
WILLIAM
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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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Chapter One.

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A Stranger in Shepherd’s Bush.

“Why! Look! he’s dead, doctor!” I gasped, standing aghast.

The sudden change in the thin sallow face, the lack of expression in the brilliant eyes, and the dropping of the jaw were sufficient to convince me that the stranger’s life had ebbed away.

The doctor bent, placed his hand upon the prostrate man’s breast for a moment, and then, straightening himself, he turned to me and answered gravely:—

“Yes, Godfrey; it is as I feared from the first. Nothing could save him. Remember what I told you this morning—it was simply a matter of hours.”

“He appears to have been a rather strong, athletic man,” I remarked, looking down upon the wan, furrowed face.

“Unusually so. The disease, however, has thoroughly wrecked his constitution. He was addicted to the morphia habit of late.” And pulling down the sheet he pointed to the marks of recent punctures upon the dead man’s forearm.

We were standing together in the small shabby bedroom of the boarding-house wherein I lived in Granville Gardens, facing the recreation ground close to Shepherd’s Bush Railway Station. The stifling July day was at an end, and the narrow room was lit by the soft hazy glow of the fast-fading London sunset.

Through the open window came the shouts of children at play upon the “green” opposite, mingled with the chatter of the passers-by and the ever-increasing whirr of the electric trams. Within that faded, smoke-grimed chamber of the dead was silence. Upon the bed between us lay the dead stranger—the man who was a mystery.

“Well, has he told you anything after all?” inquired my friend, Dr Tulloch.

“Very little,” was my reply. “He was uncommunicative. He had a reason, I believe, for concealing his identity.”

“Perhaps we shall discover something when we search his things,” my friend remarked.

“We’ll do that to-morrow,” I said. “It isn’t decent to do so at once.”

Then, as Tulloch bent again, to reassure himself that his patient was actually lifeless, a silence once more fell between us. The glow of the summer sunset deepened, shining through the smoke-haze, and lighting up those dead features for a moment, but next instant the doctor, having been satisfied that no spark of life remained, tenderly drew the sheet over the white sphinx-like countenance.

The unfortunate man was a perfect stranger to us all.

On the previous day, at a little before six o’clock in the evening, he had called upon old Mrs Gilbert, who with her daughter kept the boarding-house where I chanced to be staying, and had, it appeared, taken a top room, where his two leather portmanteaux were placed. I knew nothing of the man’s advent until Miss Gilbert had tapped at the door of the sitting-room and informed me that she had a new

guest, a foreign gentleman who could speak only a few words of broken English.

“This is his name,” she said, handing me a scrap of paper whereon he had written “Michele Massari.”

“An Italian,” I remarked. “There is a noble family of the Massari, in Ferrara. He may belong to it.”

“It’s fortunate, Mr Leaf, that you speak Italian,” Miss Gilbert said, laughing. “You’ll help us if we are in any difficulty, won’t you?”

“Most certainly,” I assured her, for I knew that a foreigner is often a great trouble in a purely English *pension*. Many people speak French or German, but few know Italian.

Then the landlady’s daughter, a pleasant-faced, florid young woman of about thirty, thanked me and withdrew.

The reason I found myself at Mrs Gilbert’s *pension* was in order to be near my old schoolfellow, Sammy Sampson, who had made the place his *pied-à-terre* in town for several years past. I had to spend six months in London upon business affairs, therefore we had agreed to share his sitting-room, a cosy little bachelor’s den leading from his bedroom at the back of the house.

An hour later at dinner the stranger made his appearance and, with my consent, was placed next to me. There were eleven guests in all—two married couples of the usual *genre* to be found in London boarding-houses of that order, and the rest men with various occupations “in the City.” We were usually a merry party, with Miss Gilbert at the head of the long table, and the chatter was generally amusing.

The advent of the stranger, however, awakened every one’s curiosity, and as he took his seat, glancing sharply around, there fell a dead silence.

He was a tall, thin, wiry man with sharp aquiline features, hair with silver threads in it, and fierce black moustaches carefully waxed. His eyes were black and penetrating, his complexion sallow, his cheeks sunken, and the glance he gave at his fellow-guests was quick and apprehensive, as though he feared recognition.

He wore evening dress, which was out of place at Mrs Gilbert’s, and also showed that he was not used to boarding-houses of that class. And as he bowed towards me and seated himself, I saw that upon his lean, claw-like hand was a fine diamond ring.

All eyes were directed upon him, and at once I detected that, being a foreigner, he was viewed with considerable disfavour and distrust. The guests at Mrs Gilbert’s were not cosmopolitan. The only foreigners accepted at their own estimation in London boarding-houses are the Indian law students. Every girl believes her “tar-brush” table-companion to be a prince.

Signor Massari ate his tinned soup in silence. He had tucked the end of his napkin into his collar in true Italian fashion, and from the fact that attached to his watch-chain was a small golden hand with the index-finger pointing, I put him down as a superstitious Tuscan. That hand was the survival of a mediaeval Tuscan charm to avert the evil eye.

Having spent some years of an adventurous youth in old-world Tuscany, and being well acquainted with the soft musical tongue of the flower-scented land, I ventured

presently to make a casual remark with my c's well aspirated, as became the true-born Florentine.

My companion started, looking at me in quick suspicion. In his keen piercing eyes was a glance of sharp apprehension and inquiry—but only for a moment. Sight of me seemed instantly to dispel his fears, and his countenance resumed its normal appearance. But his response was a rather cold and formal one—in the *patois* of the Genoese. He evidently desired that I should not put him down as Tuscan.

Though somewhat puzzled I allowed the incident to pass. Yet I made a mental note of it. Signor Massari, I decided, was a somewhat queer customer. He was a man with enemies—and he feared them. That fact was quite evident.

We chatted in Italian, much to Miss Gilbert's fussy satisfaction, but our conversation was rather formal and strained. He had no intention, it seemed, to have anything to do with his fellow-guests, and he only tolerated me because it would have been uncivil not to do so.

A friend in Italy had recommended him to Mrs Gilbert's, he explained. He had only arrived from the Continent at 4:50 that evening, and had come straight there in a cab.

"Then this is your first visit to London?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "I was here once before—long ago." And I thought he sighed slightly, as though the recollection of the previous visit was painful.

His was a sad face; hard, furrowed—a countenance that bore trouble written indelibly upon it. He ate but little, and drank only a glass of mineral water.

I tried to get him to tell me from what province of Italy he came, but he studiously avoided all my ingenious questions. He spoke of Italy vaguely, and yet with the tenderness of one who loved his fatherland. Among all the nations of Europe, the Italian is surely the most patriotic and the most eager to serve his country.

On several occasions remarks, meant to be courteous, were addressed to him in English by my companions, but it was plain that he did not understand our tongue. Or if he did, he gave no sign.

Therefore, from the very first moment of his entry into our boarding-house circle we put him down as a complete mystery.

Sammy Sampson, my irresponsible friend, sat opposite me and, as usual, kept the table laughing at his clever witticisms. Once I saw the Italian scowl in displeasure, and wondered whether he had conceived the idea that my friend was joking at his expense.

The stranger was not aware that I had detected the fierce look of hatred that, for a single instant, showed in his dark shining eyes. It was an expression that I did not like—an expression of fierce, relentless, even murderous resentment.

I was about to assure him of Sammy’s utter disinclination to poke fun at any foreigner, when I saw that if I did so I should only aggravate the situation. Therefore I let it pass.

The Italian was a man of refinement, exquisite of manner towards the ladies as was all his race, and though I cannot explain it he struck me as being well-born, and superior to those sitting at table with him. Yet he vouchsafed but little as regards himself. Italy was his home—that was all. And

Italy is a great place; a country of a hundred nations. The Venetian is of a different race from the Sicilian, the Tuscan from the Calabrian. I still suspected he was a Tuscan, yet he spoke the Italian tongue so well that at one moment I put him down as a born Florentine, while at the next as a Livornese or a Roman.

He saw that I knew Italy and the Italians, and was purposely endeavouring to mislead me.

That same night, just after midnight, Jane, one of the maids-of-all-work, rapped at my door, saying:—

“Please, sir, the Italian gentleman’s been taken awful ill. We can’t make out what ’e wants. Would you kindly go to ’im?”

I dressed hurriedly, and, ascending to the stranger’s room, asked, in Italian, permission to enter.

A faint voice responded, and a moment later I was at the stranger’s bedside. The feeble light of the single candle showed a great change in his countenance, and I saw that he was suffering severely and seemed to be choking.

“I—I thank you very much, signore, for coming to me,” he said, with considerable difficulty. “I am having one of my bad attacks—I—I—”

“Had you not better see a doctor? I’ll call a friend of mine, if you’ll allow me.”

“Yes. Perhaps it would really be best,” was his reply, and I saw that his hands were clenched in sudden pain.

Therefore, after telling Sammy of the foreigner’s illness, I put on my hat and went round into the Holland Road for my friend Tulloch.

The latter came with me at once, and as soon as I had interpreted the stranger's symptoms, and he had made a careful examination, he turned to me and said in English:—

"The man's very bad—cancer in the stomach. He's evidently been near death half a dozen times, and this will probably prove fatal. Don't frighten him, Godfrey, but just put it to him as quietly as you can. Tell him that he's really very much worse than he thinks."

"Is it worth while to tell the poor fellow the truth?" I argued. "It may only have a bad effect upon him."

"His other doctors have, no doubt, already warned him. Besides it's only fair that he should know his danger. I never keep the truth from a patient when things are desperate, like this."

"Then you hold out but little hope of him?"

Bob Tulloch, who had been with me at Charterhouse, stroked his dark beard and replied in the negative, while the stranger, who had been watching us very closely, said in Italian in a low faint voice:—

"I know! I know! I'm dying—dying!" and he laughed curiously, almost triumphantly. "I'm dying—and I shall escape them. Ah! signore," he added, with his bright black eyes fixed upon mine, "if you only knew the truth—the terrible, awful truth—you would pity me—you would, I am convinced, stand my friend. You would not believe the evil that men say of me."

"Then tell me the truth," I urged quickly, bending down to him in eagerness.

But he only shook his head and clenched his even white teeth.

“No,” he said, with a fierce imprecation in Italian. “Mine is a secret—her secret—a secret that I have kept until now—a secret that none shall know!”

Chapter Two.

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Touches a Woman’s Honour.

Tulloch left half an hour later, and Sammy, whose curiosity had been aroused concerning the foreigner, entered the room and inquired after the patient.

But hoping to learn more from the stricken man, I sent my friend back to bed and remained there through the night, administering to the patient what my friend Tulloch had ordered.

The long hours dragged on in silence. Only the ticking of the cheap American clock broke the quiet. Lying upon his back the stranger fixed his dark eyes upon me, until his hard gaze caused me quite an uncomfortable feeling. It is unpleasant to have a dying man’s eyes fixed so attentively upon one. Therefore I shifted my chair, but even then I could not escape that intent penetrating gaze. He seemed as if he were reading my very soul.

If I spoke he answered only in low monosyllables. Whenever I attempted to put a question he made a quick gesticulation, indicating his impossibility to reply. And so passed the whole long vigil until day broke in brightening grey, and the sun shone forth again.

Yet the man’s hard stony stare was horrifying. Somehow it utterly unnerved me.

Had Tulloch not declared that the fellow was dying, I should certainly have left him; yet I felt it was my duty as a man to remain there, for was I not the only person in that household acquainted with the Italian tongue?

Ever and anon he clenched his teeth tightly and drew a long hard breath, as though bitterly vengeful at thought of some incident of the past.

"*Accidenti*!" was an ejaculation that escaped his lips now and then, and by it I knew that he was praying that an accident might befall his enemies—whoever they were. He uttered the most bitter curse that an Italian could utter.

Presently, about five o'clock, just as the sun's rays entering through the opening between the dingy old rep curtains fell across the threadbare carpet in a golden bar, he became quiet again.

"Ah, signore," he said gratefully, "it is really extremely good of you to put yourself out on my account—a perfect stranger."

"Nothing, nothing," I assured him. "It is only what you would do for me if I were ill in a foreign country where I could not speak the language."

"Ay, that I would," he declared. And after a pause he added: "Nearness to death causes us to make strange friendships—doesn't it?"

"Why?" I asked, somewhat puzzled.

"Well—in me, for instance, you are making a strange friend," he said, with a queer, harsh laugh.

"Why strange?"

"Because you are utterly unaware of who or what I am."

"I know your name—that is all," I responded quietly. "You know the name by which I choose to be known here. It is not likely that I should disclose my real identity."

"Why not?"

“Because—well, there are strong reasons,” was his vague answer, and his mouth shut with a snap, as though he discerned that he had already said too much. Then a moment later he added: “As I’ve already told you, you have made a strange acquaintance in me. You will probably be surprised if ever you really do ascertain the truth, which is, however, not very likely, I think. At least I hope not.”

I recollected that he had spoken of a secret—some woman’s secret—which he intended, at all hazards, to preserve. What was it, I wondered?

The thin drawn face upon the white pillow wore a wild, desperate expression. The stranger had actually laughed in triumph at the suggestion of death. A man must be desperate ere he can face the open grave with a smile upon his lips.

After a few minutes he raised his thin yellow finger beckoning me closer, and in a fainter voice said:—

“You are the only friend I have in this great capital, Signor Leaf,”—for at table I had told him my name and something about my wandering life on the Continent—“you will not allow them to bury me as a pauper? There is money—see, in that left-hand top drawer—over there. Will you get my purse?”

I rose, opened the drawer he indicated, and handed him a bulky red morocco wallet, one of those in which Italians carry their paper currency.

He opened it and I saw that it was crammed with hundred-franc and even thousand-franc notes. In the wallet there was probably over a thousand pounds.

“Will you take charge of it?” he asked, handing it back. “I shall never want it again. Pay all the expenses, and I would ask of you one favour. Upon the stone over my grave put no name—only the words: ‘In Memory of one who was Unfortunate’—that is all.”

“And the balance of the money—to whom shall I hand that?”

He thought a few moments, his eyes fixed upon the low, smoke-blackened ceiling.

“If there is no just claimant within one year take five thousand francs as a souvenir of me, and present the remainder to a hospital—whatever hospital in London you think the most deserving. You will also find the directions for obtaining certain securities deposited in Italy. Obtain them and deal with them as you deem advisable.”

“But have you no relations?” I inquired, foreseeing a great difficulty in carrying out these verbal instructions.

“Relations! Bah! what are relations?” he cried excitedly. “Only an infernal encumbrance. I suppose I have some somewhere—everybody has more or less.”

“And don’t you know where yours are?”

“No, nor do I wish to know,” he snapped. “I am alone—you understand—entirely alone. And, moreover, I trust that if you are my friend, as you seem to wish to be, you will so far respect my memory as not to believe all that will probably be said against me. To you only I admit that I am not what I have represented myself to be—that is all. I accept your kindness, but, alas! with considerable shame.”

I drew the Italian notes from the wallet, and counted them.

“There are twenty-eight thousand lire here,” I remarked, “one thousand one hundred and twenty pounds.”

“What does it concern me how much there is?” he asked, smiling. “Use it as I’ve directed. Indeed,” he added, after a pause, “you need not tell any one that you have it.”

“I shall tell my friend Sampson, or people may think that I’ve stolen it,” I said.

“Yes,” he remarked hoarsely, with a sigh, “people are always ready to think ill of one, are they not?”

And then, as the bar of sunlight crept slowly across the worn-out carpet, a deep silence again fell, broken only by the stranger’s fierce, vengeful mutterings which to me conveyed no distinct meaning.

“*Madonna mia*!” he cried aloud once, cringing in excruciating pain. “How I suffer! I wonder how long it must be before I give out. *Dio*! Is this the punishment of hell?”

Then he turned his eyes upon me—those wide-open, horrified eyes—in a look the remembrance of which is even to-day still before me, the recollection of which I shall carry with me to the grave.

There was something indescribable about that expression, uncanny, fascinating, inhuman. They were the eyes of a man who, though still alive, was obtaining his first glance into the awful mysteries of the eternity.

At half-past seven Tulloch returned and brought him a soothing draught, so that he slept, and I then left the sick-room to dress and breakfast.

With Mrs Gilbert, Sammy and I agreed that no word of the painful affair should be told to our fellow-guests,

because illness in a boarding-house always causes the visitors to make excuses for departure. So we said nothing.

Sampson had some urgent business with his solicitor in the City that day, therefore I remained at home, acting as nurse to the unfortunate man whose end was now so near.

Three times during the day Tulloch returned, but all he did proved unavailing. The stranger could not possibly live, he said. It was a wonder that he had had strength to withstand the journey to England. It was the reaction that was proving fatal—internal haemorrhage.

Just before six o'clock, when I crept on tiptoe back to the mysterious man's darkened room to see if he still slept, he called me eagerly in a low whisper, saying that he wished to speak to me in strict confidence.

I therefore seated myself at his bedside and bent down, so that the effort of speaking should be as little as possible.

"There is still one further favour I would beg of you, Signor Leaf. I wonder whether—whether you would grant it?" he asked very feebly, stretching out his thin hand until it rested upon my wrist.

"If it is within my power, I will," I assured him.

"Then you see this!" he exclaimed, drawing from beneath his pillow a small flat packet in white paper about four inches square and secured by three large black oval seals evidently impressed by some old monastic seal of the middle ages.

"I want you," he said, "to accept the responsibility of this. They are papers of considerable value to certain relatives in Italy. Will you take charge of it, and three years after my death hand it intact to the Italian Ambassador? I appeal to

you to do so, for you are my only friend, and I am dying," he added, in a tone of intense earnestness.

"If you wish," I said, somewhat reluctant, however, to undertake such responsibility. And I took the packet, and, after examining the seals, transferred it to my pocket.

The mysterious Massari firmly declined my offer to go to the Italian Church in Hatton Garden and fetch a priest.

"I don't wish to see anybody," he snapped. "I have a reason. At least let me die in peace."

And an hour later, just as Tulloch returned, he again fixed those bright staring eyes upon me and silently passed away, carrying with him his secret to the grave.

It concerned a woman. That much he had admitted. Who was the woman, I wondered? What was her secret?

"This man had a strange history, I feel convinced," I remarked in a low voice to Tulloch as we left the chamber of death together and quietly closed the door.

"Yes," he said. "He seemed a queer fellow. But in my profession, old chap, we often meet strange people, you know. Men, when they are dying, frequently have curious fancies and extraordinary hallucinations."

And then we went down into Mrs Gilbert's sitting-room to inform her of the unfortunate occurrence in her house.

I locked the sealed packet and the bulky wallet safely away in my despatch-box, and when Sammy returned a little later I told him all that had occurred.

My friend, a short, fair-haired, round-faced fellow of thirty-eight, a splendid type of the muscular athletic Englishman, flung himself into the big leather armchair with a cigarette and listened. Like mine, his life had been full of

adventure. Some years before he had thrown up his commission in the Scots Greys in order to go on active service, anywhere so long as there was fighting. He had been through three South American revolutions; had served with the Americans in Cuba; had been mentioned in despatches for his services before Ladysmith, and was now contemplating volunteering for service against the Mad Mullah. Possessed of comfortable private means he was soldier, traveller, big-game hunter and champion tennis-player, a good all-round man bubbling over with good-humour, and a great favourite with the ladies.

"Well, Godfrey, old chap," he remarked, stretching himself out when I had concluded my story. "Certainly the fellow's a bit of a mystery. Do you know, I watched him very closely at table last night, and it somehow struck me that he feared to be recognised. Each time the door opened he started and looked apprehensively in its direction. Besides, a man of his stamp doesn't usually come to a boarding-house of this sort. He'd go to the Savoy, or the Cecil. Depend upon it he had a motive in coming here, and that motive was in order to hide himself. He may have done something wrong in Italy and fled to London, as so many do. Who knows?"

Truth to tell, my friend's suggestion exactly coincided with my own suspicion. Jane, the maid-of-all-work, had told me, to my surprise, that when she had entered his room that morning during my absence he had spoken to her in most excellent English! The fact, too, that he had refused to see a priest seemed to point to a fear lest his hiding-place might be discovered.

But he was dead, and I had, rather unwisely perhaps, accepted a curious responsibility. Even the money he had placed in my charge might be the proceeds of some theft!

That night I arranged with a neighbouring undertaker that the remains of the stranger should be taken away on the following night when the whole house was asleep, a service for which I received the heartfelt gratitude of Mrs Gilbert.

About seven o’clock the next evening when I returned from the club, Miss Gilbert met me excitedly in the hall, and asked whether I would mind stepping into her mother’s sitting-room for a moment.

Seated within, I found a tall, dark-haired, sweet-faced girl in neat black who looked at me with shy inquiry as I entered. I saw she was very beautiful. Her delicately moulded features were perfect, and upon her cheeks was the fresh bloom of youth. I judged her to be about twenty-five, with slim, narrow-waisted, graceful figure, eyes of soft dark brown, well-defined brows and tiny shell-like ears. Her air and manner was of the *chic* Parisienne, rather than the Londoner. The instant our gaze met I saw that she was a woman of exquisite sweetness—perhaps one of the most attractive I had ever seen in all my wide wanderings over the face of the globe.

“This lady desires to see you, Mr Leaf,” explained the landlady’s daughter. “She has called with regard to our friend, Signor Massari.”

I bowed to her, and as I did so she said quickly in English: —

“I am in active search of Signor Massari, and have come post-haste across Europe in order to find him. This lady says he has been here, but has left. You, I understand, speak Italian and have had several conversations with him?”

I glanced quickly at Miss Gilbert. She had not told the visitor the sad truth, therefore I was compelled to sustain the fiction that the dead man had left.

The landlady’s daughter, apparently unable to further evade her visitor’s eager questions, excused herself and left us alone together.

The instant she had gone the visitor rose with a quick *frou-frou* of silken underskirts, and closing the door turned to me with a deep earnest look, saying in a low voice scarcely above a whisper:—

“Let me confess the truth, sir! I am in a most deadly peril, and yet utterly defenceless. I have come direct from Rome in order to overtake the man who has called himself Massari. I must find him, at all hazards. If he chooses to speak—to tell the truth—then he can save my life. If not, I’m lost. Will you help me to discover him? Perhaps you know where he has gone? I throw myself upon your sympathy—upon your mercy. See!” she cried hoarsely, with a wild look in her beautiful eyes, for she was indeed desperate, “I am begging of you, a perfect stranger, begging for my freedom, for my woman’s honour—nay for my life!”

I stood before her stunned.

What could I reply? What would you have replied in such circumstances?

Chapter Three.

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Gives some Explanations.

Her voice was soft and refined. She was evidently a lady.

The mysterious stranger had held the secret which might liberate her, yet he had carried it with him to the grave!

Who was he? Who was she?

The situation was certainly one of the most difficult in which a man could find himself. Miss Gilbert, in order to conceal the fact that a death had occurred in her boarding-house, had pretended that Massari had left. I saw, however, that the pale-faced girl before me was desperate, and felt convinced that the melancholy truth should be revealed to her.

The man's death sealed her doom. She had made that entirely plain to me.

I now distinguished that her dress was dusty, her dark hair slightly dishevelled, and she bore traces of long travel. She had evidently, on arrival from the Continent, come straight from Charing Cross out to Shepherd's Bush. Therefore, by some secret means, she knew of Massari's intention of hiding himself at Mrs Gilbert's.

"You do not reply," she said, in a voice full of reproach. "Do you really refuse to render me assistance, sir? Remember, I am a helpless woman who begs her life of you. You have seen and spoken with that man. Where is he now?"

For a moment I hesitated. Then seeing that she must sooner or later know the truth I drew my breath and said:—

“Come, follow me.” And opening the door we ascended the stairs.

“Ah!” she cried excitedly. “He is still here! That woman lied when she told me he had gone, eh? He is still in the house!”

I made no reply, but went on, she following closely behind.

Then a few moments later, having gained the top landing, I threw open the door of the darkened chamber of death and drew aside the curtains.

She dashed to the bed and tore the sheet from the dead, white face.

Then she staggered back as though she had received a blow.

“My God!” she cried. “Too late!—*too late*!”

Dull, dazed, she stood there, with the stare of blank despair in her eyes and pale as ashes. The dead white face seemed to wear a smile—the smile of cheerful resignation, as though his body had parted with its spirit in gladness and in triumph.

For a little while she stood stock-still and speechless—the living dead! Suddenly—ah! it is nothing in the telling; one should have heard and seen to realise—suddenly there welled up from the depths of her heart the sigh of its aching, the sob of its breaking. Then she shrieked with the ghastly laughter of despair. Then she lashed out to a cursing of the dead man and all his deeds; and her execrations were the most shocking because they proceeded from the tongue of a sweet-mouthed woman.

Of a sudden her eyes fell upon the stranger's two portmanteaux, and dashing across she knelt to open them.

"No," I said quietly, "I cannot permit you to touch anything there."

"You cannot permit—*you*!" she cried, facing me.

"And who, pray, are you? Have I not more right to know what he has here than you?"

And with a sudden wrench she broke the hasp of the weak, foreign-made lock, and next instant turned the whole of the contents, clothes and papers, out upon the floor.

Quickly she searched among the quantity of papers, as though looking for something. Yet she was disappointed.

I took up several of the folded documents and found that they were bonds and other securities. It almost seemed as though the mysterious Massari had fled at an instant's warning and taken all the valuables he had at hand.

The second portmanteau resisted her efforts to break it open, therefore I handed her the key. If, as she said, that man had held her future in his hands, she certainly had a right to look through what he had left behind.

In her eagerness she tossed the papers hither and thither, now pausing to scan a letter and now breaking open a sealed envelope and hastily ascertaining the contents.

"No," she cried hoarsely at last, turning fiercely to where the dead body lay. "You have left no written record. Brute! coward! assassin!" she hissed between her teeth, shaking her fist in the dead man's face. "You refused to give me my freedom—to clear my honour—you laughed in my face—you who knew the truth but refused to speak!"

The scene was terrible, the living execrating the dead. I took her by the arm and tried to lead her away. But she shook me off, crying:—

“He has died of the terrible disease with which God had afflicted him. He knew, too well, that after his death I should be helpless and defenceless. He was wealthy, but what did all his wealth serve him—compelled to fly at night and hide himself here, hoping that I should not discover him. He little dreamed that I knew of his hiding-place.”

“Then he could have cleared you of some false charge, had he been so inclined?” I inquired, hoping that she would reveal the truth to me.

“Yes. A foul dastardly charge has been made against me—one of the cruellest and blackest that can be laid against a woman,” she answered. “By a word he could have established my innocence. He knew I was innocent, yet he refused—he laughed in my face, and told me that he would not lift a little finger to help either me or my father.”

“Why not?”

“Because the establishment of my innocence would have given me my happiness.”

“And he denied it to you. He had a motive, I suppose?”

“Yes—oh yes!” she said. “Even my tears did not move him. I went upon my knees and begged him to speak, but he was obdurate. That was eight days ago. And how soon has Fate overtaken him! Two days later he was compelled to fly in secret in order to avoid arrest, and to-day he is lying there dead—his lips, alas! sealed.”

“Ah! unfortunately,” I sighed, “he can no longer bear witness on your behalf, miss—I have not the pleasure of

your name?” I said, hesitating purposely.

“Miller—Lucie Miller,” she replied. “And yours?”

“Godfrey Leaf.”

“Yes, Mr Leaf, it is unfortunate for me,” she said, with a dark look of desperation. “I am a doomed woman!”

“Oh, no, you must not speak like that,” I urged. “Surely the charge against you is not so very serious!” To me it seemed impossible that such a sweet-faced girl should have any grave imputation against her.

“I have enemies, bitter, relentless enemies,” was her brief response. She had grown a little calmer, and I had replaced the sheet over the cold, lifeless countenance of the man who had refused to tell the world the truth and thus save her.

“Have you travelled from Rome alone?” I inquired.

“No. I had a companion,” she answered, but did not satisfy me whether it was a male or female.

“You live in Rome, perhaps?” I asked, for I saw that she had a cosmopolitan air which was not that of an English-bred woman.

“No. I generally live in Leghorn.”

“Ah! in Tuscany. I know Leghorn quite well—the Brighton of Italy, a very gay place in summer. Pancaldi’s at four o’clock in the season is always bright and amusing.”

“You really know Pancaldi’s?” she exclaimed, brightening. “Only fancy! We have so very few English in Leghorn. They prefer Vallombrosa or the Bagni di Lucca. Indeed an Englishman in Leghorn, beyond the shipping people, is quite a rarity.”

“And this man Massari—it was not his real name?” I said.

“No. But I regret that I am not permitted to tell you who he really was. He was a person very well-known in Italy—a person of whom you read frequently in the newspapers. That is all I may tell you.”

“Well, really, Miss Miller, all this is very mystifying,” I said. “Why did he come here?”

“Because he thought that he would be able to live in hiding. He feared lest I might follow him.”

“But you said that he also feared arrest.”

“That is so. He was compelled to escape. His enemies laid a trap for him, just as he did for my father and myself.”

“But why did he refuse to give you back your happiness by clearing you of the charge? To me it seems almost incredible that a man should thus treat an innocent woman.”

“Ah! Mr Leaf, you didn’t know him. He was one of the most unscrupulous and hard-hearted men in the whole of Italy. Every *soldo* he possessed bore upon it the blood and tears of the poor. He lent money at exorbitant interest to the *contadini*, and delighted to ruin them from the sheer love of cruelty and oppression. Those papers there,” and she pointed to the securities she had scattered upon the dingy carpet, “and every franc he possessed are accursed.”

And he had given me the sum of two hundred pounds for accepting the responsibility of his funeral and of the sealed packet.

“You mean that he was, by profession, a moneylender?”

“Oh, dear no. He lent money merely for the purpose of ruining people. He was heartless and cruel by nature, and if a man committed suicide—as many did because he had