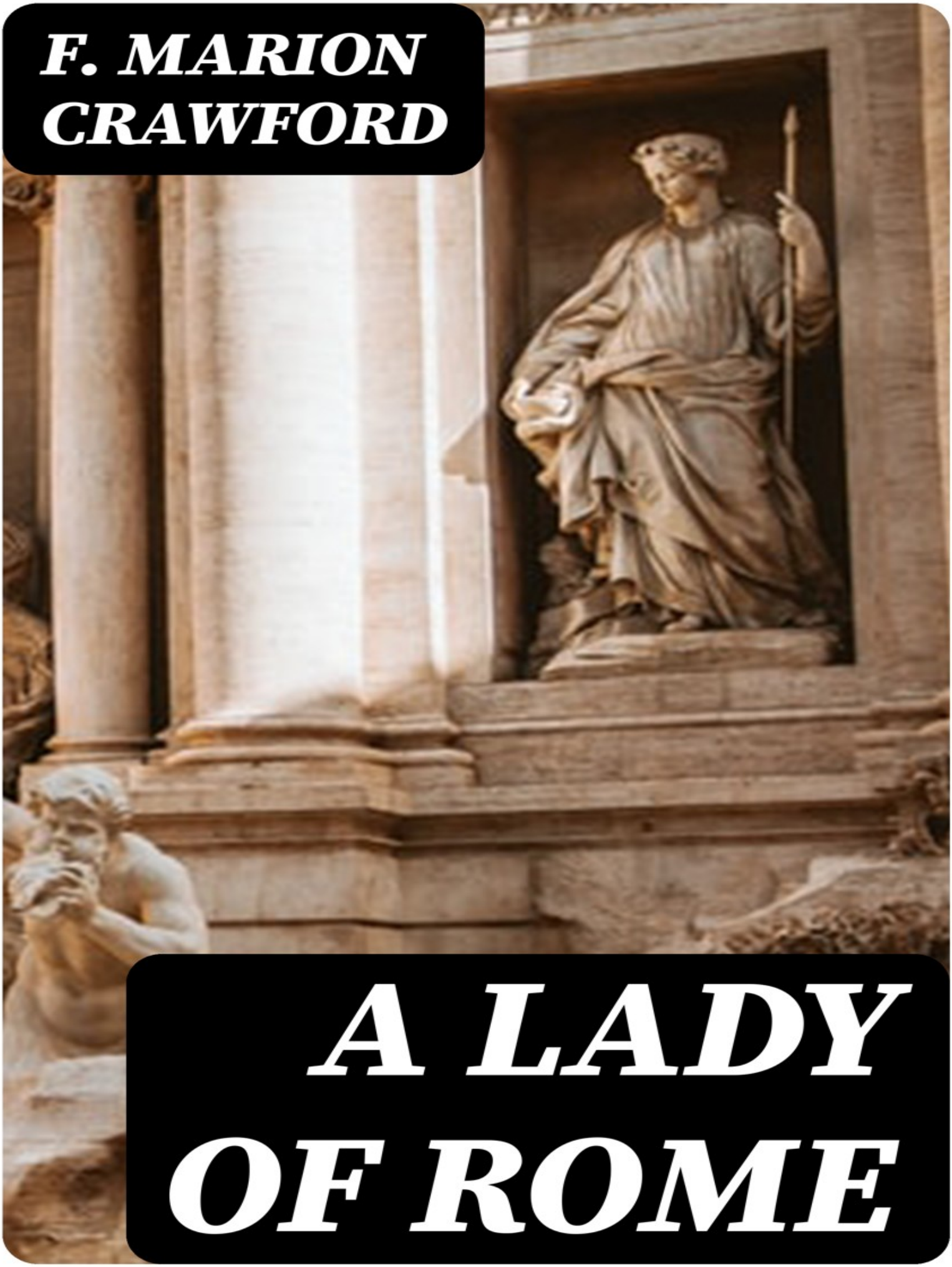
F. MARION CRAWFORD



A LADY OF ROME

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PART I

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MARIA

CHAPTER I

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Maria Montalto was dressed as a Neapolitan Acquaiola and kept the lemonade stall at the Kermess in Villa Borghese. The villa has lately changed its official name, and not for the first time in its history, but it will take as long to accustom Romans to speak of it as Villa Umberto as it once did before they could give up calling it Villa Cenci. For the modern Romans are conservative people, who look with contempt or indifference on the changes of nomenclature which are imposed from time to time by their municipal representatives.

The lady was selling iced lemonade, syrup of almonds, and tamarind to the smart and the vulgar, the just and the unjust alike; and her dress consisted of a crimson silk skirt embroidered with gold lace, a close-fitting low bodice that matched it more or less and confined the fine linen she wore, which was a little open at the throat and was picked up with red ribband at the elbows, besides being embroidered in the old-fashioned Neapolitan way. She had a handsome string of pink corals round her neck, Sicilian gold earrings hung at her ears, and a crimson silk handkerchief was tied over her dark hair with a knot behind her head.

She was very good-looking, and every one said the costume was becoming to her; and as she was not at all vain, she enjoyed her little success of prettiness very much. After all, she was barely seven-and-twenty and had a right to look five years younger in a fancy dress. She was not really a widow, though many of her friends had fallen into

the habit of treating her as if she were. It was seven years since Montalto had left her and had gone to live with his mother in Spain.

They had only lived together two years when he had gone away, and observant people said that Maria had not grown a day older since, whereas they had noticed a very great change in her appearance soon after she had been married. It was quite absurd that at twenty she should have had a little patch of grey by her left temple just where the dark hair waved naturally. At that rate we should all be old at thirty.

The observant ones had noticed another odd thing about Maria Montalto. Her girl friends remembered especially a certain fearless look in her eyes, which were not black, though they were almost too dark to be called brown, and used to be most wonderfully full of warm light in her girlhood. But she had not been married many months, perhaps not many weeks, when a great change had come into them, and instead of fearlessness her friends had seen the very opposite in them, a look of continual terror, a haunted look, the look of a woman who lives in perpetual dread of a terrible catastrophe. It had been there before her boy was born, and it was there afterwards; later she had been ill for some time, after which Montalto had gone away, and since that day her eyes had changed again.

There was no terror in them now, but there was the perpetual remembrance of something that had hurt very much. I once knew a man who had been tortured by savages for twenty-four hours, and his eyes had that same expression ever afterwards. In the Middle Ages, when

torture was the common instrument of the law, many persons must have gone about with that memory of suffering in their eyes, plain for every one to see. Maria looked as if she had undergone bodily torture, which she remembered, but no longer feared.

After all, her trouble had left no lines in her young features, nor anything but that singular expression of her eyes and that tiny patch of white in her hair. Her face was rather pale, but with that delicious warm pallor which often goes with perfect health in dark people of the more refined type, and the crimson kerchief certainly set it off very well, as the corals did, too, and the queer little Sicilian earrings.

The booth was gaily decorated with fresh oranges and lemons still hanging on their branches with fresh green leaves, and with many little coloured flags; the small swinging ‘trumone’ in which the water was iced hung in a yoke of polished brass, and the bright glasses and the bottles of syrup stood near Maria’s hand on the shining metal counter.

It was a very delicately made hand, but it did not look weak, and it moved quickly and deftly among the glasses without any useless clatter or unnecessary spilling and splashing of water. Hands, like faces, have expressions, and the difference is that the expression of the hand changes but little in many years. No artist could have glanced at Maria’s without feeling that it had a sad look about it, a something regretful and tender which would have made any manly man wish to take it in his and comfort it.

The people who came to the booth gave silver for a glass of lemonade, and some gave gold, and many of them told

Maria plainly that she was the prettiest sight in all the great fair. Most of those who came had never seen her before in their lives and had no idea who she was, though her name was one of those great ones that every Roman knows.

A handsome young bricklayer who had paid a franc for a glass of syrup of almonds, and who had boldly told Maria that she was the beauty of the day, asked a policeman her name.

‘The Contessa di Montalto.’

The young man looked pleased, for he had secretly hoped to hear that she was nothing less than a Savelli or a Frangipane; not at all for the sake of boasting that he had received his glass from such very superior hands, but only for the honour of Rome. Yet though the name was familiar to him because he knew where the palace was, he had imagined that the family had died out.

‘Which is this Montalto?’ he asked.

The policeman could not answer the question, and his official face was like a stone mask. But the bricklayer had a friend who was engaged to marry a sempstress who worked for a smart dressmaker, and therefore knew all about society; and in the course of time he found the two walking about, and offered to pay for lemonade if they would come to the booth with him. They were not thirsty, and thanked him politely, so he asked the young woman who this Contessa di Montalto might be. She threw up her eyes with an air of compassion.

‘Ah, poor lady!’ she cried. ‘That is a long story, for she has been alone these seven years since her husband left her. He was a barbarian, a man without heart, to leave her!

Was it her fault if she had loved some one else before she was married to him?'

'Adelina is a socialist,' observed the young woman's betrothed, with a laugh. 'She believes in free love! It is all very well now, my heart,' he added, looking at her with adoring eyes, 'but after we have been to the Capitol you shall be a conservative.'

'Oh, indeed? I suppose you will beat me if I look at your friend here?' She pretended to be angry.

'No. I am not a barbarian like the Conte di Montalto. But I will cut off your little head with a handsaw.'

He was a carpenter. There were Romans of all sorts in the Villa, the smart and the vulgar, the rich and the poor, and the rich man who felt poor because he had lost a few thousands at cards, and the poor man who felt rich because he had won twenty francs at the public lottery. The high and mighty were there, buzzing about royalties on foot, and there were the lowly and meek, eating cheap cakes under the stone pines and looking on from a distance. There were also some of the low who were not meek at all, but excessively cheeky because they had been told that all men are equal, and had paid their money at the gate in order to prove the fact by jostling their betters and staring insolently at modest girls whose fathers chanced to be gentlemen. These youngsters could be easily distinguished by their small pot hats stuck on one side, their red ties, and their unhealthy faces.

At some distance from Maria Montalto's booth there was another, where a number of Roman ladies chanced to have

met just then and were discussing their friends. Most of them had a genuinely good word for Maria.

‘I have not seen her in colours since her boy was born,’ said the elderly Princess Campodonico. ‘She is positively adorable!’

‘What is her story, mother?’ asked the Princess’s daughter, a slim and rather prim damsel of seventeen.

‘Her story, my dear?’ inquired the lady with a sort of stony stare. ‘What in the world can you mean?’ She turned to a friend as stout, as high-born, and as cool as herself. ‘I hear you have ordered a faster motor car,’ she said.

The slim girl was used to her mother’s danger signals, and she turned where she stood and looked wistfully and curiously at Maria di Montalto, who was some twenty yards away.

‘As if I were not old enough to hear anything!’ the young lady was saying to herself.

Then she was aware that the two elder women were talking in an undertone, and not at all about motor cars.

‘He is in Rome,’ she heard her mother say. ‘Gianforte saw him yesterday.’ Gianforte was the Princess’s husband.

‘Do you mean to say he has the courage to——’ began the other.

‘Or the insolence,’ suggested the first.

Then both saw that the girl was listening, and they at once talked of other things. There is an age at which almost every half-grown-up girl is figuratively always at an imaginary keyhole ready to surprise a long-suspected secret, though often innocently unconscious of her own alert curiosity. This seems to have been the attitude of Eve

herself when she met the Serpent, and though we are told that Adam was much distressed at the consequences of the interview, there is no mention of any regret or penitence on the part of his more enterprising mate.

So the slim and prim Angelica Campodonico, aged barely seventeen, wondered what Maria Montalto's story might be, and just then she felt the strongest possible desire to go over to the lemonade booth to tell the pretty Countess confidentially that 'he' was in Rome, whoever 'he' was, and to see how the lady would behave. Would she think that his coming showed 'courage' or 'insolence'? It was all intensely interesting, and the girl would have been bitterly disappointed if she could have known that within twenty minutes of her going away 'he' would actually be present and would have the insolence—or the courage!—to go directly to the Countess of Montalto's booth and speak to her under the very eyes of society. Unhappily for the satisfaction of Angelica's curiosity her mother took her away, and it was a long time before she learned the truth about Maria.

The Countess was not alone in her booth; indeed, she could not have done the manual work without a good deal of help, for at times there had been a dozen people standing before her little counter, all impatient and thirsty, and all ready to pay an exorbitant price for even a glass of water, in the name of charity. Therefore she not only had one of her own servants at work, out of sight in the little tent behind her, but several men who were more or less friends of hers had succeeded each other as her assistants during the long afternoon. They belonged to the younger generation of

Romans, a set of young men whom their parents certainly never dreamt that they were rearing and whom their grandfathers and grandmothers count with the sons of Belial, largely because they love their country better than the decrepit and forlorn traditions of other days. Forty years ago it would not have occurred to a Roman gentleman to call himself an Italian, but to-day most of his children call themselves Italians first and Romans afterwards, and to these younger ones Italy is a great reality. It is true that Romans have not lost their dislike of the inhabitants of almost all other Italian cities, whether of the south or the north. The Roman dislikes the Neapolitan, the Piedmontese and the Bolognese with small difference of degree, and very much as they and the rest all dislike each other. Italy has its sects, like Christianity, which mostly live on bad terms with each other when forcibly brought together in peaceable private life—like Presbyterians, Methodists, Anglicans, and Baptists, not to mention Roman Catholics. But as it is to be hoped that all Christians would unite against an inroad of heathens, so it is quite certain that all Italians would now stand loyally together for their country against any enemy that should try to dismember it. No one who can recall the old time before the unification can help seeing what has been built up. It is a good thing, it is a monument in the history of a race; as it grows, the petty landmarks of past politics disappear in the distance, to be forgotten, or at least forgiven, and the mountain of what Italy has accomplished stands out boldly in the political geography of modern Europe.

Moreover, those who are too young to have helped in the work are nevertheless proud of what has been done; and this is itself a form of patriotism that brings with it the honest and good hope of doing something in the near future not unworthy of what was well done in the recent past.

The young men who helped Maria Montalto to mix lemonade and almond syrup for her stall were of this generation, all between twenty and thirty years old, and mostly of those who follow the line of least resistance from the start of life to the finish. They are all easily amused, because in their hearts they wish to be amused, and for the same reason they are easily bored when there is no amusement at all in the air. They are not bad fellows, they are often good sportsmen, and they are generally not at all vicious. They are not particularly good, it is true, but then they are very far from bad. They have less time for flirting and general mischief than their fathers had, because it now seems to be necessary to spend many hours of each day in a high-speed motor car, which is not conducive to the growth and blooming of the passion flower. It does not promote the development of the intelligence either, but that is a secondary consideration with people who need never know that they have minds. Morally, motoring is probably a good rather than an evil. People who live in constant danger of their lives are usually much more honest and fearless than those who dawdle through an existence of uneventful safety. The soldier in time of peace was the butt and laughing-stock of the ancients in the comedies of Plautus and Terence, and of the Greeks, whom those playwrights copied or adapted, but no such contemptuous use has ever

been made of the sailor, whose life is in danger half a dozen times in every year.

Oderisio Boccapaduli was squeezing a lemon into a glass for Maria when he saw her hand shake as if it had been struck, and the spoon which she was going to use for putting the powdered sugar into the glass fell from her fingers upon the metal counter with a sharp clatter. Oderisio glanced sideways at her face without interrupting the squeezing of the lemon, and he saw that the characteristic warmth had disappeared all at once from her natural pallor and that her white cheeks looked as cold as if she were in an ague. She was looking down when she took up the spoon again and drew the polished brass sugar-can nearer to her. The young man was quite sure that something had happened to disturb her, and he could only suppose that she felt suddenly tired and ill, or else that some one had appeared in sight not far from the booth, whose presence was unexpected and disagreeable enough to give her a bad shock.

But he knew much more about her than Angelica Campodonico, for he was six-and-twenty, and had been seventeen himself when Maria had married, and nineteen when Montalto had left her; and since he had finished his military service and had been at large in society he had learned pretty much all that could be known about people who belonged to his set. He therefore scrutinised the faces in the near distance, and presently he saw one which he had not seen in Rome for several years; once more he glanced sideways at Maria, and her hand was unsteady as she gave

the full glass to a respectable old gentleman who was waiting for it in an attitude of admiration.

The face was that of a man who was Oderisio’s cousin in a not very distant degree, and who bore the honourable and historical name of Baldassare del Castiglione. He was looking straight at Maria and was coming slowly towards her.

Then Oderisio, who was an honest gentleman, saw that something unpleasant was going to happen, and on pretence of bringing fresh glasses from behind the booth, he slipped under the curtain into the tent; but instead of getting the tumblers he quietly took his hat and stick and went away, telling the servant that he would send his brother or a friend to help the Contessa, as he was obliged to go home. Moreover, he carefully avoided passing in front of the booth lest Maria should think that he was watching her, and he went off to another part of the Kermess.

Meanwhile the old gentleman drank his lemonade, and it chanced that no other customer was at the counter when Castiglione reached it and took off his hat. He was a square-shouldered man of thirty or a little less, with short and thick brown hair and a rather heavy moustache, such as is often affected by cavalrymen; his healthy, sunburnt face made his rather hard eyes look very blue, and the well-shaped aquiline nose of the martial type, with the solid square jaw, conveyed the impression that he was a born fighting man, easily roused and soon dangerous, somewhat lawless and violent by nature, but brave and straightforward.

He took off his hat and bowed as he came up, neither stiffly nor at all familiarly, but precisely as he would have

bowed to ninety-nine women out of a hundred whom he knew. He did not put out his hand, and he did not speak for a moment, apparently meaning to give Maria a chance to say something.

Her hand was no longer shaking now, but the warmth had not come back to her face, and when she slowly looked up and met the man's eyes her own were coldly resentful. She did not speak; she merely met his look steadily, by an effort of will which he was far from understanding at the moment.

'I have left Milan on a fortnight's leave,' he said quietly. 'Will you let me come and see you?'

'Certainly not.'

The decided answer was given in a voice as calm as his own, but the tone would have convinced most men that there was to be no appeal from the direct refusal. Castiglione's features hardened and his jaw seemed more square than ever. There was a look of brutal strength in his face at that moment, though his voice was gentle when he spoke.

'Have you never thought of forgiving me?' he asked.

'I have prayed that I might.' Maria fixed her eyes fearlessly on his.

'But your prayer has not been answered, I suppose,' he said, with some contempt, and with an evident lack of belief in the efficacy of prayer in general.

'No,' Maria answered. 'God has not yet granted what I ask every day.'

Castiglione looked at her still. It was strange that the face of such a man should be capable of many shades of

expression, so subtle that only a portrait painter of genius could have defined them and reproduced any one of them, while most men would hardly have noticed them all. Yet every woman with whom he talked felt that his face often said more than his words.

The keen blue light in his eyes softened at Maria's simple answer to his contemptuous speech; the strength was in his face still, but without the brutality. She saw, and remembered why she had loved him too well, and when he spoke she turned away lest she should remember more.

'I beg your pardon for what I said. I am sorry. Please forgive me.'

'Yes,' she answered, 'I can forgive that, for you did not mean it.'

She looked behind her, for she had been expecting Oderisio to come back at any moment. The booth was so small that she could lift the curtain without leaving the counter. She looked under it and saw that Oderisio was gone, and she guessed that he knew something and had seen Castiglione coming; instead of being grateful to him for leaving her, she at first resented his going away and bit her lip; for she was a very womanly woman, and every woman is annoyed that any man should know any secret of hers which she has not told him. But later, when she was thinking over what had happened, she felt that Oderisio had done what a gentleman should, according to his lights; for he must have known that the two had not seen each other for years, and that such a meeting could hardly take place without some show of feeling on one side or the other.

Castiglione thanked her gently for her answer, and was going to say more, but she interrupted him, and suddenly began to busy herself with a lemon and a glass.

‘I am making you a lemonade,’ she said in a low voice. ‘There are some people we know coming to the booth. Do not turn round to look.’

The new-comers were two rather young women and a man who was not the husband of either. Castiglione knew them too, as Maria was well aware, and she would not have let them find him there, talking to her, without so much as a lemonade for an excuse.

But the necessity for the small artifice, the low tone in which she had been obliged to speak, and, above all, the close connection of that necessity with the past, had slightly changed the situation.

‘I shall go to your house to-morrow at three o’clock,’ said Castiglione in a tone which the approaching party could not possibly have heard. ‘Not much sugar, if you please,’ he added very audibly and without pausing a second.

Again she bit her lip a little, and she drew a short breath which he heard, and she shook her head, but it was impossible to answer him otherwise, for the three new-comers were close to the booth, and a moment later they were greeting her and Castiglione. The man was one of the now numerous Saracinesca tribe, a married son of the gigantic old Marchese di San Giacinto, who was still alive, and who had married Flavia Montevarchi nearly forty years earlier. His companions were the Marchesa di Parenzo, the Roman wife of a gentleman of Bologna, and Donna Teresa Crescenzi, whose wild husband had been killed in a motor-

car accident at last, and who was supposed to be looking for another. The Marchesa di Parenzo was Maria Montalto's most faithful friend, and Donna Teresa was one of the most accomplished gossips in Rome.

An accomplished gossip is one who tells stories which sound as if they might be true. This kind is very dangerous.

Neither of these two ladies knew all the truth about Maria and Castiglione; the difference between them was that the Marchesa never talked of the story, whereas Donna Teresa had concocted a tale which she repeated at intervals in the course of years, with constantly increasing precision of detail and dramatic sequence, till society had almost accepted it as an accurate account of what had taken place.

In actual fact there was not a word of truth in it, except that Maria and Castiglione had loved each other dearly. Donna Teresa was a tolerably good-natured woman on the whole, however, and her story gave Maria credit for the most splendid self-sacrifice and the most saintly life; it represented Baldassare del Castiglione as a hero worthy of his knightly ancestor and a perfect Galahad, so far as Maria was concerned; and it threw every particle of the blame on Montalto, who had left his wife to go and live in Spain, and was therefore permanently enrolled amongst those absent friends whose healths are drunk at family gatherings with a secret prayer that they may remain absent for ever, and whose characters may be torn to rags and tatters with perfect safety.

Donna Teresa had reached the point of believing her own story. She said she had been present at almost every crisis in the two years' drama which had so completely separated

three people that they apparently meant never to set eyes on one another again; she had consoled the lovers, she had inspired them with courage to sacrifice themselves, and had metaphorically dried their scalding tears; and she had spoken her mind to that monster of brutality, the Count of Montalto. In fact, she had contributed to his determination to go away for ever and to leave his poor young wife to bring up his son in peace.

Maria knew Donna Teresa's story well, for her friend Giuliana Parenzo had told it to her; and as Maria was in no way called upon to make a public denial of it, she simply said nothing and was grateful to the gossip for treating her so kindly. Giuliana was not curious, and if she rightly guessed some part of the secret which her friend had never told her, she would not for worlds have asked her a question.

The three new-comers were all in the best possible humour, and the ladies wore perfectly new spring frocks of the very becoming model that was in fashion that spring; the one was of the palest grey and the other of the softest dove-colour. Giuliana was a dark woman with a quiet face; Teresa Crescenzi was very fair, fairer, perhaps, than all probability, and when she was excited she screamed.

'Dear Maria!' she cried in a high key, after the first words of greeting. 'You are quite adorable in that costume! The Princess Campodonico was saying just now that it is a real pleasure to see you in colours at last. Maria has worn nothing but black and grey for seven years,' added the lively lady, turning to Castiglione.

‘We all are dying of thirst,’ said Giuliana, seeing the look of annoyance in her friend’s face. ‘We all want lemonade, and we all want it at once. Won’t you let me come inside and help you?’

‘No, dear,’ answered Maria with a grateful look. ‘I really do not need help, and you do not look at all like a Neapolitan Acquaiola in that frock! Besides, Oderisio Boccapaduli is supposed to be my adjutant, but he has gone off to smoke a cigarette.’

She was very busy, and Donna Teresa turned to Castiglione.

‘And where in the world have you been since I met you in Florence last year?’ she asked. ‘I thought your regiment was coming to Rome at the beginning of the winter. I am sure you told me so.’

‘You are quite right. My old regiment came to Rome before Christmas, but I had already exchanged into another.’

In spite of herself Maria glanced at Castiglione as he spoke, but he was not looking at her, nor even at Donna Teresa. From the place where the booth was situated he could see a certain clump of ilex-trees that grow near what has always been called the Piazza di Siena, I know not why. Maria saw that his eyes were fixed on that point, and she shivered a little, as if she felt cold.

‘Why did you exchange?’ Donna Teresa asked, with the shameless directness of a thoroughly inquisitive woman. ‘Did you quarrel with your colonel, or fight a duel with a brother officer?’

Castiglione smiled and looked at her.

‘Oh, no! Nothing so serious! It was only because I was sure that you no longer loved me, dear Teresa!’

The younger generation of Romans, who have grown up more gregariously than their parents did, very generally call each other by their first names. Even Giuliana laughed at Castiglione’s answer, and Maria herself smiled quite naturally. Five minutes earlier she would not have believed that anything could make her smile while he stood there, and she was displeased with herself for being amused. It was as if she had yielded a little where she meant never to yield again.

Donna Teresa herself laughed louder than Giuliana.

‘The impertinence of the man!’ she screamed. ‘As if I did not know that curiosity is my besetting sin, without being reminded of it in that brutal way! I, love you, Balduccio? I detest you! You are an odious man!’

‘You see!’ he answered. ‘I was quite right to exchange! And since you admit that you find me odious, this is an excellent moment for me to go away!’

He put down a gold piece on the metal counter to pay for the lemonade which he had not drunk, for he was a poor man and could not afford to be mean. As a matter of fact, the lemonade which Maria had so hastily begun to make for him had been finished for Teresa Crescenzi, but no one had noticed that, and it was all for charity.

Donna Teresa protested that it was atrocious of him to go away, but he was quite unmoved. He only smiled at everybody, took young Saracinesca’s outstretched hand and lifted his hat in a vague way to the three ladies without looking particularly at any of them. Then he turned and

went off at a leisurely pace, and soon disappeared in the crowd. Teresa watched Maria Montalto’s face narrowly, but she could not detect the slightest change of expression in it, either of disappointment or of satisfaction. Maria had recovered herself and the sweet warmth was in her pale cheeks again.

The spring sun was low and golden, and for a few moments the pretty scene took more colour; by some inexplicable law of nature the many laughing voices rang more musically as the light grew richer, just before it began to fade. It was the last day of the fair, and Maria knew that she should never forget it.

Then the chill came that always falls just before sunset in Rome, and the people felt it and began to hurry away. No one would ask for another lemonade now.

Before Maria went home she put the money she had taken into a rather shabby grey velvet bag. For a few moments she stood still, watching the fast-diminishing crowd in the distance and the changing light on the trunks of the pines. Then her eyes fell unawares on the ilexes, and she started and instantly bent down her head so as not to see them, and her hands tightened a little on the old velvet bag she held. Without looking up again she turned and went under the curtain to the back of the booth where her footman was waiting with a long cloak that quite hid her pretty costume; and she covered her head and the crimson kerchief with a thick black lace veil, and went away towards the avenue where her brougham was waiting.

Just before she reached it, and as if quite by accident, Oderisio Boccapaduli came strolling by. He helped her to get

in and begged her to excuse him if he had not come back to the booth before she had left it, adding that he had met his mother, which was quite true, and that she had detained him, which was a stretch of his imagination.

‘Get in with me,’ Maria answered as he stood at the open door of the carriage. ‘If you are going away, too, I will take you into town and drop you wherever you like.’

He thanked her and accepted the invitation with alacrity, though he wondered why it was given. He could not have understood that she was physically afraid to be alone with her memory just then.

CHAPTER II

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Maria asked her friend Giuliana Parenzo to lunch with her the next day. If Baldassare Castiglione came at three o’clock, and if it seemed wiser not to refuse him the door outright, he should at least not find her alone.

The Countess occupied one floor of a rather small house in the broad Via San Martino, near the railway station. It was a sunny apartment, furnished very simply but very prettily. After her husband had left her she had declined to accept any allowance from him and had moved out of the old palace, in which the state apartment was now shut up, while the rest of the great building was now occupied by a cardinal, an insurance company, and a rich Chicago widow. Maria lived on her own fortune, which was not large, but was enough, as she had been an only child and both her parents were dead.

Giuliana sat on her right at the small square table, and on her left was seated a sturdy boy over eight years old, and lately promoted to sailor’s clothes. Why are all boys now supposed to go to sea between six and eight or nine, or even until ten and twelve?

Leone was a handsome child. He had thick brown hair and a fair complexion; his bright blue eyes flashed when he was in a rage, as he frequently was, and his jaw was already square and strong. Maria was the only person who could manage him, and was apparently the only one to whom he could become attached. He behaved very well with Giuliana Parenzo; but though she did her best to make him fond of

her, she was quite well aware that she never succeeded in obtaining anything more from him than a kind of amusing boyish civility and polite toleration. As for nurses, he had made the lives of several of them so miserable that they would not stay in the house, and Maria had now emancipated him from women, greatly to his delight. He submitted with a tolerably good grace to being dressed and taken to walk by a faithful old man-servant who had been with Maria's father before she had been born. He was not what is commonly known as a 'naughty boy'; he spoke the truth fearlessly, and did not seek delight in torturing animals or insects; but his independence and his power of resistance, passive and active, were amazing for such a small boy, and he seemed not to understand what danger was. Maria did not remember that he had ever cried, either, even when he was in arms. Altogether, at the age of eight, Leone di Montalto was a personage with whom it was necessary to reckon.

Maria knew that she loved him almost to the verge of weakness, but she would not have been the woman she was if she had been carried beyond that limit. He was all she had left in life, and so far as lay in her she meant that he should be a Christian gentleman. Nature seemed to have made him without fear; and Maria would have him reach a man's estate without reproach. It was not going to be easy, but she was determined to succeed. It was the least she could do to atone for her one great fault.

Without reproach he should grow up, for his very being was a reproach to her. That was the bitterest thing in her lonely existence, that the sight of what she loved best, and

in the best way, should always remind her of the blot in her own life, of that moment of half-consenting weakness when she had been at the mercy of a desperate, daring, ruthless man whom she could not help loving. It was cruel that her only great consolation, the one living creature on whom she had a right to bestow every care and thought of her loving heart, should for ever call up the vision of her one and only real sin.

There were moments when the mother’s devotion to her child felt like a real temptation, when she asked herself in self-torment whether it was all for the boy alone, or whether some part of it was not for that which should never be, for what she had fought so hard to thrust out of her heart since the day when she had married Montalto, seven years ago. For she had loved Castiglione even then, and before that, when she had been barely seventeen and he but twenty, and they had danced together one autumn evening at the Villa Montalto, at a sort of party that had not been considered a real party, and to which her mother had taken her because she wished to go to it herself, or perhaps because she wanted Montalto to see her pretty daughter and fall in love with her before she was out of the schoolroom.

And that was what had happened. It had all been fated from the first. On that very night Montalto fell in love with her, and she with Baldassare del Castiglione, whom she had called Balduccio, and who had called her Maria, ever since they had known each other as little children. On that night she had felt that he was a man, and no longer a boy. It was the first time she had seen him in his new officer’s uniform,

for it was not a week since he had got his commission. But she had hardly known Montalto, who had been brought up much more in Spain and Belgium than in Rome, because his mother was Spanish and his father had been a block of the old school, who feared the (godless) education of modern Italy.

Giuliana Parenzo was a year or two older than Maria, and the latter had felt for her the boundless admiration which very young girls sometimes have for those slightly older ones in whom they see their ideals. Giuliana had been a thoroughly good girl, had married happily, was a thoroughly good wife, and was the conscientious mother of five children; but she was very far from being the saintly heroine her friend's imagination had made of her.

She was morally lucky. Without in the least depreciating the intrinsic value of her virtue, it is quite fair to ask what she might have done if she had ever been placed in the same situation as her friend. But this never happened to her, though she was apparently not without those gifts and qualities that suggest enterprise on the part of admirers. She had been a very pretty girl, and in spite of much uneventful happiness and five children she was considered to be a beautiful woman at nine-and-twenty; and, moreover, she was extremely smart. In looks she was not at all like a rigid Roman matron.

But temptation had not come her way; it had passed by on the other side, and she could hardly understand how it could exist for others, since it certainly had never existed for her. There are people who go through life without accidents; they cross the ocean in utterly rotten steamers without

knowing of the danger, they travel in the last train that runs before the one that is wrecked, they go out in high-speed motors with rash amateur chauffeurs who are killed the very next day, they leave the doomed city on the eve of the great earthquake, and the theatre five minutes before the fire breaks out.

Similarly, there are women who are morally so lucky that an accident to their souls is almost an impossibility. Giuliana Parenzo was one of them, and Maria's affection gave her credit for strength because she had never faced a storm. Not that it mattered much, after all. The important thing was that Maria, even at the worst crisis of her young life, had always looked upon her spotless friend as her guide and her ideal. Yet there had been a time when it would have been only too easy for her to look another way.

To-day Maria had turned to Giuliana naturally in her difficulty. It was hardly a trouble yet, but Castiglione's return and his intended visit were the first incidents that had disturbed her outwardly peaceful life in all the seven years that had passed since her husband had left Rome. The rest had been within her.

It would not last long. Castiglione had said that he had only a fortnight's leave, and with the most moderate desire to avoid him, she need not meet him more than two or three times while he was in Rome. To refuse to receive him once would perhaps look to him like fear or weakness, and she believed that she was strong and brave; yet she did not wish to see him alone, not because she was afraid of him, but because to be alone with him a few moments, even as