of these people.”

“Of course. But from the English firm we get nothing—the English are too honest;” and the thin, sallow-faced Sicilian laughed scornfully towards his superior, Signor Camillo Morini, senator of the kingdom of Italy and Minister of War.

His Excellency, a tall, well-built, well-dressed man of sixty or so, in a suit of light grey tweed, whose hair was only just turning white, whose carefully trained moustache showed but few silver threads, and whose dark, deep-set eyes were sharp and observant, stood at the window gazing thoughtfully out upon the green level English lawn where his daughter Mary and some visitors were playing tennis.

He remained silent, his back to Angelo Borselli, the man in black who had travelled from Rome to Leicestershire to urge him to accept the bribe of four thousand pounds from the German firm of army contractors. Camillo Morini was a man with a strange, adventurous history—a man who, had he not lived entirely in the political world, would have been termed a knight of industry, a self-made man who, by his own ingenious craft and cunning, had risen to become one of Italy’s chief Ministers, and a senator of the kingdom. He entertained some scruples as regards honesty, both political and financial, yet General Angelo Borselli, the bureaucrat, who was Under-Secretary, for the past ten years had been busily engaged in squeezing all the profit possible out of the office he held.

Morini and Borselli had for years assisted each other, or, to be more truthful, Morini, who seemed to exercise a kind of animal magnetism over men, had used Borselli for his own ends, and the Under-Secretary had been the Minister’s

cat's-paw ever since the days of Victor Emmanuel when they were deputies together at Montecitorio. Upon the stormy sea of Italian politics they had sailed together, and although many times they had run before the wind towards the shoals of exposure, they had somehow always managed to escape disaster.

Borselli had, by His Excellency's clever manoeuvring, been given the rank of general although a comparatively young man, and had been appointed Under-Secretary of War, while the pair had, in secret, reaped a golden harvest, even against Morini's will. When deputy, and little better than a political adventurer, he had been compelled to make his politics pay; but as Minister, with the responsibility of office upon him, he had at first worked for the benefit of Italy. Yet, alas! so contaminating had been the corruption about him that he found it well-nigh impossible to act disinterestedly, and very soon all his highest resolves had been cast aside, and with Borselli ever scheming and ever prompting at his elbow, he was constrained, like his fellow-members of the Cabinet, to seek profit where he could.

In Italy, under the régime of the late King Humbert, Ministers soon became millionaires—in francs—and Camillo Morini was no exception.

A born leader of men, gifted with a marvellous tact, a keen, clear foresight, a wide knowledge of men, and a deep, wily cunning, he held the confidence of his sovereign, the late lamented king, and took care that nothing occurred to shake or to imperil it. He was a *poseur*, and owed his position to his ingenious methods and his plausible tongue. His highly respectable exterior was inspiring, and the veneer

of elegant refinement of manner had opened to him the best social circles in Rome and Paris. He was a good linguist, and had been an advocate in Florence in the days when he made the law a stepping-stone into politics and fat emoluments.

General Angelo Borselli, the soldierly, middle-aged man of the sallow face in funereal black, always acted the part of the cringing underling, yet at heart he really hated and despised the man whom he was bound to call “His Excellency.” It was, however, Borselli’s active brain which evolved those neat schemes by which a portion of the public funds of poor strangled Italy went into their joint pockets, he who inspired the Press and kept at bay the horde of political opponents. It was General Borselli who made suggestions, who juggled so cleverly with figures, and who ruled the Ministry of War with a rod of iron.

The two men detested each other, yet, held together by the bond of mutual peculation, they played constantly into each other’s hands, and both had become wealthy in consequence.

Noticing that the Minister remained silent, still looking forth upon the lawn, the other, with a strange glance of evil envy, remarked—

“You are surely not becoming scrupulous! The commission is only a fair one. If those pigs of Germans want the contract they must pay for it.”

Camillo Morini snapped his bony fingers, but still remained silent. At heart he longed to free himself of all this dishonesty at the expense of the comfort and safety of the army. Indeed he knew that by such transactions his country

was being imperilled. Recent disasters in Abyssinia had been due directly to the defective arms and ammunition supplied to the troops. The contractors had all paid him heavy bribes, and the brave sons of Italy had gone forth armed with rubbish, and were defeated in consequence.

Yes. He longed to become honest, and yet with all his heavy expenses, his splendid palace in Rome, his magnificent old villa on the hillside outside Florence, his great tracts of wine-lands and olive-gardens in the Apennines, and that house he rented as a summer residence in England, how could he refuse these alluring presents? They were necessary for his position—for his existence. His eyes were fixed upon his daughter Mary, a neat, trim figure in a cream flannel dress; his daughter who believed so implicitly in him, and who regarded him as her ideal of probity and uprightness. He sighed.

“Perhaps you consider a hundred thousand francs not quite enough?” remarked the man behind him. “I told the agent in London yesterday, when he came to Claridge’s, that I expected you would want another twenty thousand, but he said his firm could not possibly afford it. He is remaining in London until to-morrow for your decision. He intended to come down here and see you, but I forbade it.”

“Quite right! Quite right! Keep all such persons as far from me as possible, Angelo,” was the Minister’s quick reply. “I’ve had more than enough of them.”

The other smiled, still standing erect on the hearthrug, his back to the fireplace, his hands in his trousers pockets, smoking a cigarette.

“Of course,” he said, “I tried to get all I could out of him, but a hundred thousand was his absolute limit. Indeed I wanted to make it German marks, not francs, but it was useless. I have brought with me the acceptance of the contract,” he added. “The decree only requires your endorsement,” and he drew from his pocket a paper which he opened and spread upon the big old-fashioned writing-table of the library.

The Minister, however, still hesitated, while his companion smiled within himself at what he regarded as a sudden and utterly unnecessary pang of conscience.

“This cheap contracting is simply sacrificing the lives of our poor men,” declared Morini suddenly, turning at last from the window and facing the man who was so constantly his tempter.

“Bah! There are cheap contracts and secret commissions in all the departments—marine, public-works—even at the Ministry of Justice.”

“I know, I know,” groaned the Minister. “The whole system is rotten at the core. I’ve tried to be honest, and have failed.”

“Your Excellency must admit that our department does not stand alone. It is to be regretted that our poor conscripts are half starved, and our soldiers armed with faulty ammunition, but surely we must live as well as those in the other ministries!”

“At the sacrifice of Italy?” remarked the Minister in a hard tone. “I really do not believe, Angelo, that you possess any conscience,” he added bitterly.

“I possess, I think, about the same quantity as your Excellency,” was the other’s satirical reply, as he twisted his dark moustache. “Conscience and memory are the two most dangerous operations of the politician’s intellect. Happy the man who indulges in neither.”

“Then you must be very happy indeed,” remarked His Excellency, with a dry laugh. “But,” he added, sighing, “I suppose I must fall in with your suggestion for this, the very last time. You say that the money will be placed to my account at the Credit Lyonnais next Monday—eh?”

The Under-Secretary nodded in the affirmative, and then the Minister took up a pen and with a quick flourish scribbled his signature at the head of the document which gave slop-made uniforms and brown-paper boots to fifteen regiments of Italian infantry.

Chapter Two.

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Friends of her Excellency.

Her Excellency Signora Morini was an Englishwoman, and for that reason the Minister rented Orton Court, that picturesque old Queen Anne house in Leicestershire, where, with their daughter Mary, they each year spent August and September, the two blazing months of the Italian summer.

Standing back amid wide level lawns, high box-hedges, quaint old flower-gardens, and spreading cedars, about four miles out of Rugby on the Leicester road, it dominated a wide stretch of rich, undulating pastures of bright fresh green, so pleasing to the eye after the sun-baked, thirsty land of Italy. The house, a quaint, rambling old place full of odd nooks and corners, was of time-mellowed red brick, partly ivy-covered, with a wide stone portico, spacious hall, and fine oak staircase. One wing, that which faced the tennis-lawn, was covered with roses, while around the lawn itself were iron arches over which trailing roses also grew in abundant profusion.

The Morinis kept but little company when in England. They came there for rest after the mad whirl of the Roman season, and so careful was His Excellency to keep his true position a secret, and thus avoid being compelled to make complimentary calls upon the English Ministers and officials in London, that very few persons, if indeed anyone in the neighbourhood, were really aware that the tall, courteous foreigner who came there for a few weeks each year—Mr

Morini, as they called him—was actually one of the most powerful Ministers in Europe.

They were civil to their neighbours in a mild, informal way, of course. Foreigners are always regarded with suspicion in England. Madame Morini made calls which were returned, and they usually played tennis and croquet in the afternoon; for Mary, on account of her bright, cosmopolitan vivacity, was a particular favourite with everyone.

The local clergy, headed by the rural dean and his wife, were fond of drinking tea on the pretty lawn of Orton Court, and on this afternoon among the guests were several rectors and their curates, together with their women-folk. The wife of the Minister of War had been the daughter of a poor Yorkshire clergyman. She had, while acting as English governess in the family of a Roman prince, met her husband, then only a struggling advocate in the Florence courts, and, notwithstanding that she was a Protestant, they had married, and she had never for one moment repented her choice. Husband and wife, after those years of strange ups and downs, were still entirely devoted to each other; while Mary, their only child, they mutually idolised.

The scene upon that sunny lawn was picturesque and purely English.

Madame Morini, a dark-haired, well-preserved woman in pale mauve, was seated at a bamboo table in the shade serving tea and gossiping with her friends—for the game had been suspended, and cake and biscuits were being handed round by the men in flannels.

An elderly woman, wife of a retired colonel, inquired for “Mr Morini,” whereupon madame answered—

“He is in the house, detained on business, I think. A gentleman has come down from London to see him.” And thus was her husband’s presence excused.

Ten minutes later, however, when Mary, watching her opportunity, saw her mother alone, she ran up to her, whispering in her ear—

“That man Borselli has come from Rome, mother! I saw his face at the study window. Why can’t he leave father alone when we are here on holiday?”

“I suppose it is some affair of state, my dear,” was her mother’s calm reply. “Your father told me he was to arrive this afternoon. He is to remain the night.”

“I hate the man!” declared the pretty, dark-haired girl with emphasis. “I watched him through the window just now, and saw him look so black at father behind his back. I believe they have quarrelled.”

“I think not, my dear. Your father and General Borselli are very old friends, remember.”

“Of course. But he’s a Sicilian, and you know what you’ve always told me about the Livornese and the Sicilians.”

“Don’t be silly, Mary,” exclaimed the Minister’s wife, laughing. “Matters of state do not concern us women. Go and continue your game.”

The girl shrugged her shoulders with the queer little foreign gesture due to her cosmopolitan upbringing, and turned away to rejoin the young man in grey flannels who stood awaiting her on the other side of the court.

She was twenty-one, with perfect, regular features, a pointed chin, dark chestnut hair, and a pair of large, lustrous eyes in which gleamed all the fire and passion of the sunny

South. Her figure, neat-waisted and well-proportioned, was always admired in the salons of Rome and Florence, and she had for the past couple of years been the reigning beauty in the official and diplomatic world of the Eternal City.

Possessed of an easy grace, a natural modesty, with a sweet, pleasant expression, she had, soon after returning from school at Broadstairs, been chaperoned into Roman society by her mother, and had now, at twenty-one, become essentially a woman of the world, well-dressed, *chic*, and full of vivacity. A remarkable linguist—for she spoke English, Italian, French, and Spanish with equal fluency—she had quickly made her mark in that very difficult circle, Italian society, a fact which pleased her parents, and induced her father to increase her allowance until she was enabled to have her ball dresses from Paris and her tailor-made gowns from London.

Morini, compelled, for the sake of his prominent position, to make a show of affluence, saw that by dressing his daughter better than other girls he was exhibiting a prosperity that would be noticed and talked about.

As she crossed the lawn that warm August afternoon, plainly attired in her cream flannel skirt and pale blue blouse, there could be no two opinions regarding her marvellous beauty. It was of an unusual kind, a combination of the handsome classic model of the ancients with the sweet womanliness of modern life. Her carriage, too, was superb. The casual observer, watching her retreating form, would not require to look twice to recognise that she was of foreign birth; for no Englishwoman carries herself with that easy, elastic swing which is inherent in the Italian girl of the

upper class. Yet, perhaps owing to her mother's English birth and teaching, she admired to the full everything that was British. She was a keen, outspoken critic of all things Italian, and was never so happy as when they were living unostentatiously in semi-privacy for those two welcome months each year in rural Leicestershire.

At heart, she hated that brilliant circle in which they were compelled to move when at home—the continual functions, the official balls, the court receptions, the gay, irresponsible world of intrigue and scandal, of dazzling uniforms and glittering decorations, in which she was so continually courted and flattered. Already she had become nauseated by its vices and its shams, and longed always for the rural peace of the country, early hours, and the ease of old frocks. Yet it was impossible, she knew. She was compelled to live in that fevered atmosphere of wealth and officialdom that revolved around the throne of His Majesty King Humbert, to receive the admiration and homage paid to her because of her striking beauty, and to act her part, as her father instructed her—a prominent part in one of the most brilliant courts of Europe.

Was it any wonder that, scarce out of her teens, she was already a *femme du monde*, with a wide knowledge of the hypocrisies of society, the tortuous ways of political intrigue, and the foetid moral atmosphere of those gilded salons and perfumed boudoirs?

"I wonder if you'll forgive me if I don't play any more, Mr Macbean?" she asked of the dark-haired young man in grey who stood, racquet in hand, awaiting her return. "I am very tired. I played in the tournament at your uncle's yesterday,

you know, and we from the South are exotic plants, after all."

"Forgive you! Of course!" cried the young man gallantly. "The sun is still too warm to be comfortable. Perhaps you will show me the gardens instead?"

"Willingly," she answered. "But there's not much to see here, I fear," and they strolled together between the high box-hedges, into the well-kept flower-garden with its grey old sundial and beds edged with curbs of lichen-covered stone. Beyond lay another lawn, which rose gently until it gave entrance into a small shady wood of high old oaks and elms wherein the rooks were cawing.

The pair were comparatively strangers. A fortnight before, he had called with his uncle, the rector of Thornby, whom he was visiting, and on several occasions since they had met at tennis or at tea in the drawing-rooms of various houses in the neighbourhood.

They chatted while strolling around the great sloping lawn, and he was expressing admiration at the excellent game she had played. She inwardly reflected that he seemed a very pleasant companion—so different from those over-dressed young Roman nobles, all elegance, swagger, and pose.

To George Macbean Nature had been kind and Chance had been cruel.

He was tall, slender, and athletic, with pale, refined features and a look of thoughtful and reticent calm. People looked at him far oftener than they did at handsomer men. It was one of those faces which suggest the romance of fate, and his eyes, under their straight brows and their drooping

lids, could gaze at women with an honest, open look. And yet women seldom saw him for the first time without thinking of him when he had passed from sight. He aroused at a first glance a vague speculative interest—he was a man whom women loved, and yet he was utterly unconscious of it all.

He was son of a younger son of the Macbeans of Castle Douglas; the blood of the ancient Galloway lairds ran in his veins; yet it was all that remained to him of the vanished greatness of a race that had fought so valiantly on the Border. He had, on his father's death, been compelled to come down from Cambridge only to find himself launched upon the world practically penniless, when, by good fortune, an influential friend of his father's in the City had contrived to obtain for him a situation as private secretary to Mr Morgan-Mason, a wholesale provision merchant, who, having made a fortune in business, sought to enter society by the parliamentary back door. He sat for South-West Norfolk, and was mainly distinguished in the House by his loudness of dress and his vulgar ostentation.

The post of secretary to such an impossible person was by no means a congenial occupation for a gentleman. The white-waistcoated vulgarian smiled at the poverty of the peerage, and treated his secretary as he would one of his shopmen in the Goswell Road; yet George Macbean could only "grin and bear it," for upon this aspiring merchant of cheese and bacon his very living depended. He could not afford to lose the one hundred and eighty pounds a year which the bacon merchant paid him.

It being the recess, and Mr Morgan-Mason having followed in the wake of a needy earl and his wife to Vichy, Macbean was spending a month with the Reverend Basil Sinclair, his bachelor uncle, when he had become acquainted with that bright, vivacious girl who was walking beside him.

She was speaking of Italy, and life there in winter, without, of course, mentioning the official position of her father, when he said—

“Ah! I too love Italy. I have been to Rome and Florence several times. Both cities are delightful—even to the mere visitor like myself.”

“Perhaps you speak Italian?” she hazarded in that language.

“I am fairly well acquainted with it,” he responded in the purest Tuscan, laughing the while. “Before I went to Cambridge I lived five years with my mother’s brother, who was a priest in Pisa.”

“Why, you speak like a born Italian!” she laughed. “It is so difficult for us English to roll our r’s—to give the exact accent, for instance, to *cane* and to *carne*. Over those two words we make ourselves ridiculous.” They had entered the wood, where the damp smell of decaying leaves, so essentially English, met their nostrils, and were strolling up one of the mossy paths in the cool shadow. Yes, she was certainly lovely, he reflected. Report had not lied about her. She was more beautiful than any woman he had ever before beheld, more graceful, more cosmopolitan.

Morini? Morini? Yes, he had heard the name before. It was not at all uncommon in Tuscany. She was Anglo-Italian, and

the girl born of Anglo-Italian parents is perhaps the most charming and cosmopolitan of any in Europe.

Chatting gaily, they lingered in the wood, strolled through the long range of hothouses, and then back again to the lawn, where they found the guests bidding farewell to their hostess and departing.

The Reverend Basil Sinclair was bending over Madame Morini's hand, an example which his nephew, though loth to leave the side of the girl who had so entirely charmed him, was bound to follow, and five minutes later the two men mounted into the rector's pony-cart, raised their hats, and drove away.

Later that evening, as General Borselli, ready dressed for dinner, stood, a well-set-up figure in the long, low, old-fashioned drawing-room, with its perfume of pot-pourri, awaiting the appearance of the ladies, the door suddenly opened, and there entered a dark, good-looking, brown-bearded man of about thirty, who was a guest at Orton, but having been up to London for the day, had only just returned in time to slip into his dinner-jacket.

The two men faced each other.

The new-comer, also a foreigner, started back, halting on the threshold as he recognised the sallow, sinister countenance of the other in the dim half-light. Angelo Borselli was the very last man he expected to meet beneath the Minister's roof in England, and the encounter was, to him, somewhat disconcerting.

"You!" cried the general in surprise, speaking in French. "So you actually have the audacity to pose as a friend of His Excellency, after those very plain words I spoke in the

Florence Club! You accept my friend’s invitation and dare pay court to mademoiselle! Is this not a dangerous game you are playing, my friend?”

“I conceive no danger in it—as far as I am concerned,” replied the young Frenchman, Jules Dubard, coolly. “Besides, my private affairs are surely no concern of yours! If His Excellency does me the great honour to invite me to his English home, I shall certainly accept, even at risk of incurring your displeasure,” he added, with a supercilious smile.

“You recollect what I told you?”

“Perfectly,” replied the well-dressed young count, with an air of extreme politeness, as he rearranged his cravat in the mirror. “But you appear to overlook one rather important fact.”

“And what is that, pray?” inquired the Sicilian, with an evil flash in his dark eyes.

“Exposure to His Excellency is synonymous with exposure of yourself in quite another quarter, my dear general,” replied the guest, in a meaning tone. “You cannot afford to risk that, you know. We both of us may threaten, but it is, after all, what these English call a fool’s game. Neither of us dare give each other away. So we may just as well be friends as enemies—eh?”

Chapter Three.

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In which Mary Reveals Certain Suspicions.

Dinner, served with that same stiff stateliness that characterised everything in the Morini household, was over, and the three men had rejoined the ladies in the drawing-room.

Mary, in a pretty *décolleté* dinner-gown of pale pink chiffon, with a single tea-rose in her corsage, had, at Dubard's suggestion, gone to the piano, and in a sweet contralto had sung some of those old Florentine folk-songs, or *stornelli*, as they are called, those weirdly mediaeval songs that are still sung by the populace in the streets of Florence to-day. Then as conclusion she ran her fingers lightly over the keys and sang—

"Fiorin Fiorello!
Di tutti i fiorellin che fioriranno,
Il fior del' amor mio sara il piu bello?"

"Brava! Brava!" cried the young Frenchman standing by the piano, and as she raised her eyes to his, it was patent that the pair entertained a regard for each other.

"Your songs of old Florence are so charming, so different from everything else in music, mademoiselle," he declared. "We have nothing like them in France. Our *chansons* are, after all, inharmonious rubbish. It is not surprising that you in Italy have a contempt for our literature, our music, and our drama, for it cannot compare with yours. We have had

no poet like Dante, no composer like Verdi, no musician like Paganini—and," he added, dropping his voice to a low whisper as he bent quickly to her ear, "no woman so fair as Mary Morini."

She blushed, and busied herself with her music books in order to conceal her confusion. The general was chatting with her father and mother at the farther end of the long room, and therefore did not notice that swift passage of admiration on the part of Jules Dubard.

The Frenchman was a friend of the family, mainly because he had been helpful to Morini in a variety of ways, and also on account of his pleasant, easy-going manner and quiet elegance. He was from the South. The old family château—a grey, dismal place full of ghostly memories and mildewed pictures of his ancestors—stood high up in the Pyrenees above Bayonne, five miles from the Spanish frontier; yet he had always lived in Paris, and from the days when he left college on his father's death he had led the gay, irresponsible life of the modern Parisian of means, was a member of the Jockey Club, and a well-known figure at the Café Américain and at Maxim's.

As a young man about the French capital he gave frequent bachelor parties at his cosy flat in the Avenue Macmahon, and possessing a very wide circle of friends, he had been able to render the Italian Minister of War several confidential services.

Two years ago, while in Rome, he had received an invitation to dine one evening at His Excellency's splendid old palace—once the residence of a Roman prince—and from that time had been on terms of intimacy with the

family and one of Mary's most ardent admirers. He spent a good deal of his time in the Eternal City, and had during the past season become a familiar figure in society.

His Excellency, quick of observation, had, however, detected Borselli's antipathy towards the young man, even though it was so cleverly concealed. And he had wondered. As fellow-guests beneath his roof they had that evening chatted and laughed together across the dinner-table, had referred to each other by their Christian names, and had fraternised as though they were the best friends in the world. Yet those words uttered by Angelo Borselli while awaiting the ladies had been full of hidden meaning.

The Morinis were in ignorance of the truth—and Mary most of all.

Dubard was not a handsome man—for it is difficult to find a man of the weak, anaemic type of modern Parisian who can be called good-looking from an English standpoint. He was thin-featured, lantern-jawed, with a pale complexion, dark eyes, and a brown moustache. He wore his hair parted in the centre, and as an *élégant* was proud of his white almost waxen hands and carefully manicured finger-nails. His dress, too, often betrayed those signs of effeminacy which in Paris just now are considered the height of good form in a man. His every movement seemed studied, yet his stiff elegance was on the most approved model of the Bois and the ballroom. He played frequently at his *cercle*, he wore the most hideous goggles and fur coat and drove his motor daily, and he indulged in *le sport* in an impossible get-up, not because he liked tramping about those horrid

muddy fields, but because it was the correct thing for a gentleman to do.

But his greatest success of all had, he told himself, been the attraction of Mary Morini. All through the past winter in Rome he had danced with her, flirted with her, raised his hat to her as she had driven on the Pincio, and had joined her in her mother's box at the Constanzi. To the Quirinale he had, of course, not been bidden, but he lived in the hope of next season receiving the coveted royal command.

With Camillo Morini as his friend, everything in Italy was possible.

Yet Angelo Borselli's presence disturbed him that evening. He knew the man who had been given the post of Under-Secretary. They had met long before he had known Morini—under circumstances that in themselves formed a strange and remarkable story—a story which he feared might one day be made public.

And then?

Bah! Why anticipate such a terrible *contretemps*? he asked himself. Then he bit his under lip as he glanced at his enemy standing beneath the light of the rose-shaded lamp talking with madame, and afterwards turned again to laugh and chat with mademoiselle.

"I lunched at the Junior United Service Club to-day with a friend of yours," he was saying; for she had risen from the piano and they had gone out upon the moon-lit verandah together, where, obtaining her permission, he lit a cigarette.

"A friend of mine?"

"Captain Houghton, the British naval attaché at Rome. He is home for a month's leave, and sent his compliments to

you.”

“Oh, Freddie Houghton?” she exclaimed. “He was longing to get home all the winter, but couldn’t get leave. He’s engaged, they say, and of course he wanted to see his enchantress. He’s the best dancer in Rome.”

Then suddenly lowering his voice, he asked abruptly—

“Why is Borselli here? I had no idea he was to be a guest!”

“Ah! I know you don’t like the fellow,” she remarked, glancing back into the room. “Neither do I. He is my father’s evil genius, I believe.”

“What makes you suspect that?” inquired the Frenchman, with considerable interest.

“Several circumstances,” was her vague response, as she twisted her curious old snake bracelet, a genuine sixteenth-century ornament which she had bought one day in a shop on the Ponte Vecchio in Florence.

“You mistrust him—eh?”

“He poses as my father’s friend, but I believe that all the time he is jealous of his position and is his bitterest enemy.”

“But they are very old friends, are they not?”

“Oh yes. The general owes his present position entirely to my father; otherwise he would now be in garrison in some obscure country town.”

“I only wish he were,” declared Dubard fervently. “He is jealous of our friendship. Did you notice how he glared at me while you were singing?”

“And yet at table you were such good friends,” she laughed.

“It is not polite to exhibit ill-feeling in a friend’s house, mademoiselle,” was his calm response. “Yet I admit that I entertain no greater affection for the fellow than you do.”

“But why should he object to our friendship?” she exclaimed. “If he were unmarried, and in love with me, it would of course be different.”

“No,” he said. “He hates me.”

“Why?”

Jules Dubard was silent, his dark eyes were fixed away across the moon-lit lawn.

“Why?” she repeated. “Tell me!”

“Well, he has cause to hate me—that’s all,” and he smiled mysteriously.

“But he’s a dangerous man,” she declared, with quick apprehension. “You probably don’t know so much of him as I do. He would betray his own father if it suited his purpose.”

“I know,” laughed the man drily. “I’ve heard sufficient stories concerning him to be quite well aware of his unscrupulous character. It is a thousand pities that he is an associate of your father’s.”

“Ah yes!” she sighed. “But how can it be avoided? They are in office in the same ministry, and are bound to be in constant touch with each other. The only thing I fear is that he has, by some intrigue, contrived to get my father in his power,” she said confidentially.

“How? What causes you to suspect such a thing?” he inquired quickly.

“Because once or twice of late I have noticed how when he has called in Rome and in Florence my father has been disinclined to see him, and that after the fellow’s departure

he has seemed very thoughtful and preoccupied. More than once, too, I've heard high words between them when they've been closeted together in the study in Rome. I once heard him threaten my father," she added.

"Threaten him!" cried her companion quickly. "What did the man say? Tell me." All that the girl was telling him was confirming what, in his heart, he already suspected.

"Well," she said, in a low voice of confidence, "it was early one morning, after the last court ball, and he had driven home with us. Afterwards my father had taken him to the study, and I had said good-night, when, on going to my room half an hour later, I found my maid very unwell. Therefore I went down again, intending to get from the study the key of the medicine cupboard, when I heard voices within, and naturally stopped to listen. I heard my father say distinctly, 'I won't. I'll never be a party to such a piece of audacious robbery—why, it's treason—treason, do you hear? No, Angelo, not even you can induce me to betray my country!' Then in reply I heard the general say, 'Very well. I have told you the course I intend to adopt. Your refusal places me in a critical situation, and I shall therefore save myself.' 'At my expense?' asked my father in a low, hoarse voice. 'Yes,' the man replied. 'I shall certainly not fall without an effort to retain my place, my liberty, depend upon it. And when the truth is out regarding the Sazarac affair, this high moral standard that you are now adopting will avail you but little.' Then there was a silence. At last my father asked in a tone of reproach, 'You actually intend to betray me, Angelo?—you, who owe your rank, your position, everything to me! Tell me, you are surely joking?' 'No,'