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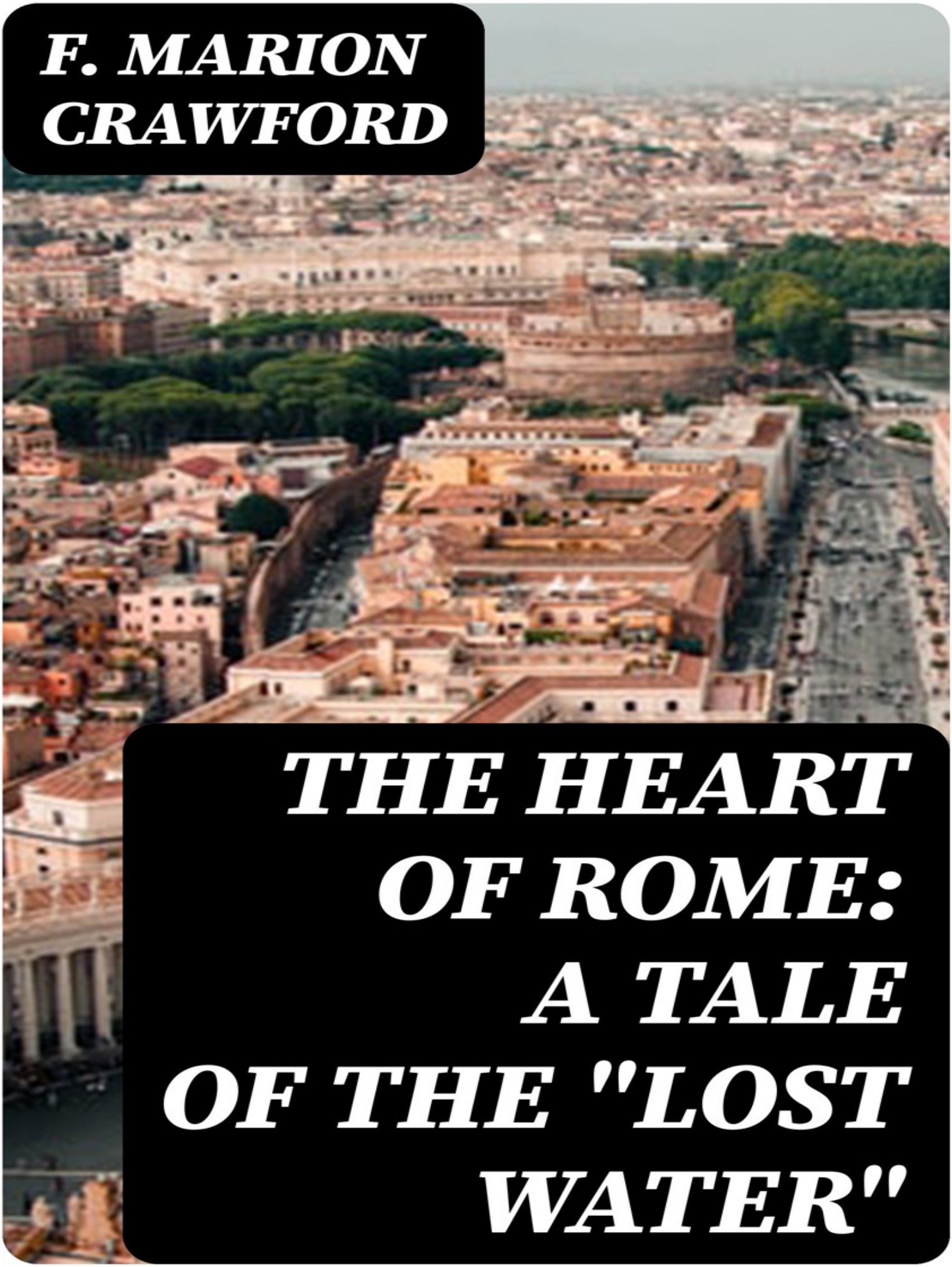

THE HEART OF ROME: A TALE OF THE "LOST WATER"

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THE HEART OF ROME

CHAPTER I

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The Baroness Volterra drove to the Palazzo Conti in the heart of Rome at nine o'clock in the morning, to be sure of finding Donna Clementina at home. She had tried twice to telephone, on the previous afternoon, but the central office had answered that "the communication was interrupted." She was very anxious to see Clementina at once, in order to get her support for a new and complicated charity. She only wanted the name, and expected nothing else, for the Conti had very little ready money, though they still lived as if they were rich. This did not matter to their friends, but was a source of constant anxiety to their creditors, and to the good Pompeo Sassi, the steward of the ruined estate. He alone knew what the Conti owed, for none of them knew much about it themselves, though he had done his best to make the state of things clear to them.

The big porter of the palace was sweeping the pavement of the great entrance, as the cab drove in. He wore his working clothes of grey linen with silver buttons bearing the

ancient arms of his masters, and his third best gold-laced cap. There was nothing surprising in this, at such an early hour, and as he was a grave man with a long grey beard that made him look very important, the lady who drove up in the open cab did not notice that he was even more solemn than usual. When she appeared, he gave one more glance at the spot he had been sweeping, and then grounded his broom like a musket, folded his hands on the end of the broomstick and looked at her as if he wondered what on earth had brought her to the palace at that moment, and wished that she would take herself off again as soon as possible.

He did not even lift his cap to her, yet there was nothing rude in his manner. He behaved like a man upon whom some one intrudes when he is in great trouble.

The Baroness was rather more exigent in requiring respect from servants than most princesses of the Holy Roman Empire, for her position in the aristocratic scale was not very well defined.

She was not pleased, and spoke with excessive coldness when she asked if Donna Clementina was at home. The porter stood motionless beside the cab, leaning on his broom. After a pause he said in a rather strange voice that Donna Clementina was certainly in, but that he could not tell whether she were awake or not.

"Please find out," answered the Baroness, with impatience. "I am waiting," she added with an indescribable accent of annoyance and surprise, as if she had never been kept waiting before, in all the fifty years of her more or less fashionable life.

There were speaking-tubes in the porter's lodge, communicating with each floor of the great Conti palace, but the porter did not move.

"I cannot go upstairs and leave the door," he said.

"You can speak to the servant through the tube, I suppose!"

The porter slowly shook his massive head, and his long grey beard wagged from side to side.

"There are no servants upstairs," he said. "There is only the family."

"No servants? Are you crazy?"

"Oh, no!" answered the man meditatively. "I do not think I am mad. The servants all went away last night after dinner, with their belongings. There were only sixteen left, men and women, for I counted them."

"Do you mean to say—" The Baroness stopped in the middle of her question, staring in amazement.

The porter now nodded, as solemnly as he had before shaken his head.

"Yes. This is the end of the house of Conti."

Then he looked at her as if he wished to be questioned, for he knew that she was not really a great lady, and guessed that in spite of her magnificent superiority and coldness she was not above talking to a servant about her friends.

"But they must have somebody," she said. "They must eat, I suppose!
Somebody must cook for them. They cannot starve!"

"Who knows? Who knows? Perhaps they will starve."

The porter evidently took a gloomy view of the case.

"But why did the servants go away in a body?" asked the Baroness, descending from her social perch by the inviting ladder of curiosity.

"They never were paid. None of us ever got our wages. For some time the family has paid nobody. The day before yesterday, the telephone company sent a man to take away the instrument. Then the electric light was cut off. When that happens, it is all over."

The man had heard of the phenomenon from a colleague.

"And there is nobody? They have nobody at all?"

The Baroness had always been rich, and was really trying to guess what would happen to people who had no servants.

"There is my wife," said the porter. "But she is old," he added apologetically, "and the palace is big. Can she sweep out three hundred rooms, cook for two families of masters and dress the Princess's hair? She cannot do it."

This was stated with gloomy gravity. The Baroness also shook her head in sympathy.

"There were sixteen servants in the house yesterday," continued the porter. "I remember when there were thirty, in the times of the old Prince."

"There would be still, if the family had been wise," said the Baroness severely. "Is your wife upstairs?"

"Who knows where she is?" enquired the porter by way of answer, and with the air of a man who fears that he may never see his wife again. "There are three hundred rooms. Who knows where she is?"

The Baroness was a practical woman by nature and by force of circumstances; she made up her mind to go upstairs and see for herself how matters stood. The name of Donna

Clementina might not just now carry much weight beside those of the patronesses of a complicated charitable organization; in fact the poor lady must be in a position to need charity herself rather than to dispense it to others. But the Baroness had a deep-rooted prejudice in favour of the old aristocracy, and guessed that it would afterwards be counted to her for righteousness if she could be the first to offer boundless sympathy and limited help to the distressed family.

It would be thought distinctly smart, for instance, if she should take the Princess, or even one of the unmarried daughters, to her own house for a few days, as a refuge from the sordid atmosphere of debt and ruin, and beyond the reach of vulgar creditors, one of whom, by the way, she knew to be her own excellent husband. The Princess was probably not aware of that fact, for she had always lived in sublime ignorance of everything connected with money, even since her husband's death; and when good Pompeo Sassi tried to explain things, telling her that she was quite ruined, she never listened to what he said. If the family had debts, why did he not borrow money and pay them? That was what he was paid for doing, after all. It was true that he had not been paid for a year or two, but that was a wretched detail. Economy? Had not the Princess given up her second maid, as an extravagance? What more did the man expect?

The Baroness knew all this and reflected upon what she knew, as she deliberately got out of her cab at the foot of the grand staircase.

"I will go upstairs myself," she said.

"Padrona," observed the porter, standing aside with his broom.

He explained in a single word that she was at liberty to go upstairs if she chose, that it was not of the least use to go, and that he would not be responsible for any disappointment if she were afterwards not pleased. There is no language in the world which can say more in one word than the Italian, or less in ten thousand, according to the humour of the speaker.

The Baroness took no notice as she went up the stairs. She was not very tall, and was growing slowly and surely stout, but she carried her rather large head high and had cultivated importance, as a fine art, with some success. She moved steadily, with a muffled sound as of voluminous invisible silk bellows that opened and shut at each step; her outer dress was sombre, but fashionable, and she wore a long gold chain of curious and fine workmanship to carry her hand-glass, for she was near-sighted. Her thick hair was iron-grey, her small round eyes were vaguely dark with greenish lights, her complexion was like weak coffee and milk, sallow, but smooth, even and healthy. She was a strong woman of fifty years, well used to the world and its ways; acquisitive, inquisitive and socially progressive; not knowing how to wish back anything from the past, so long as there was anything in the future to wish for; a good wife for an ambitious man.

The magnificent marble staircase already looked neglected; there were deep shadows of dust in corners that should have been polished, there was a coat of grey dust on the head and shoulders of the colossal marble statue of

Commodus in the niche on the first landing; in the great window over the next, the armorial crowned eagle of the Conti, cheeky, argent and sable, had a dejected look, as if he were moulting.

It was in March, and though the sun was shining brightly outside, and the old porter wore his linen jacket, as if it were already spring, there was a cold draught down the staircase, and the Baroness instinctively made haste up the steps, and was glad when she reached the big swinging door covered with red baize and studded with smart brass nails, which gave access to the grand apartment.

By force of habit, she opened it and went in. There used to be always two men in the outer hall, all day long, and sometimes four, ready to announce visitors or to answer questions, as the case might be. It was deserted now, a great, dismal, paved hall, already dingy with dust. One of the box-benches was open, and the tail of a footman's livery greatcoat which had been thrown in carelessly, hung over the edge and dragged on the marble floor.

The Baroness realized that the porter had spoken the truth and that all the servants had left the house, as the rats leave a sinking ship. One must really have seen an old ship sink in harbour to know how the rats look, black and grey, fat and thin, old and young, their tiny beads of eyes glittering with fright as they scurry up the hatches and make for every deck port and scupper, scrambling and tumbling over each other till they flop into the water and swim away, racing for safety, each making a long forked wake on the smooth surface, with a steady quick ripple like the tearing of thin paper into strips.

The strong middle-aged woman who stood alone in the empty hall knew nothing of sinking vessels or the ways of rats, but she had known incidentally of more than one catastrophe like this, in the course of her husband's ascendant career, and somehow he had always been mysteriously connected with each one. An evil-speaking old diplomatist had once said that he remembered Baron Volterra as a pawn-broking dealer in antiquities, in Florence, thirty years earlier; there was probably no truth in the story, but after Volterra was elected a Senator of the Kingdom, a member of the opposition had alluded to it with piquant irony and the result had been the exchange of several bullets at forty paces, whereby honour was satisfied without bloodshed. The seconds, who were well disposed to both parties, alone knew how much or how little powder there was in the pistols, and they were discreet men, who kept the secret.

The door leading to the antechamber was wide open, and the Baroness went on deliberately, looking about through her hand-glass, in the half light, for the shutters were not all open. Dust everywhere, the dust that falls silently at night from the ancient wooden ceilings and painted beams of Roman palaces, the dust of centuries accumulated above and sifting for ever to the floors below. It was on the yellow marble pier tables, on the dim mirrors in their eighteenth century frames, on the high canopy draped with silver and black beneath which the effigy of another big cheeky eagle seemed to be silently moulting under his antique crown, the emblem of a race that had lived almost on the same spot for eight hundred years, through good and bad repute, but in

nearly uninterrupted prosperity. The Baroness, who hankered after greatness, felt that the gloom was a twilight of gods. She stood still before the canopy, the symbol of princely rank and privilege, the invisible silk bellows were silent for a few seconds, and she wondered whether there were any procurable sum which she and her husband would grudge in exchange for the acknowledged right to display a crowned eagle, cheeky, argent and sable, in their hall, under a canopy draped with their own colours. She sighed, since no one could hear her, and she went on. The sigh was not only for the hopelessness of ever reaching such social greatness; it was in part the outward show of a real regret that it should have come to an untimely end. Her admiration of princes was as sincere as her longing to be one of them; she had at least the melancholy satisfaction of sympathizing with them in their downfall. It brought her a little nearer to them in imagination if not in fact.

The evolution of the snob has been going on quickly of late, and quicker than ever since vast wealth has given so many of the species the balance of at least one sort of power in society. His thoughts are still the same, but his outward shape approaches strangely near to that of the human being. There are snobs now, who behave almost as nicely in the privacy of their homes as in the presence of a duchess. They are much more particular as to the way in which others shall behave to them. That is a test, by the bye. The snob thinks most of the treatment he receives from the world; the gentleman thinks first how he shall act courteously to others.

The Baroness went on and entered the outer reception room, and looking before her she could see through the open doors of the succeeding drawing-rooms, where the windows had been opened or perhaps not closed on the previous evening. It was all vast, stately and deserted. Only ten days earlier she had been in the same place at a great reception, brilliant with beautiful women and handsome men, alive with the flashing of jewels and decorations in the vivid light, full of the discreet noise of society in good-humour, full of faces she knew, and voices familiar, and of the moonlight of priceless pearls and the sunlight of historic diamonds; all of which manifestations she dearly loved.

Her husband had perhaps known what was coming, and how soon, but she had not. There was something awful in the contrast. As she went through one of the rooms a mouse ran from under the fringe of a velvet curtain and took refuge under an armchair. She had sat in that very chair ten days ago and the Russian ambassador had talked to her; she remembered how he had tried to extract information from her about the new issue of three and a half per cent national bonds, because her husband was one of the financiers who were expected to "manipulate" the loan.

A portrait of a Conti in black velvet, by Velasquez, looked down, coldly supercilious, at the empty armchair under which the mouse was hiding. It could make no difference, great or small, to him, whether the Baroness Volterra ever sat there again to talk with an ambassador; he had sat where he pleased, undisturbed in his own house, to the end of his days, and no one can take the past from the dead, except a modern German historian.

Not a sound broke the stillness, except the steady plash of the water falling into the fountain in the wide court, heard distinctly through the closed windows. The Baroness wondered if any one were awake except the old porter downstairs. She knew the house tolerably well. Only the Princess and her two unmarried daughters slept in the apartment she had entered, far off, at the very end, in rooms at the corner overlooking the small square and the narrow street. The rest of the old palace was surrounded by dark and narrow streets, but the court was wide and full of sunshine. The only son of the house, though he was now the Prince, lived on the floor above, with his young wife and their only child, in what had been a separate establishment, after the old Roman custom.

The Baroness went to one of the embrasures of the great drawing-room and looked through the panes at the windows of the upper story. All that she could see were shut; there was not a sign of life in the huge building. Ruin had closed in upon it and all it held, softly, without noise and without pity.

It was their own fault, of course, but the Baroness was sorry for them, for she was not quite heartless, in spite of her hard face. The gloomiest landscape must have a ray of light in it, somewhere. It was all their own fault; they should have known better; they should have counted what they had instead of spending what they had not. But their fall was great, as everything had been in their prosperity, and it was interesting to be connected with it. She faintly hoped Volterra would keep the palace now that they could certainly never pay any more interest on the mortgage, and it was barely possible that she might some day live in it herself,

though she understood that it would be in very bad taste to occupy it at once. But this was unlikely, for her husband had a predilection for a new house, in the new part of the city, full of new furniture and modern French pictures. He had a pronounced dislike for old things, including old pictures and old jewellery, though he knew much about both. Possibly they reminded him of that absurd story, and of his duel at forty paces.

Volterra would sell the palace to the Vatican, with everything in it, and would look about for another lucrative investment. The Vatican bought all the palaces in the market for religious institutions, and when there were not enough "it" built the finest buildings in Rome for its own purposes. Volterra was mildly anti-clerical in politics, but he was particularly fond of dealing with the Vatican for real estate. The Vatican was a most admirable house of business, in his estimation, keen, punctual and always solvent; it was good for a financier to be associated with such an institution. It drove a hard bargain, but there was never any hesitation about fulfilling its obligations to the last farthing. Dreaming over one of his enormous Havanas after a perfect dinner, Baron Volterra, Senator of the Kingdom of Italy, often wondered whether the prosperity of the whole world would not be vastly increased if the Vatican would consent to be the general financial agent for the European nations. Such stability as there would be, such order! Above all, such guarantees of good faith! Besides all that, there were its cordial relations with the United States, that is to say, with the chief source of the world's future wealth! The Senator's strongly-marked face grew sweetly

thoughtful as he followed his own visions in the air, and when his wife spoke of living in an antiquated Roman palace and buying an estate with an old title attached to it, which the King might graciously be pleased to ratify, he playfully tapped his wife's sallow cheek with two fat fingers and smiled in a way that showed how superior he was to such weakness. It was not even worth while to say anything.

Once more the Baroness sighed as she turned from the window. She meant to have her own way in the end, but it was hard to wait so long. She turned from the window, glanced at a beautiful holy family by Bonifazio which hung on the opposite wall above an alabaster table, estimated its value instinctively and went on into the next drawing-room.

As she passed through the door, a low cry of pain made her start and hesitate, and she stood still. The degree of her acquaintance with the members of the family was just such that she would not quite dare to intrude upon them if they had given way to an expression of pardonable weakness under their final misfortune, whereas if they were bearing it with reasonable fortitude she could allow herself to offer her sympathy and even some judicious help.

She stood still and the sound was repeated, the pitiful little tearless complaint of a young thing suffering alone. It was somewhere in the big room, hidden amongst the furniture; which was less stiffly arranged here than in the outer apartments. There were books and newspapers on the table, the fireplace was half-full of the ashes of a burnt-out fire, there were faded flowers in a tall vase near the window, there was the undefinable presence of life in the heavier and warmer air. At first the Baroness had thought that the

cry came from some small animal, hurt and forgotten there in the great catastrophe; a moment later she was sure that there was some one in the room.

She moved cautiously forward in the direction whence the sound had come. Then she saw the edge of a fawn-coloured cloth skirt on the red carpet by an armchair. She went on, hesitating no longer. She had seen the frock only a day or two ago, and it belonged to Sabina Conti.

A very fair young girl was kneeling in the shadow, crouching over something on the floor. Her hair was like the pale mist in the morning, tinged with gold. She was very slight, and as she bent down, her slender neck was dazzling white above the collar of her frock. She was trembling a little.

"My dear Sabina, what has happened?" asked the Baroness Volterra, leaning over her with an audible crack in the region of the waist.

At the words the girl turned up her pale face, without the least start of surprise.

"It is dead," she said, in a very low voice.

The Baroness looked down, and saw a small bunch of yellow feathers lying on the floor at the girl's knees; the poor little head with its colourless beak lay quite still on the red carpet, turned upon one side, as if it were resting.

"A canary," observed the Baroness, who had never had a pet in her life, and had always wondered how any one could care for such stupid things.

But the violet eyes gazed up to hers reproachfully and wonderingly.

"It is dead."

That should explain everything; surely the woman must understand. Yet there was no response. The Baroness stood upright again, grasping her parasol and looking down with a sort of respectful indifference. Sabina said nothing, but took up the dead bird very tenderly, as if it could still feel that she loved it, and she pressed it softly to her breast, bending her head to it, and then kissing the yellow feathers. When it was alive it used to nestle there, almost as it lay now. It had been very tame.

"I suppose a cat killed it," said the Baroness, wishing to say something.

Sabina shook her head. She had found it lying there, not wounded, its feathers not torn—just dead. It was of no use to answer. She rose to her feet, still holding the tiny body against her bosom, and she looked at the Baroness, mutely asking what had brought her there, and wishing that she would go away.

"I came to see your sister," said the elder woman, with something like apology in the tone.

Sabina was still very pale, and her delicate lips were pressed together, but there were no tears in her eyes, as she waited for the Baroness to say more.

"Then I heard the bad news," the latter continued. "I heard it from the porter."

Sabina looked at her quietly. If she had heard the bad news, why had she not gone away? The Baroness began to feel uncomfortable. She almost quailed before the pale girl of seventeen, slender as a birch sapling in her light frock.

"It occurred to me," she continued nervously, "that I might be of use."

"You are very kind," Sabina answered, with the faintest air of surprise, "but I really do not see that you could do anything."

"Perhaps your mother would allow you to spend a few days with me—until things are more settled," suggested the Baroness.

"Thank you very much. I do not think she would like that. She would not wish me to be away from her just now, I am sure. Why should I leave her?"

The Baroness Volterra did not like to point out that the Princess Conti might soon be literally homeless.

"May I ask your mother?" she enquired. "Should you like to come to me for a few days?"

"If my mother wishes it."

"But should you like to come?" persisted the elder woman.

"If my mother thinks it is best," answered Sabina, avoiding the Baroness's eyes, as she resolutely avoided answering the direct question.

But the Baroness was determined if possible to take in one of the family, and it had occurred to her that Sabina would really be less trouble than her mother or elder sister. Clementina was the eldest and was already looked upon as an old maid. She was intensely devout, and that was always troublesome, for it meant that she would insist upon going to church at impossibly early hours, and must have fish-dinners on Fridays. But it would certainly be conferring a favour on the Princess to take Sabina off her hands at such a time. The devout Clementina could take care of herself. With her face, the Baroness reflected, she would be safe

among Cossacks; besides, she could go into a retreat, and stay there, if necessary. Sabina was quite different.

The Princess thought so too, as it turned out. Sabina took the visitor to her mother's door, knocked, opened and then went away, still pressing her dead canary to her bosom, and infinitely glad to be alone with it at last.

There was confusion in the Princess Conti's bedroom, the amazing confusion which boils up about an utterly careless woman of the great world, if she be accidentally left without a maid for twenty-four hours. It seemed as if everything the Princess possessed in the way of clothes, necessary and unnecessary, had been torn from wardrobes and chests of drawers by a cyclone and scattered in every direction, till there was not space to move or sit down in a room which was thirty feet square.

Princess Conti was a very stout woman of about the same age as her visitor, but not resembling her in the least. She had been beautiful, and still kept the dazzling complexion and magnificent eyes for which she had been famous. It was her boast that she slept eight hours every night, without waking, whatever happened, and she always advised everybody to do the same, with an airy indifference to possibilities which would have done credit to a doctor.

She was dressed, or rather wrapped, in a magnificent purple velvet dressing-gown, trimmed with sable, and tied round her ample waist with a silver cord; her rather scanty grey hair stood out about her head like a cloud in a high wind; and her plump hands were encased in a pair of old white gloves, which looked oddly out of place. She was standing in the middle of the room, and she smiled calmly

as the Baroness entered. On a beautiful inlaid table beside her stood a battered brass tray with an almost shapeless little brass coffee-pot, a common earthenware cup, chipped at the edges, and three pieces of doubtful-looking sugar in a tiny saucer, also of brass. The whole had evidently been brought from a small cafe near by, which had long been frequented by the servants from the palace.

Judging from her smile, the Princess seemed to think total ruin rather an amusing incident. She had always complained that the Romans were very dull; for she was not a Roman herself, but came of a very great old Polish family, the members of which had been distinguished for divers forms of amiable eccentricity during a couple of centuries.

She looked at the Baroness, and smiled pleasantly, showing her still perfect teeth.

"I always said that this would happen," she observed. "I always told my poor husband so."

As the Prince had been dead ten years, the Baroness thought that he might not be wholly responsible for the ruin of his estate, but she discreetly avoided the suggestion. She began to make a little apology for her visit.

"But I am delighted to see you!" cried the Princess. "You can help me to pack. You know I have not a single maid, not a woman in the house, nor a man either. Those ridiculous servants fled last night as if we had the plague!"

"So you are going out of town?" enquired the Baroness, laying down her parasol.

"Of course. Clementina has decided to be a nun, and is going to the convent this morning. So sensible of her, poor dear! It is true that she has made up her mind to do it three

or four times before now, but the circumstances were different, and I hope this will be final. She will be much happier."

The Princess stirred the muddy coffee in the chipped earthenware cup, and then sipped it thoughtfully, sipped it again, and made a face.

"You see my breakfast," she said, and then laughed, as if the shabby brass tray were a part of the train of amusing circumstances. "The porter's wife went and got it at some dirty little cafe," she added.

"How dreadful!" exclaimed the Baroness, with more real sympathy in her voice than she had yet shown.

"I assure you," the Princess answered serenely, "that I am glad to have any coffee at all. I always told poor dear Paolo that it would come to this."

She swallowed the rest of the coffee with a grimace, and set down the cup. Then, with the most natural gesture in the world, she pushed the tray a little way across the inlaid table, towards the Baroness, as she would have pushed it towards her maid, and as if she wished the thing taken away. She did it merely from force of habit, no doubt.

Baroness Volterra understood well enough, and for a moment she affected not to see. The Princess had the blood of Polish kings in her veins, mingled with that of several mediatized princes, but that was no reason why she should treat a friend like a servant; especially as the friend's husband practically owned the palace and its contents, and had lent the money with which the high and mighty lady and her son had finally ruined themselves. Yet so overpowering is the moral domination of the born aristocrat

over the born snob, that the Baroness changed her mind, and humbly took the obnoxious tray away and set it down on another table near the door.

"Thank you so much," said the Princess graciously. "It smells, you know."

"Of course," answered the Baroness. "It is not coffee at all! It is made of chicory and acorns."

"I do not know what it is made of," said the Princess, without interest, "but it has an atrociously bad smell, and it has made a green stain on my handkerchief."

She looked at the bit of transparently fine linen with which she had touched her lips, and threw it under the table.

"And Sabina?" began the Baroness. "What shall you do with her?"

"I wish I knew! You see, my daughter-in-law has a little place somewhere in the Maremma. It is an awful hole, I believe, and very unhealthy, but we shall have to stay there for a few days. Then I shall go to Poland and see my brother. I am sure he can arrange everything at once, and we shall come back to Rome in the autumn, of course, just as usual. Sassi told me only last week that two or three millions would be enough. And what is that? My brother is so rich!"

The stout Princess shrugged her shoulders carelessly, as if a few millions of francs more or less could really not be such a great matter. Somebody had always found money for her to spend, and there was no reason why obliging persons should not continue to do the same. The Baroness showed no surprise, but wondered whether the Princess might not have to lunch, and dine too, on some nauseous little mess

brought to her on a battered brass tray. It was quite possible that she might not find five francs in her purse; it was equally possible that she might find five thousand; the only thing quite sure was that she had not taken the trouble to look, and did not care a straw.

"Can I be of any immediate use?" asked the Baroness with unnecessary timidity. "Do you need ready money?"

"Ready money?" echoed the Princess with alacrity. "Of course I do! I told you, Sassi says that two or three millions would be enough to go on with."

"I did not mean that. I am afraid—"

"Oh!" ejaculated the Princess with a little disappointment. "Nothing else would be of any use. Of course I have money for any little thing I need. There is my purse. Do you mind looking? I know I had two or three thousand francs the other day. There must be something left. Please count it. I never can count right, you know."

The Baroness took up the mauve morocco pocket-book to which the Princess pointed. It had a clasp in which a pretty sapphire was set; she opened it and took out a few notes and silver coins, which she counted.

"There are fifty-seven francs," she said.

"Is that all?" asked the Princess with supreme indifference. "How very odd!"

"You can hardly leave Rome with so little," observed the Baroness. "Will you not allow me to lend you five hundred? I happen to have a five hundred franc note in my purse, for I was going to pay a bill on my way home."

"Thanks," said the Princess. "That will save me the trouble of sending for Sassi. He always bores me dreadfully

with his figures. Thank you very much."

"Not at all, dear friend," the Baroness answered. "It is a pleasure, I assure you. But I had thought of asking if you would let Sabina come and stay with me for a little while, until your affairs are more settled."

"Oh, would you do that?" asked the Princess with something like enthusiasm. "I really do not know what to do with the girl. Of course, I could take her to Poland and marry her there, but she is so peculiar, such a strange child, not at all like me. It really would be immensely kind of you to take her, if your husband does not object."

"He will be delighted."

"Yes," acquiesced the Princess calmly. "You see," she continued in a meditative tone, "if I sent her to stay with any of our cousins here, I am sure they would ask her all sorts of questions about our affairs, and she is so silly that she would blurt out everything she fancied she knew, whether it were true or not—about my son and his wife, you know, and then, the money questions. Poor Sabina! she has not a particle of tact! It really would be good of you to take her. I shall be so grateful."

"I will bring my maid to pack her things," suggested the Baroness.

"Yes. If she could only help me to pack mine too! Do you think she would?"

"Of course!"

"You are really the kindest person in the world," said the Princess. "I was quite in despair, when you came. Just look at those things!"

She pointed to the chairs and sofas, covered with clothes and dresses.

"But your boxes, where are they?" asked the Baroness.

"I have not the least idea! I sent the porter's wife to try and find them, but she has never come back. She is so stupid, poor old thing!"

"I think I had better bring a couple of men-servants," said the Baroness. "They may be of use. Should you like my carriage to take you to the station? Anything I can do—"

The Princess stared, as if quite puzzled.

"Thanks, but we have plenty of horses," she said.

"Yes, but you said that all your servants had left last night. I supposed the coachman and grooms were gone too."

"I daresay they are!" The Princess laughed. "Then we will go in cabs. It will be very amusing. By the bye, I wonder whether those brutes of men thought of leaving the poor horses anything to eat, and water! I must really go and see. Poor beasts! They will be starving. Will you come with me?"

She moved towards the door, really very much concerned, for she loved horses.

"Will you go down like that?" asked the Baroness aghast, glancing at the purple velvet dressing-gown, and noticing, as the Princess moved, that her feet, on which she wore small kid slippers, were stockingless.

"Why not? I shall not catch cold. I never do."

The Baroness would have given anything to be above caring whether any one should ever see her, or not, on the stairs of her house in a purple dressing-gown, without stockings and with her hair standing on end; and she

pondered on the ways of the aristocracy she adored, especially as represented by her Excellency Marie-Sophie-Hedwige-Zenaide-Honorine-Pia Rubomirska, Dowager Princess Conti. Ever afterwards she associated purple velvet and bare feet with the idea of financial catastrophe, knowing in her heart that even ruin would seem bearable if it could bring her such magnificent indifference to the details of commonplace existence.

At that moment, however, she felt that she was in the position of a heaven-sent protectress to the Princess.

"No," she said firmly. "I will go myself to the stables, and the porter shall feed the horses if there is no groom. You really must not go downstairs looking like that!"

"Why not?" asked the Princess, surprised. "But of course, if you will be so kind as to see whether the horses need anything, it is quite useless for me to go myself. You will promise? I am sure they are starving by this time."

The Baroness promised solemnly, and said that she would come back within an hour, with her servants, to take away Sabina and to help the Princess's preparations. In consideration of all she was doing the Princess kissed her on both her sallow cheeks as she took her leave. The Princess attached no importance at all to this mark of affectionate esteem, but it pleased the Baroness very much.

Just as the latter was going away, the door opened suddenly, and a weak-looking young man put in his head.

"Mamma! Mamma!" he cried, in a thin tone of distress, almost as if he were going to cry.

He was nearly thirty years old, though he looked younger. He was thin, and pale, with a muddy and spotted

complexion, and his scanty black hair grew far back on his poorly developed forehead. His eyes had a look that was half startled, half false. Though he was carefully dressed he had not shaved, because he could not shave himself and his valet had departed with the rest of the servants. He was the Princess's only son, himself the present Prince, and the heir of all the Conti since the year eleven hundred.

"Mamma!"

"What is the matter, sweetheart?" asked the Princess, with ready sympathy. "Your hands are quite cold! Are you ill?"

"The child! Something has happened to it—we do not know—it looks so strange—its eyes are turned in and it is such a dreadful colour—do come—"

But the Princess was already on her way, and he spoke the last words as he ran after her. She turned her head as she went on.

"For heaven's sake send a doctor!" she cried to the Baroness, and in a moment she was gone, with the weak young man close at her side.

The Baroness nodded quickly, and when all three reached the door she left the two to go upstairs and ran down, with a tremendous puffing of the invisible silk bellows.

"The Prince's little girl is very ill," she said, as she passed the porter, who was now polishing the panes of glass in the door of his lodge, because he had done the same thing every morning for twenty years.

He almost dropped the dingy leather he was using, but before he could answer, the cab passed out, bearing the

Baroness on her errand.