Le Queux William

Behind the Throne

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Le Queux W.

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Содержание

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Chapter One
The Cat's-Paw

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

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

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

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

"And your share, my dear Angelo?"

"That is apart. I have arranged it."

"And they'll profit a million, and dress our unfortunate infantry in shoddy?"

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

"But the boots? – the contract is for boots as well."

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

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

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

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

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

Morini and Borselli had for years assisted each other, or, to be more truthful, Morini, who seemed to exercise a kind of animal magnetism over men, had used Borselli for his own ends, and the Under-Secretary had been the Minister's cat's-paw ever since the days of Victor Emmanuel when they were deputies together at Montecitorio. Upon the stormy sea of Italian politics they had sailed

together, and although many times they had run before the wind towards the shoals of exposure, they had somehow always managed to escape disaster.

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

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

A born leader of men, gifted with a marvellous tact, a keen, clear foresight, a wide knowledge of men, and a deep, wily cunning, he held the confidence of his sovereign, the late lamented king, and took care that nothing occurred to shake or to imperil it. He was a *poseur*, and owed his position to his ingenious methods and his plausible tongue. His highly respectable exterior was inspiring, and the veneer of elegant refinement of manner had opened to him the best social circles in Rome and Paris. He was a good linguist, and had been an advocate in Florence in the days when he made the law a stepping-stone into politics and fat emoluments.

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

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

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

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

Camillo Morini snapped his bony fingers, but still remained silent. At heart he longed to free himself of all this dishonesty at the expense of the comfort and safety of the army. Indeed he knew that by such transactions his country was being imperilled. Recent disasters in Abyssinia had been due directly to the defective arms and ammunition supplied to the troops. The contractors had all paid him heavy bribes, and the brave sons of Italy had gone forth armed with rubbish, and were defeated in consequence.

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

"Perhaps you consider a hundred thousand francs not quite enough?" remarked the man behind him. "I told the agent in London yesterday, when he came to Claridge's, that I expected you would want another twenty thousand, but he said his firm could not possibly afford it. He is remaining in

London until to-morrow for your decision. He intended to come down here and see you, but I forbade it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Two
Friends of her Excellency

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She was twenty-one, with perfect, regular features, a pointed chin, dark chestnut hair, and a pair of large, lustrous eyes in which gleamed all the fire and passion of the sunny South. Her figure, neat-waisted and well-proportioned, was always admired in the salons of Rome and Florence, and she had for the past couple of years been the reigning beauty in the official and diplomatic world of the Eternal City.

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

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

As she crossed the lawn that warm August afternoon, plainly attired in her cream flannel skirt and pale blue blouse, there could be no two opinions regarding her marvellous beauty. It was of an unusual kind, a combination of the handsome classic model of the ancients with the sweet womanliness of modern life. Her carriage, too, was superb. The casual observer, watching her retreating form, would not require to look twice to recognise that she was of foreign birth; for no Englishwoman carries herself with that easy, elastic swing which is inherent in the Italian girl of the upper class. Yet, perhaps owing to her mother's English birth and teaching, she admired to the full everything that was British. She was a keen, outspoken critic of all things Italian, and was never so happy as when they were living unostentatiously in semi-privacy for those two welcome months each year in rural Leicestershire.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was tall, slender, and athletic, with pale, refined features and a look of thoughtful and reticent calm. People looked at him far oftener than they did at handsomer men. It was one of those faces which suggest the romance of fate, and his eyes, under their straight brows and their drooping lids, could gaze at women with an honest, open look. And yet women seldom saw him for the first time without thinking of him when he had passed from sight. He aroused at a first glance a vague speculative interest – he was a man whom women loved, and yet he was utterly unconscious of it all.

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

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

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

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

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

"Perhaps you speak Italian?" she hazarded in that language.

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

"Why, you speak like a born Italian!" she laughed. "It is so difficult for us English to roll our r's – to give the exact accent, for instance, to *cane* and to *carne*. Over those two words we make ourselves ridiculous." They had entered the wood, where the damp smell of decaying leaves, so essentially English, met their nostrils, and were strolling up one of the mossy paths in the cool shadow. Yes, she

was certainly lovely, he reflected. Report had not lied about her. She was more beautiful than any woman he had ever before beheld, more graceful, more cosmopolitan.

Morini? Morini? Yes, he had heard the name before. It was not at all uncommon in Tuscany. She was Anglo-Italian, and the girl born of Anglo-Italian parents is perhaps the most charming and cosmopolitan of any in Europe.

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

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

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

The two men faced each other.

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

"You!" cried the general in surprise, speaking in French. "So you actually have the audacity to pose as a friend of His Excellency, after those very plain words I spoke in the Florence Club! You accept my friend's invitation and dare pay court to mademoiselle! Is this not a dangerous game you are playing, my friend?"

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

"You recollect what I told you?"

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

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

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

Chapter Three
In which Mary Reveals Certain Suspicions

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

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

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

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

"Your songs of old Florence are so charming, so different from everything else in music, mademoiselle," he declared. "We have nothing like them in France. Our *chansons* are, after all, inharmonious rubbish. It is not surprising that you in Italy have a contempt for our literature, our music, and our drama, for it cannot compare with yours. We have had no poet like Dante, no composer like Verdi, no musician like Paganini – and," he added, dropping his voice to a low whisper as he bent quickly to her ear, "no woman so fair as Mary Morini."

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

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

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

Two years ago, while in Rome, he had received an invitation to dine one evening at His Excellency's splendid old palace – once the residence of a Roman prince – and from that time had been on terms of intimacy with the family and one of Mary's most ardent admirers. He spent a good deal of his time in the Eternal City, and had during the past season become a familiar figure in society.

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

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

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

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

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

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

And then?

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

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

"A friend of mine?"

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

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

Then suddenly lowering his voice, he asked abruptly —

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

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

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

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

"You mistrust him – eh?"

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

"But they are very old friends, are they not?"

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

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

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

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

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

"No," he said. "He hates me."

"Why?"

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

"Why?" she repeated. "Tell me!"

"Well, he has cause to hate me – that's all," and he smiled mysteriously.

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

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

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

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

"Because once or twice of late I have noticed how when he has called in Rome and in Florence my father has been disinclined to see him, and that after the fellow's departure he has seemed very thoughtful and preoccupied. More than once, too, I've heard high words between them when they've been closeted together in the study in Rome. I once heard him threaten my father," she added.

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

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

"You are certain – quite certain – that Borselli mentioned the Sazarac affair?" asked the Frenchman, in deep earnestness and surprise. "I mean that you distinctly heard the name of Sazarac mentioned?"

"Distinctly. Why?"

But the Frenchman made no reply. How could he tell her? What she had related revealed to him a strange and startling truth – a truth which held him amazed, aghast.

Chapter Four
Contains a Mystery

In the rector's cosy little study at Thornby, George Macbean sat that same evening smoking his pipe, perplexed and puzzled.

In the zone of light shed by the green-shaded reading-lamp the rector, a stout, good-humoured, round-faced man of forty, sat writing a letter, while his nephew, lounging back in the old leather arm-chair before the fireplace, drew heavy whiffs at his pipe, with his eyes fixed straight upon the well-filled bookcase before him.

That day he had become a changed man.

From the first moment he had bowed to Mary Morini, when his uncle had introduced him at Orton, he had been struck by her marvellous grace and beauty, and this admiration had daily increased until now he was compelled to acknowledge within himself that he was deeply in love with her.

He smiled bitterly as the truth made itself manifest. He had been over head and ears in love with half a dozen women in his time, but he had always in a few weeks discovered their defects, their ambitions, and their lack of womanliness, without which a woman is no woman. He supposed it would be the same again, for he was not a man who wore his heart upon his sleeve.

And yet he had discovered that a mystery surrounded her – a mystery that attracted him.

The dead quiet of the night was unbroken save for the scratching of the rector's pen, for the village of Thornby, like all agricultural villages, goes to bed early and rises with the dawn. The solemn bell in the old church-tower struck ten as Mr Sinclair scribbled the superscription, blotted it, and rose from the table to fill his own pipe.

"Why, George, my boy, you're glum to-night. What's the matter?"

"I really didn't know I was," laughed his nephew. "I was only thinking. And I didn't want to disturb you."

"Nothing disturbs me – except babies in church," declared the big fellow, laughing deeply. He was a good type of the easy-going bachelor parson in the enjoyment of a comfortable living and popularity in local society. He was fond of golf and cricket, was a good judge of a horse, a good shot, and frequently rode to hounds.

He filled his well-coloured briar carefully, lit it, and then casting himself into the chair opposite his nephew, said with a laugh —

"I noticed you were very chummy with Mary Morini. Well, what do you think of her?"

"Very charming," responded the young man, rather annoyed at his uncle's chaff.

"All the men about here rave over her beauty – and they have cause to, no doubt. She's a very entertaining companion and possesses a keen sense of humour – one of those girls who attract a man without being aware of it. That's the chief essential in a woman's grace."

"But who are these Morinis?" inquired Macbean, removing his pipe from his mouth. "Nobody seems to know exactly who or what they are."

"You're quite right," responded his uncle, in a rather changed tone. "Quite between ourselves, I've heard that question asked a good many times. Morini himself seems a bit of a recluse, for he seldom goes anywhere. Indeed, I haven't spoken to him more than half a dozen times in my life. But Madame Morini and her daughter are taken up by the local people because of their apparent affluence and because they rent Orton from Lady Straker."

"What kind of man is this Morini?" asked Macbean, in an idle tone.

"Oh, rather gentlemanly, with a lot of elegant pose. Speaks English very well for a foreigner, and smokes a very excellent brand of cigar. But, if the truth were told, he's looked upon here with a

good deal of suspicion. Ill-natured people say that he's a foreign adventurer who comes here in hiding from the police," he added, laughing.

The young man blew a long cloud of smoke from his lips, and remained silent. He was trying to recall a face he had seen – the face of a man, evidently a foreigner, who had passed them in a dogcart as they were on the road home from Orton. The man's features had puzzled him ever since. They were familiar, yet he could not recollect in what circumstances they had met before.

In his position as secretary to the Member for South-West Norfolk he met many men, yet somehow he held a distinct idea that in the misty past this man had created upon him some impression of evil.

"You recollect," he exclaimed at last, "that just before we came to the cross-roads to Calthorpe we passed a dogcart coming out from Rugby, with a groom in dark green livery."

"Yes. It was Morini's cart. The man in it is a guest at Orton," was the rector's reply. "More than that," he added, "he's said to be engaged – or about to be engaged – to the girl you admire so much."

"Oh, that's interesting!" remarked Macbean. "Do you know the man's name?"

"He's a young French count named Dubard. I've met him here several times; he seems quite a decent fellow for a Frenchman."

"Dubard? Dubard?" repeated the young man aloud, starting forward as though a sudden revelation had flashed upon him. "Surely he can't be Jules Dubard, the – "

"The what?" asked the rector quickly.

His nephew hesitated, recognising how he had narrowly betrayed the secret of that recognition. Then he added quite coolly —

"The Frenchman."

Basil Sinclair, disappointed at this clever evasion, looked his nephew straight in the face, and from the pallor of his cheeks saw that whatever recollections had been conjured up by mention of that name they were evidently the reverse of pleasing.

"His name is certainly Jules, and he is a Frenchman," he said gravely. "But you know something about him. I see it in your face."

The young man smiled, and lolling back again in the big easy-chair, answered with admirable coolness, considering the bewildering truth that had at that moment flashed upon him —

"I am only surprised that Miss Morini should become engaged to a Frenchman. She told me to-day that her greatest regret is that they cannot live in England always."

"Ah, my boy, she's a thorough-going cosmopolitan," replied the rector, his pipe still between his teeth. "Such women always marry foreigners. I daresay her father would object if she wanted to marry an Englishman. He's a man who evidently means his daughter to marry a title."

"In Italy it is rather a claim to distinction not to possess a title," laughed his nephew, recollecting how many penniless counts and marquises he had come across during those happy years when he lived with his Uncle Pietro in the white, half-deserted old city of Pisa.

"Morini is Italian to the backbone, with all the Italian's admiration for England and yet with all the Italian's prejudices. You'll say so when you know him."

"But this count?" exclaimed Macbean. "Tell me what you know about him."

"You know more than I do, my dear George," declared Sinclair, with a sly smile, "only you don't choose to tell me. You hold an opinion that he is not a fit and proper person to become the husband of Morini's daughter. Admit it."

"I don't yet know who Morini really is," responded his nephew, with a clever diplomacy. "You have not yet told me the general impression in the neighbourhood regarding the family."

"As I have already said, they're looked upon with distinct suspicion."

"Because they are foreigners – eh?"

"Possibly. We are very insular here in Leicestershire, notwithstanding the increasing foreign element in the hunting-field."

George slowly knocked the ashes from his pipe, saying —

"We English hold the foreigner in too great contempt. We are apt to forget that there are other Powers constantly conspiring to undermine our strength and to overthrow our sovereignty. The rural stay-at-home entertains a belief in England's security that is really childish in its simplicity, and if we have not a wise king, a strong Cabinet, and shrewd men in our diplomatic service, the mine must explode some day, depend upon it."

"Ah," laughed the rector, "I suppose it's your parliamentary associations that make you talk like that. You told me you sometimes prepare speeches for Morgan-Mason to deliver to his constituents. Is that one of his texts?"

"No, not exactly," replied the other, with a good-humoured smile. "I only speak what I think. The ignorance of the public regarding foreigners is simply appalling. They are in utter ignorance of the state of advancement of certain foreign nations as compared with our own. We are always slow and conservative, while they are quick to adopt new inventions, new ideas, and new schemes of progress."

"Mostly gingerbread," remarked the rector.

"Argument upon that point is unnecessary," said Macbean, growing serious. "I only emphasise the fact that a foreign family in England is at a far greater disadvantage than an English family on the Continent. The former is held in suspicion or shunned, while the latter is fêted and welcomed. Ah, my dear uncle, society, with all its sins and vices, is full of amazing prejudices."

"But of course there is another side to the question of the Morinis," his uncle said. "It got abroad last year that Morini held some very high position in Rome. Young Barton, the schoolmaster at Kilworth, went with one of Lunn's tours to Italy, and when he came back he told an extraordinary story of how the party were being shown the outside of one of the public offices when a gentleman descended from a carriage which drove into the courtyard, and as he entered the sentries saluted. To his surprise he recognised him as Mr Morini, and on inquiry understood from one of the doorkeepers that he was His Excellency the Minister of War. Of course nobody believed him. But I've looked in 'Whitaker,' and, strangely enough, it gives Signor Camillo Morini as Minister of War!"

"Ah, my dear uncle," laughed Macbean, "of course regard it as entirely confidential, but what Barton discovered is the truth. Signor Morini is a member of the Italian Cabinet, and one of the most prominent personages in Italy – and they actually believe him *here* to be an adventurer!" he laughed. "But," he added, "you haven't told me about Dubard."

"I know practically nothing, except that he stayed at Orton for a month last summer, and was very attentive to Mary. And as he's here again this season, the gossips say they are engaged. He is a rich man, I hear, with estates in the Pyrenees."

George Macbean's lip curled slightly, and he gave vent to a distinct sniff of dissatisfaction. He had recognised him as they had passed on the highroad, and yet, until his uncle had mentioned the name of Dubard, he had been puzzled as to the man's actual identity.

To him, the fact that the Frenchman was guest at Orton, and engaged to the Minister's daughter, was utterly staggering. Yet rumour did not say there was really an engagement – or at least it had not been formally announced.

The young man relit his pipe and smoked on in silence, his brows knit, his mind full of a certain scene of the past – a scene conjured up in his memory by sight of that pale, narrow face with the brown moustache – a scene that caused his hands to clench themselves and his teeth to close together firmly.

"Do tell me what you know about the Frenchman," urged the rector.

"No, thank you, my dear uncle," responded the other. "I know too well these gossiping villages, and I hold the law of slander in too great a dread. The count is all right," he laughed. "A very nice fellow, you said."

His uncle saw that he had no intention of saying a word against the visitor at Orton, and yet at the same time it was apparent that he held him in distinct mistrust. Yet, after all, reflected the rector, it was curious that George had not recognised him at once.

Macbean sat back watching the smoke curl slowly up, plunged in deep reflection. That man of all others was to marry Mary Morini! What a cruel vagary of Fate! Did she really love the fellow? he wondered. Had his elegant airs and graces, his stiff poses, and French effeminacy really attracted her? To him it seemed impossible. She was too sweet and womanly, too modest and full of the higher ideals of life, to allow that veneer of polish to deceive her. It might be, of course, that the marriage was to be one of convenience – that the Minister wished his daughter to become a French countess with an ancient title like that of Dubard – yet he could not conceive that she would of her own free will marry such a man.

Evidently His Excellency Camillo Morini was in blind ignorance of the character of his guest, or he would never for a moment entertain him in the bosom of his family.

If they were really engaged, then her future was at stake. He alone knew the truth – that ghastly, amazing truth – and it was therefore his bounden duty to go to her and frankly tell her all that he knew – or better, to seek an interview with the Minister and place the facts before him.

When he had bidden his uncle good-night and mounted to the small old-fashioned bedroom, he blew out the candle and sat at the open window gazing out upon the wide stretch of pasture land white in the moonbeams, reviewing the whole situation and endeavouring to decide upon the best course of action.

Mary Morini had charmed him with her sweet face and piquante cosmopolitan manner, yet at that same moment he had made a discovery that held him dumb in amazement. He recognised that she was in deadly peril – how deadly she little dreamed, and that to save her – to save the honour of her family – he must tell the truth.

He saw before him the tragedy of silence, and yet, alas! his lips were sealed.

To utter one single word of what he knew would be to bring upon himself opprobrium, disgrace, ruin!

Chapter Five
Is Mainly about a Woman

George Macbean had, after a long, sleepless night, made up his mind.

When he descended to breakfast next morning he announced to his uncle his intention of cycling into Rugby, well knowing that the rector had to give a lesson in religious instruction in the village school, and would therefore not be able to accompany him.

So, in determination to meet the Frenchman face to face, to expose him and thus save Mary, even at risk of his own disgrace, he mounted and rode away down the white, dusty highroad.

Instead of going into Rugby, however, he turned off at Lilbourne, and rode over the road along which they had driven the previous evening, to Orton.

Eleven o'clock was certainly a rather unconventional hour for calling, but as he dismounted at the gates and walked his machine up the long, well-kept drive he had already invented an excuse. As he passed the study window he saw within a tall, elderly, grave-faced man in a suit of light grey tweed, and at once recognised that it was His Excellency himself.

In answer to his ring at the door, a young English footman appeared, whereupon he asked —

"Is Count Dubard at home?"

"The count left this morning by the nine o'clock train."

"Left!" echoed Macbean. "And is he not returning?"

"I think not, sir. He took his luggage. But I will inquire if you'll step in a moment."

The man had conducted him across the wide old-fashioned stone hall into a pleasant morning-room which looked out upon the flower-garden and was flooded with sunshine, and after the lapse of a few moments the door reopened and there entered Mary herself, a charming figure in a fresh white blouse and linen skirt.

"Why, Mr Macbean!" she cried, extending her hand gaily. "You are quite an unexpected visitor! Davis says you want to see Count Dubard. He left for Paris this morning."

"And is he not coming back?"

"No, I believe not," was her answer. "He received a letter this morning calling him to Paris at once, and dashed off to try and catch the eleven o'clock service from Charing Cross. He just had time, he said. He was anxious to see you, I think."

"Anxious to see me – why?" asked Macbean quickly.

"Last night he told me that he recognised you as you were driving home with Mr Sinclair, and asked if I knew you. I, of course, told him that you had been playing tennis here. He seemed very eager to see you, and made quite a lot of inquiries about you."

Her companion was silent. The recognition had been mutual, then, and the story of the urgent letter was only an excuse of the Frenchman's to escape from a very ugly and compromising position! His flight showed Macbean that the fellow was in fear of him, and yet he had fortunately avoided a scene between them, and a result which, in all probability, might have caused his own ruin.

He looked at the bright, sweet-faced woman before him, and wondered – wondered how she could allow her affection to be attracted towards such a fellow. And yet what an admirable actor the man was! She was, alas! in ignorance of it all.

How could he tell her? To explain, would only be to condemn himself. No. He resolved that for the present he must conceal his secret – for his own sake. Nevertheless how strange it was, he thought, that he should thus suddenly be drawn so closely towards her. Yesterday she was a mere acquaintance of the tea-table and the tennis-lawn, like dozens of other girls he knew, while to-day he was there as her friend and protector, the man who intended to save her and her family from the ingenious trap that he now saw was already prepared.

"I'm sorry he's gone," he remarked in a tone of regret, adding, "I knew him long ago, and only after we had passed, my uncle told me that he was a guest here."

"He too said he wanted very much to see you," she remarked brightly. "But you'll meet again very soon, no doubt. I shall tell him of your inquiries when I write, for he spoke of you in the warmest terms. I did not know your address in London, so I gave him Mr Sinclair's. I'm so sorry he's gone," she added. "We were to have all gone for a picnic to-day over to Kenilworth."

"And instead of that the central attraction has disappeared," he hazarded, with a smile.

"What do you mean by 'central attraction'?" she asked, flushing slightly.

"My friend Dubard, of course. I suppose what everyone says is correct, Miss Morini, and therefore I may be permitted to congratulate you upon your engagement to my friend?"

"Oh, there is no engagement, I assure you," was her reply, as she looked at him with open frankness, her cheeks betraying a slightly heightened colour. "I know there's quite a lot of gossip about it, but the rumours are entirely without foundation," she laughed; and as she sat there in the deep old window-seat, he recognised that, notwithstanding the refined and dignified beauty of a woman who was brilliant in a brilliant court, she still retained a soft simplicity and a virgin innocence; she was a woman whose first tears would spring from compassion, "suffering with those that she saw suffer." She had no acquired scruples of honour, no coy concealments, no assumed dignity standing in its own defence. Her bashfulness as they spoke together was less a quality than an instinct; like the self-folding flower, spontaneous and unconscious. Cosmopolitan life in that glare and glitter of aristocratic Rome – that circle where, from the innate distrust women have of each other, the dread of the betrayed confidence and jealous rivalry, they made no friends, and were indeed ignorant of the true meaning of friendship, where flattery and hypocrisy were the very air and atmosphere and mistrust lay in every hand-clasp and lurked in every glance – had already opened Mary Morini's eyes to the hollow shams, the manifold hypocrisies, and the lamentable insincerity of social intimacies, and she had recoiled from it with disgust.

She had retained her woman's heart, for that was unalterable and inalienable as a part of her being; but her looks, her language, her thoughts, assumed to George Macbean, as he stood there beneath the spell of her beauty, the cast of the pure ideal.

And yet she loved Jules Dubard!

He bit his lip and gazed out of the old diamond panes upon the tangle of red and white roses around the lawn.

Ah! how he longed to speak to her in confidence – to reveal to her the secret that now oppressed his heart until he seemed stifled by its ghastliness.

But it was utterly impossible, he told himself. Now that Dubard had fled, he must find other and secret means by which to acquaint her with the truth, and at the same time shield himself from the Frenchman's crushing revenge.

He contrived to conceal the storm of emotion that tore his heart, and laughed with her about the unfounded rumours that had got abroad concerning her engagement, saying —

"Of course in a rural neighbourhood like this the villagers invent all kinds of reports based upon their own surmises."

"Yes," she declared. "They really know more about our business than we do ourselves. Only fancy! That I am engaged to marry Count Dubard – ridiculous!"

"Why ridiculous?" he asked, standing before her.

"Well – because it is!" she laughed, her fine eyes meeting his quite frankly. "I'm not engaged, Mr Macbean. So if you hear such a report again you can just flatly deny it."

"I shall certainly do so," he declared, "and I shall reserve my congratulations for a future occasion."

She then turned the conversation to tennis, evidently being averse to the further discussion of the man who had courted and flattered her so assiduously – the man who was her father's friend –

and presently she took Macbean out across the lawn to introduce him to her father, who had seated himself in a long cane chair beneath the great cedar, and was reading his Italian paper.

His Excellency looked up as they approached, whereupon Mary exclaimed —

"This is Mr Macbean, father. He wishes to salute you. He was here yesterday playing tennis, but you were not visible."

"Very glad to meet you, sir," exclaimed Camillo Morini, rising, grasping the young man's hand, and raising his grey felt hat. "You know," he explained, as he reseated himself, "I am a busy man, and so I have but little opportunity of meeting my wife's English friends. But," he added, in very good English, after a slight pause, as he readjusted his gold-rimmed glasses and looked harder at the young man, "if I am not mistaken, we have met before, have we not? I seem to recognise your face."

"Yes, your Excellency," laughed Macbean, whereupon both Mary and her father started in surprise, for it was apparent that their visitor was aware of Morini's true position. "I had the honour of having an audience of your Excellency in Rome. I am secretary to Mr Morgan-Mason, and accompanied him to Rome on the deputation which waited upon you regarding the concession of supplying army stores in Abyssinia."

"Of course, of course!" exclaimed the Minister, suddenly interested. "I recollect quite well. You introduced the deputation, and I remember remarking how well you spoke Italian for an Englishman. Ah yes. I could not give the concession, as it had already been given to a German firm," he added, omitting, however, the real reason, namely, because the English company had offered no secret commission. "And you are secretary to Morgan-Mason? He is a deputy, I believe."

Macbean explained that his employer sat for South-West Norfolk, and in response to other inquiries gave certain information concerning his politics and his social influence, facts of which the clever Minister made a note; for an idea had occurred to him that the monied provision-dealer whose pompousness had struck him as he had sat in his private cabinet at the Ministry of War might be one day of service to him.

All through his career it had been part of Camillo Morini's creed to note persons who might be of assistance to him, and to afterwards use their influence, or their weaknesses, to his advantage. A keen judge of character, he read men's minds as he would an open book. He had recognised the weakness of that white-waistcoated Englishman who was struggling into society, and he resolved that one day both the Member of Parliament and his secretary should be put to their proper uses.

"Mr Macbean called to see Count Dubard, who is a friend of his," his daughter explained.

"Oh, you are acquainted! How curious!" exclaimed His Excellency. "Dubard unfortunately left this morning – because he received a letter which recalled him at once to Paris. But as my valet tells me that no letters arrived for the count this morning, I can only surmise that he was tired of us here, and found country life in England too dull," he laughed knowingly. "I've received the same fictitious letter myself before now, when I've been tired of a host and hostess."

And they all three laughed in chorus. His Excellency was of course unaware of the real reason of Jules Dubard's flight, and the young Englishman smiled within himself as he reflected upon the staggering surprise it would cause that calm, astute man who was such a power in the south of Europe if he knew the actual truth.

"Of course," added Signor Morini, turning to the young man, "you will do me one kind favour? You will not mention to anyone here my true position. I come to England each year for rest and quiet, and if I am unknown no political significance can be attached to my summer visits – you understand?"

"Certainly, your Excellency, I shall respect your wishes," was Macbean's reply, and a few minutes later he took leave of the great statesman and his daughter, and, full of strange conflicting reflections, rode out upon the broad highway back to Thornby.

Chapter Six
Discloses Certain Strange Facts

As Big Ben boomed forth twelve o'clock over London that same night the supper-room at the Savoy was filled to overflowing with a boisterous, well-dressed crowd of after-theatre revellers. The scene was brighter and gayer perhaps than any other scene at that hour in all the giant city. The "smart set," that slangy, vulgar result of society's degeneration, was as largely represented as usual; the women were fair, the jewels sparkled, the dresses were rich, and in the atmosphere was that restlessness, that perpetual craze for excitement which proves so attractive to habitués of the place.

Every table in the great room was engaged, and the company was essentially *le monde ou l'on s'amuse*. But you probably have sat there amid the hurrying of the waiters, the hum of voices, the loud laughter of "smart women," the clinking of champagne-glasses, that babel of noise drowned by the waltzes played by the Hungarian band. The air was heavy with the combined odour of a hundred perfumes, the fresh flowers drooped upon the tables, and the merry company crowded into that last half-hour all the merriment they could before the lights were lowered.

At such places one sees exhibited in public the full, true, and sole omnipotence of money – how it wins the impoverished great ones to be guests of its possessor, how it purchases the smiles of the haughtiest, the favours of the most exclusive.

Lazily watching that animated scene, the two men who had been guests at Orton, Dubard and Borselli, were sitting apart at a small table near the window. A bottle of Krug stood between them, and as they leaned their elbows on the table they criticised their fellow-guests, speaking in Italian, so that their remarks should not be understood by their neighbours.

The band had just concluded Desgranges' "Jalouse," that air so reminiscent of the terrace of the Café de Paris at Monte Carlo, the leader had bowed to the company, and the waiters were busy collecting the banknotes with which the bills were in most cases paid, when the Italian drained his glass, saying —

"Let us go! I've had enough of this! Come on to Claridge's with me for a final cigar."

"A moment?" exclaimed Dubard, his eyes fixed across the room. "Do you see over there, just behind the column, two ladies with a stout man with grey side-whiskers? One of the ladies is in blue. What a terrible vulgarian the fellow is! I've been watching him."

The general glanced in the direction indicated and replied —

"Oh yes, I noticed him as we came in. You're right, my dear Jules, that fellow is a vulgarian. I met him once in Rome. His name is Morgan-Mason, a deputy and very wealthy."

"Morgan-Mason!" echoed the Frenchman, looking hard at him. "Ah!" he added, "I've heard of him, of course. Yes. Let us go," and they both rose, descended by the lift, and drove in a hansom to Claridge's.

In the Under-Secretary's elegant little sitting-room – the room wherein that afternoon he had accepted the German contractor's bribe on Morini's behalf – he drew forth a box of choice cigars, and they both commenced to smoke.

A brief and rather painful silence fell between them. Both men had that evening exhibited towards each other a strained politeness, each knowing that the other hated him. Dubard's defiance on the previous night had upset all the calculations of that past-master of intrigue, Angelo Borselli, whose dark eyes now darted a swift glance at his companion lolling back in the big arm-chair apparently perfectly at his ease.

To Borselli's surprise, and believing that his departure had been due to his threat on the previous night, Dubard had left Rugby for London an hour before he had, but at four o'clock that afternoon

he had sent an invitation to the Carlton, suggesting that they should spend the evening together at a theatre, which they had done.

There was a mystery in the Frenchman's sudden departure from Orton, and in it Borselli suspected an ingenious move. Throughout the whole day he had reasoned within himself, finally coming to the conclusion that it was better to be friendly with such a man as Jules Dubard than to be his enemy.

Dubard had seen during the evening that his companion wished to speak with him but was hesitating. At last, however, after they had smoked in silence for some minutes, the crafty Sicilian stroked his moustache and exclaimed —

"I fear, my dear Jules, that I was rather hasty, perhaps rude, last night. Yet, after all, I am very glad that you took my hint and left Orton."

The Frenchman opened his eyes widely at the man's calm audacity.

"I did not take your hint in the least, I assure you," he exclaimed, with quick indignation. "I left Orton for quite another reason."

The sallow-faced man smiled, as though quite unconscious of his companion's anger.

"Yes," he said. "I know. You cannot deceive me."

"You know?" cried the Frenchman, starting to his feet. "What do you know? Have you invited me up here to threaten me again?"

"I merely say that I know the reason why you received the letter calling you to Paris this morning," replied the Under-Secretary in a cold, calm voice. "It was because you met and were recognised by a certain Englishman named Macbean, the secretary of that vulgar fellow we saw eating his supper half an hour ago."

Dubard's jaw fell. He saw that by some utterly unaccountable means his enemy was aware of the real reason which compelled him to fly from Leicestershire.

Was it possible that he could know the whole truth? No; it was impossible. Macbean dare not speak. Of that he felt quite assured.

"Ah?" continued the general, a grim smile crossing his thin, hard features as he narrowly watched his companion. "You see I am not quite as ignorant of the past as you believe, my dear Jules."

"Nor am I!" cried the Frenchman, turning upon him savagely. "Last night you threatened me, remember!"

"And to-night I have invited you here, my dear friend, to arrive at some amicable agreement that will be to our mutual advantage," answered the clever Under-Secretary, with a suavity of manner which showed him to be a born diplomat.

"Yes, I know," answered the other in a dry, hard voice. "This is not the first time you and I have discussed matters, General Borselli. I know that if it suited you you'd betray your own mother. You have no conscience, no code of honour?"

"My code of honour is exactly the same as yours, *caro mio*," replied the Italian, laughing. "I try to turn all I can into profit for myself, just as you are trying to do. My maxim is 'self first.'"

"And for that reason you are plotting the downfall of Morini and the whole Ministry!"

"A work in which you are actively assisting," added the Under-Secretary.

"I did not come here to be insulted," Dubard protested.

"Neither did I invite you here to pose as a censor of political morality," responded his shrewd companion, looking straight and determinedly into his pale face. "But why should we quarrel, when it is to our mutual interests to remain friendly?"

"I have not quarrelled. Last night you objected to me visiting the Morinis."

"Because I am well aware of your object."

"I admit that I intend to marry Mary," and he removed his cigar from his mouth and examined it.

"And you have also a further object in view, my dear count – one that is even more interesting," declared Borselli, "a plan that I can very easily frustrate."

"Well, you told me that last night," he said. "And I, on my part, frankly declare that I do not in the least fear any revelations you can make."

"Not of the affair of General Sazarac?" whispered the cunning Italian, his dark eyes fixed upon the younger man as he bent towards him. "Have you so completely forgotten certain events which, if recalled, would mean – well, they would mean that you would neither marry Morini's daughter nor be successful in the next very ingenious trick by which you intend to make a grand *coup* at the expense of my country."

At the mention of the name of General Sazarac the other's face blanched, and holding his breath he stood glaring at the man who with raised eyebrows smiled so calmly at him. He saw that this political adventurer was aware of a certain deep, terrible secret of the past which he believed was buried for ever. His enemy's attitude of cool confidence was sufficient to bring him at once to a sense of his insecurity.

"Well?" he managed to gasp. "And what is your proposal?"

"Ah, my dear friend, I am glad you are ready to listen to reason," responded the Sicilian. "We must both face the future unshrinkingly, you know. You have your own schemes; I have mine. By acting in accord we shall succeed, but if we are enemies then we shall commit the very foolish and unpardonable error of exposing each other. I know quite well that there are certain rather unfortunate incidents regarding my own career, those disagreeable little matters of which you have knowledge, and by which you could retaliate. You see, I do not for a single moment intend to deny them. On the contrary, I frankly suggest that by an agreement of silence we can be helpful in each other's interests. We both desire advancement, and can gain it through the medium of Morini. Are you not agreed?"

Dubard, slowly convinced that without the general's aid he must be powerless and in peril, nodded in the affirmative. He did not discern the wily man's ulterior motive, or the secret reason of the proposed compact.

"Your primary object, my dear Jules, is of course money," the general went on. "Now, by a simple written declaration I shall absolve you from all connection with the Sazarac affair, while you, on your part, will deny my connection with that ugly little matter in Rome two years ago. Both of us will then emerge again honest and upright – models of virtue. Bygones will be bygones. I shall go my way, you will go yours; I to assist you, and you to help me – a perfectly reciprocal arrangement. I shall become Minister, while you – well, you will by a single *coup* become a rich man, and at the same time gain a very charming wife."

"And Morini?"

The Under-Secretary elevated his shoulders and exhibited his palms.

"And the Englishman Macbean?"

"He is a mere fly in amber," declared the Sicilian, with a sinister smile. "Fortune lies before us in Italy, my dear Jules – for you wealth and a wife; for me, office and distinction. By acting in accord we have nothing whatever to fear. Morini dare not disobey us, and Macbean, being a poor man, will easily fall into our power. Leave him entirely to me. I have a scheme by which he will shortly discover that his whole future depends upon his silence, and that a single indiscreet word will mean his ruin."

"And if that fails?"

"Then there is still that effective method which was adopted towards Sazarac – you understand?"

The Frenchman nodded, darting a swift glance at the thin-featured man before him.

He understood too well.

Chapter Seven
An Afternoon at Thornby

The Thornby Flower-Show was held a week later in the rectory grounds, the work of arrangement chiefly devolving upon the bluff, good-natured rector and his nephew George.

The little rural fête, encouraged by the richer residents, was, like other village flower-shows, the annual occasion for the cottagers to exhibit their "twelve best varieties of vegetables," their "six best pot-plants," the ferns from their windows, and such-like horticultural possessions. Though quite a small show, it was typically English, well managed, and therefore always attended by people from the big houses in the neighbourhood, whose gardeners themselves competed in the open classes.

The judges – three gardeners from a distance – had inspected the exhibits in the marquee, and having made their awards, had, together with the committee, consisting of the local butcher and baker and two or three cottagers, all in their Sunday clothes and wearing blue rosettes, been entertained to luncheon by Mr Sinclair, when just before two o'clock the village band in uniform filed in at the garden-gate and put up their music-stands on the lawn. Then, as the church clock struck two, the villagers were admitted, each exhibitor making a rush for the tent, anxious to ascertain whether his exhibit bore the coloured card indicative of a prize.

At half-past two several smart carriages had driven up, and at last came the Morini landau, containing Mr Morini and his wife and daughter Mary. Basil Sinclair and George having welcomed them at the gate, Mr Morini was conducted to a small platform on the lawn, where, after a few words of introduction from the rector, he made a short speech in fairly good English, declaring the flower-show open.

Afterwards the party were conducted round the show by Sinclair, while George, of course, walked with Mary, who looked cool and sweet in a simple gown of pale grey voile, with a large grey hat to match.

As they walked around the tent, close beneath the noonday sun and heavy with the odour of vegetables and perfume of flowers, she congratulated him upon the success of the show.

Thornby always looked forward to the flower-show, for it was a gala day for the village; its four shops were closed, across the road at the top of the hill the committee stretched a string of gay bunting, and when dusk came the rectory garden was illuminated and there was dancing on the lawn. Thornby made every occasion an excuse for a dance, and the annual *al fresco* ball on the rector's lawn was the chief event of the year.

It was His Excellency's first visit to the rectory, therefore Mr Sinclair showed him the old-fashioned house, the grounds, the quaint old fifteenth-century church with its curious sculptured tombs, old carved oak and monumental brasses, while Mrs Morini, meeting several ladies of her acquaintance on the lawn, left Mary free to walk and talk with George Macbean.

For a whole long week of never-ending days he had been eagerly anticipating that meeting. Never for one moment had he ceased to think of her. The sweet, fair-faced girl was in peril, he knew, and if it were possible he intended to save her. But how? Ah! that was the question.

Although so deeply in love with her, he was judicious enough to save appearances, knowing well that the eyes of the whole countryside were upon him. The rustic is ever on the alert to discover defects in his master, and gossip in a village generally errs on the side of ill-nature. Therefore he was careful to appear gallant, and yet not too pressing in his attentions – a somewhat difficult feat with the strong ardour of love burning within him.

They were strolling together through the quaint old flower-garden sloping gently away towards the placid river, where they found themselves alone, when Mary, turning her beautiful face to him, suddenly said —

"I had no idea, Mr Macbean, that you had met my father in Rome. He was very much interested the other day, and after you had gone made quite a lot of inquiries about you."

"It was very kind of him," was the young man's laughing reply. "I merely went as interpreter to Mr Morgan-Mason, who had business at your Ministry of War."

Then, as they halted beneath the trees at the water's edge, where there was a cool, refreshing breeze, she exclaimed suddenly, with a slight sigh, "Ah, how I wish we always lived in dear old England! I always look back upon my schooldays by the sea as the happiest in all my life; but now," – and she drew a long breath again. "It is so different in Italy."

Yes. She was sad, he recognised – very sad. But why? Her young heart seemed oppressed by some hidden grief. He saw it in her fine dark eyes at the moments when she was serious. Time after time, as he spoke to her and she answered, he recognised that upon her mind rested some heavy burden which oppressed and crushed her. Her resolute yet gentle spirit, her simple, serious, domestic turn of mind distinguished her from all the other women of his acquaintance. Her reveries, her simplicity, her melancholy, her sensibility, her fortitude, her perfectly feminine bearing, even though that of a cosmopolitan, were the characteristics of a womanly woman – a woman who would struggle unsubdued against the strangest vicissitudes of fortune, meeting with unshaken constancy reverses and disasters such as would break the most masculine spirit.

George Macbean recognised all this, and more. He saw that she was at heart a thoroughly English girl, fond of tennis, hockey, and a country life, who had been transplanted into an artificial world of glare and glitter, of empty etiquette and false friendships, and yet who, at the same time, seemed to be held transfixed by some secret upon her conscience.

What was it? he wondered. Was he, after all, mistaken?

The longer he remained in her company, the more mystified did he become. He knew too well the character of Jules Dubard; he knew that she was marked down a victim, and he intended to stand as her friend – her champion if need be – even at peril to himself.

As she leaned over the old wooden rail at the river brink, gazing across the calm, unruffled waters, she chatted with gay vivacity about their mutual friends in the neighbourhood, and related her failure at a tennis tournament held on the previous day by a colonel's wife on the other side of Rugby.

"I suppose you often see Count Dubard in Rome," he said at last, with some attempt at indifference. "He is in Italy a great deal nowadays, I have heard."

"He was in Rome this winter," she answered. "He often came to my mother's receptions."

"He has a very wide circle of acquaintances, has he not?"

"Yes, mostly military men. He seems to know half of the officers in Rome. I thought I knew a good many, for crowds come to us every Thursday, but he knows far more."

"And of course your father sends him cards for the official receptions at the Ministry of War?"

"Certainly – why?" she asked, glancing quickly at her companion with some surprise.

"Oh, nothing," he laughed uneasily. "I was only reflecting that he must have a very pleasant time in Italy, that's all."

"I believe he enjoys himself," she said. "But every foreigner who has money and is recognised by his Embassy can have a pleasant time in Rome if he likes."

"But not every foreigner enjoys the friendship of the Minister of War," he remarked – "nor of his daughter," he added, with a smile.

Her cheeks flushed slightly.

"Ah!" she protested, with one of those quaint little foreign gestures. "There you are again, Mr Macbean! Teasing me because these ignorant people here say that I'm engaged to the count. It is really too bad of you! Did I not assure you the other day that it is quite untrue?"

"Forgive me!" he exclaimed, raising his panama hat, bowing as though she were an entire stranger, and yet laughing the while. "I had no intention of giving offence. Envy is permitted, however – is it not?"

"Oh, it hasn't given me offence at all?" she laughed frankly. "You see, there's no truth in the rumour, therefore I can afford to laugh."

Her words struck him as very strange. They seemed to convey that if the engagement were really a fact it would cause her regret and annoyance.

"I wanted to meet Dubard so much," he remarked in a tone of regret. "I suppose there is no chance he will return to Orton?"

"Not this summer, I think. He left us to go direct to Paris, and then I believe he goes to his estate in the Pyrenees."

"But he came here intending to spend a week or so at Orton, did he not?"

"Yes; but he received a letter recalling him to France," she said. "Father says he didn't receive any letter. If he really didn't, he surely could have left without telling us a lie."

Macbean smiled. How little she knew of the real character of Jules Dubard, the plausible *élégant* who was such a prominent character at the Jockey Club and in the Bois.

"Very soon," she added, in a tone of regret, "we shall have to return. My father is due back at the Ministry on the fourth of next month, and while he is there we shall go up to San Donato, our villa above Florence, and stay for the vintage, which, to me, is the best time in Italy in all the year."

"Ah yes," he sighed. "I have always heard so. Myself I love Italy – I only wish I could escape from this country with its long dismal winters and live in sunshine always."

"You would very soon tire of it," she assured him, looking him straight in the face with her fine eyes. "Even our bright sun gives one fever, and our blue sky becomes so monotonous that one longs for the calm of a grey English day."

"I would like to try it for a year or two," he declared wistfully.

"Then why don't you?"

He was silent, and their eyes met again.

"Because I am not my own master, Miss Morini," was his low response. "My living, such as it is, lies here in England. I am the factotum of a man who has elevated money to be his god, and I am compelled to serve him in silence and without complaint because it happens to be my lot in life."

"A rather unhappy and uncomfortable one, I should imagine," she remarked, suddenly growing grave.

"At times, yes," was his brief reply. He did not wish to burden her with his own disappointments and misfortunes. She knew what was his position, a mere secretary, and that was sufficient. What hope could he ever have of daring to aspire to her hand? He might stand as her friend, but become her lover, never!

And when, a week later, he called at Orton to wish her farewell, as his vacation was at an end and he was compelled to return to his chambers in the Temple, and to that room in Mr Morgan-Mason's flat in Queen Anne's Mansions, he looked in vain in her eyes for some sign of genuine regret. There was none. No, she too had realised that on account of his position love was forbidden him.

"We shall meet here again, I hope, Mr Macbean – next summer," she exclaimed, laughing airily, as she gave him her small white hand.

"I hope so," was his fervent reply in a low, meaning voice, as their hands clasped.

And then, with sinking heart and full of grave apprehensions regarding her future, he bowed and left her, left her, alas! to Jules Dubard – Jules Dubard of all men!

Chapter Eight
The Traitor

Camillo Morini stood at the big window of his private cabinet in the Ministry of War at Rome, gazing down upon the silent courtyard, white in the glaring heat of afternoon.

He was dressed in a cool suit of clean white linen, as is the summer mode in the South, and as he stood gazing out at the sentry standing in his box motionless as a statue, he calmly smoked his after-luncheon cigar – a good Havanna he had brought from England. The man who was so constantly juggling with a nation's future pressed his lips together, and afterwards heaved a big sigh – a sigh that echoed through the big, lofty room.

The Minister's cabinet, like all the rooms in the new War Office, was big and bare, with a marble floor for summer, and a high stove of white terra-cotta with broad brass bands for winter. Upon the ceiling were fine modern frescoes; the walls, however, unlike those of the other rooms, which were mostly colour-washed, were papered dark red, and the heavy furniture was covered with thick red plush; while in one corner was a handsome marble bust of Victor Emmanuel upon a pedestal, and above hung a large framed portrait of King Umberto, the reigning sovereign, and a huge shield bearing the arms of Italy. In the centre stood a huge writing-table of carved walnut, with a great high-backed chair, the seat of the man who ruled the army of Italy.

The doors were double, with a wide space between, so that the messenger in uniform who lounged outside should overhear nothing, while so hemmed in by secretaries was the Minister that he was as difficult of approach as the very sovereign himself.

That huge square block of new stuccoed buildings, with long corridors, enormous clerks' room, and big courtyard, the echoes of which were awakened day and night by the regular tramp of the sentries and the clank of arms, was at that moment a veritable hive of industry – for of all the government departments in Rome, the War Office, with its tremendous responsibilities, is the best conducted.

His Excellency was reflecting upon something that Angelo Borselli, the Under-Secretary, had told him while they had been lunching together at the club. He recognised the seriousness of it all, and he sighed in consequence.

Presently, while his eyes were still fixed upon that sentry erect and motionless in his box, upon which the sun beat down so fiercely, there was a rap at the door, and there entered the uniformed messenger who had been on guard outside, who saluted, saying —

"General Arturo Valentini of the 6th Alpine Regiment, together with a captain of the same regiment, crave an audience with your Excellency."

"What is the captain's name?" grunted the Minister of War.

The messenger looked at the card that had been given him, and replied —

"Captain Felice Solaro, your Excellency."

"Ah! Solaro! Solaro!" exclaimed Morini, tossing away his cigar. "Show them in."

And as he passed before the tiny mirror he glanced at himself to adjust his cravat and see that not a single hair was awry – a habit of his before giving audience.

A few moments later two men in uniform were ushered in. The general, short of stature, white-haired, with firm military step, a red face, and white moustache, saluted and stood at attention as he entered the Minister's presence; while the captain, a smart-looking, dark-haired man of forty, followed his superior's example, yet as Morini darted a quick glance at him, he visibly trembled at it. The captain's face was white as death, and as he stood for a moment in the awkward silence that followed, his gloved fingers chafed his sword hilt nervously.

"Well, general?" inquired the Minister, who had never before met that distinguished officer, but whom he, of course, knew well by repute. Valentini had been Inspector-General of Genio fifteen years ago, and had served Italy well in those fierce campaigns of the early sixties, as his row of medals and decorations showed. "Why do you wish for audience?" he asked sharply.

"Your Excellency, I am here to crave for a more merciful sentence upon this man," the kindly old officer answered, turning to the captain, who stood with head bowed at his side. "I am his commanding officer, and in justice I wish to intercede for him."

The Minister raised his eyes in surprise, and asked —

"And what is this man's name, pray?"

"I am Felice Solaro, your Excellency," faltered the captain, as though fearing to pronounce his own name. "My general has travelled with me from Piedmont to obtain audience and to implore your mercy."

"Solaro!" echoed the Minister, looking straight at him. "Ah yes, I remember!" Then turning to the general, Morini added in a hard, impatient tone —

"I cannot see why you should have troubled yourself to come to Rome on such an errand – and without leave too! I thought this man was under arrest? Is this the way you execute military justice in the north?"

"I took it upon myself to bring the captain here," was the fine old officer's answer.

"And he wears his sword, I see!" remarked the Minister, with a sneer. "I suppose you have taken it upon yourself to give it back to him – eh?"

"I returned him his sword temporarily, your Excellency, in order that during our journey here no one should recognise him as the man who has been sentenced, and further, in order that he should stand before you in the full possession of his rights as an officer, and ask your leave to explain."

"I have no time to hear any explanations from men who have been condemned by court-martial, General Valentini. It is your duty to hear his excuses – not mine. The whole matter is quite clear. I have had the papers before me, and have gone through them carefully. They were sent to me in England. And if you ask me my private opinion, general, I think that dismissal from the army and fifteen years' imprisonment is a very light sentence upon a traitor. Had I been on the court-martial I should have given a life sentence."

"But, your Excellency!" gasped the unhappy captain, his face blanched, his hands trembling, "I am innocent. I am the victim of some clever conspiracy, by which the real culprit has shielded himself. I had no chance of defending myself at the court-martial, for – "

"Silence!" cried the Minister. "You have been tried and found guilty of treason against your king and country. The evidence is as plain as the light of day, and yet you deny your guilt?"

"I do deny it," declared the unhappy captain. "They refused to hear my explanation."

"That is true, your Excellency," interposed the general. "The court sat for four days in Turin with closed doors, and as three of the officers composing it were due to go on their annual leave, the sitting on the fourth day was terminated hurriedly, sentence was given, and sent to you for confirmation. Your Excellency has confirmed it, therefore Captain Solaro has no appeal except to yourself."

"You, as his commanding officer, were not a member of the court?"

"No, your Excellency."

"Then why should you interest yourself in a matter which does not concern you, pray?" inquired Morini impatiently.

"Because this unfortunate affair reflects upon the honour of my command."

"Oh, of course. It is all very well to speak heroically after the event!" exclaimed the Minister of War, with a hard, dry laugh. "The mischief has been done, and one of your officers has been found guilty of treason – of selling a military secret to a foreign power."

"Found guilty, yes," exclaimed the unfortunate captain. "But innocent, nevertheless!"

Morini shrugged his shoulders, and seating himself in his writing-chair took some official memoranda from a drawer in the table. Then, having glanced quickly at it, he said —

"The facts are quite plain. This man, Felice Solaro, of the 6th Alpine Regiment, is in garrison on Mont Gran Paradiso in the Alps, where on the other side of the mountain, at Tresenta, we have recently constructed a new fortress, for the protection of the frontier at that point. This fortress, which is sunk out of sight, has taken four and a half years to construct, and was only completed and garrisoned six months ago. It commands the Oreo valley, which, in the event of hostilities with France, would be one of the most vulnerable points on the frontier. French agents have, time after time, endeavoured to learn something of our works up there; but so well has the spot been guarded that only two agents have succeeded in obtaining sight of it, and both were arrested and are now in prison as spies. And yet, in spite of all this, there was found in Solaro's quarters by an orderly fragments of a curious letter in French addressed to 'Mon cher Felice,' acknowledging receipt of the plans, thanking him, and enclosing the sum agreed upon in Italian banknotes."

"The letter was never addressed to me," the captain cried. "I know nothing of it. The whole thing was a conspiracy to ruin and disgrace me!"

"But there are other facts supplied by the secret service," went on the Minister in a dry, hard tone, turning to the accused man. "You spent your last leave in Paris; you were seen by one of our agents in the company of a man well-known to be a French spy. You went to various places of amusement with him, drank with him at the Hôtel Chatham, at the Grand Café, and other places, and," added Morini, looking him straight in the face, "and what is more, he lent you money. Do you deny that?"

The captain stood glaring at his accuser, utterly dumbfounded. This latter truth had not been given in evidence against him. The Minister therefore held certain secret information of which he was in entire ignorance. He had been watched in Paris! He held his breath, and was silent. Even the general looked at him in surprise and suspicion.

"No," he answered hoarsely at last, "I do not deny it. The man did lend me money."

"For what purpose – eh? In order to obtain from you in secret the plans of the Tresenta fortress," declared His Excellency. "French agents do not lend money to Italian officers without some *quid pro quo*."

"I did not know that the fellow was a spy until afterwards."

"Until it was too late, I suppose. You were entrapped, so you were compelled to give the plans to France. Now admit it."

"I assert that I am entirely innocent," he declared. "It is true that I spent my leave in Paris, where I met a man who called himself Georges Latrobe, an engineer from Bordeaux, who spoke Italian I ran short of cash, and he lent me five hundred francs, which I repaid to him ten days after my return to barracks. It was only on the last day when I was with him that my suspicions were aroused regarding his real character. We were sitting together in the Café Terminus, when he turned the conversation to our defences on the Alpine frontier, expressing a desire to visit me at Gran Paradiso. I at once told him that the admission of strangers within the military zone was prohibited. But he pressed me, and even went so far as to offer me a receipt for the money he had lent me, together with a like sum if I could gain him admission, in order, so he said, to see the latest feat of Italian engineering. But my suspicions were at once aroused. I told him that his suggestion was impossible, and from that day I have not seen him."

"But you furnished him with plans and details of the fortifications?" snapped the Minister of War.

"I did not," denied the captain stoutly. "I admit that I very narrowly escaped falling into a clever trap, but fortunately saved myself. If the plans have actually been furnished, then they have been given by someone else, not by me; and that letter was placed in my quarters in order to divert suspicion from the guilty person."

"Ah, a very ingenious story!" the Minister laughed incredulously. "You admit being friendly with the spy?"

"I admit all that is the truth, your Excellency, but I flatly deny that I am a traitor to my king," was the accused man's quick, response.

"But you see you were watched while on leave," the Minister went on, referring to his report. "On your return from Paris you travelled by way of Milan to Bologna, where you visited a certain Signora Nodari and her daughter."

"The latter was my betrothed," the unhappy man explained.

"Exactly. Then how do you account for the agent Latrobe calling upon her a month later and obtaining from her a packet which she had received by post from the garrison of Gran Paradiso? It was only afterwards that this fact was known, otherwise the spy would not have escaped from Italy."

Captain Solaro stood rigid.

"Have you really proof of this, your Excellency?" he demanded in a low, hoarse voice. "I – I cannot think that she would betray me."

"Ah! Never trust a woman," observed the Minister, with a grim smile. "She has made a statement – a statement which proves everything."

"Which proves?" he cried wildly. "Which proves I am innocent."

"No," declared Morini calmly. "Which proves that you are guilty."

"Ah, but let me tell you how – "

"No more!" cried Morini, rising with quick anger from his chair and snapping his fingers in impatience. "You have been found guilty and sentenced, and I think that even your general, after your own admissions, is now convinced of his injudicious and ridiculous attempt to shield a traitor."

"Ah!" cried the unfortunate man, hot tears springing to his eyes, "I see now how I have been betrayed – and I know by whom!"

"I have no further time to waste upon hearing any counter-charges," abruptly answered the Minister. "From to-day you are dismissed the army in disgrace. My decree will appear in to-night's *Gazette*, and, General Valentini," he added meaningly, turning to the stern old officer who had writhed beneath the civilian's rebuke, "convey your prisoner back to Turin, and do not again become the gaoler of a traitor."

"You absolutely refuse to hear me further, then!" cried the captain in wild desperation, dismayed to find that all attempt to clear his character had failed.

"I do."

The accused man with set teeth drew his sword, and with one quick wrench across his knee broke the gleaming blade and cast it ringing upon the marble floor.

"Take my sword!" he cried, drawing himself up to the salute. "Take my honour – take my life! But you – even you, Camillo Morini – cannot condemn me with justice! One day you shall know that I am innocent – you hear! – innocent!"

And with firm tread he strode out of the Minister's private room, followed by his general, who merely saluted in stiff silence, his scabbard trailing upon the marble.

Chapter Nine
His Excellency Learns the Truth

The Minister of War was seated busily writing beneath the green-shaded reading-lamp in the big library of the great old Antinori Palace, his handsome residence in Rome.

Five years ago he had bought that enormous old place in the Via Nazionale – a place full of historic interest – together with its old furniture, its gallery of cinquecento paintings, and its corridor filled with armour. It was a high, square, ponderous place of princely dimensions, with a great central courtyard where an old fountain plashed on in the silence as it had done for three centuries or more, while around the arched cloisters were the carved arms of the various families through whose hands the place had passed in generations bygone.

The library was a high room on the first floor, with long cases filled with parchment-covered books, many of them illuminated codices and rare editions, a fine frescoed ceiling, and a great open hearth over which was an ornamentation of carved marble of the Renaissance with a grinning mascherino. The floor was of marble, except that the littered writing-table was set upon an oasis of thick Turkey carpet, giving to the room an austere character of comfortless grandeur, like everything else in that huge old palace of the days when every house of the Roman nobility was a fortress.

An Italian Minister's life is not by any means an easy one, as Camillo Morini had long ago discovered. He was often in his private cabinet at the Ministry of War at nine o'clock in the morning, and frequently sent home by his private secretary urgent papers which he could examine and initial after dinner, as he had done that day. His wife and daughter were up at the villa near Florence for the vintage, and he was alone and undisturbed. He had not even troubled to change for dinner, but was still in the linen suit he had worn during the day, and had merely exchanged his white coat for an easy black alpaca one.

As Minister of War, his salary was one thousand pounds sterling per annum, an amount quite inadequate for his needs. True, he travelled free in his private saloon on the railway, but yet he had a most uncomfortable time of it owing to the fact that he was expected by his friends to repay them for services rendered with the gift of offices, favours, introductions, and recommendations. Wherever he went he was besieged by a host of people who wanted favours, exemptions of their sons from military service, increased stipend, or the redressing of some act of official injustice or petty tyranny.

His wife, too, was pestered with "recommendations" to him; for without recommendations nothing could be obtained. If he went to inspect the garrison of a provincial town, the prefect, the mayor, the head of the *carabinieri*, and the most prominent citizens called on him every day; while when in the country the wheezy village band played operatic airs outside his window every evening, alternated with a chorus of children from the elementary schools.

His sovereign, King Humbert, although good-natured and brave, was too easy-going and lacking in moral stamina to make a really strong monarch, hence the whole Cabinet, from the Prime Minister downwards, were guilty of grave irregularities, if not of actual corruption. The fault, however, lay with the system, rather than with the men. How could a Cabinet Minister entertain lavishly and keep up appearances upon a mere thousand pounds a year, when he had no private means?

Happily, the present hard-working, cultivated king, Victor Emmanuel the Third, has mastered all the details of state business, and has swept his Cabinet clean of those men who abused their position under his lamented father, until the whole face of Italian politics has entirely changed since the days when Camillo Morini held office as head of the army.

Under the late King Humbert, Ministers were often chosen, not because they were capable statesmen, but simply because it was necessary that a particular region should be represented in the Cabinet, so as not to arouse local jealousies. In any case, their tenure of office was too precarious

and too short to enable them to do much good work, and whatever the Minister managed to do would probably be undone by his successor.

Morini would have gone out of office half a dozen times had he not succeeded, by judicious bribery, in obtaining protection from his enemies. Indeed, he only retained office by dint of his own ingenuity and clever diplomacy towards those who were ever trying to hound him down. Not only did he bear the great responsibility of the army, but, in common with other members of the Cabinet, the greater part of his activity was absorbed in the manipulation of party groups in the Chamber and in studying parliamentary exigencies. He had to judiciously subsidise certain newspapers in view of a general election, make use of the secret service fund in certain quarters, and be careful not to shower too many favours on one province; for if he offended any particular town, the local deputy, hitherto a staunch ministerialist, would turn and rend him.

Truly his position, head of an army costing sixteen millions annually, and with a multitude of people bent on getting something out of him, was the reverse of comfortable. He would have resigned long ago had he dared, but resignation or dismissal from office would, he knew only too well, spell ruin to him. So he was held there in an office of bribery and dishonesty, which he had grown to regard with bitter hatred. He had served through three administrations, it was true, and was a trusted servant of his king, yet the daily worry of it all, the ever-present fear of exposure and of downfall, held him in constant apprehension of a future ruin and obscurity.

The dead silence of the night was unbroken save by the scratching of his quill as he scribbled his signature upon one after another of the pile of various papers at his elbow.

He wrote mechanically, for he was reflecting upon that scene in his cabinet when the captain of Cacciatori Alpini had broken his sword across his knee.

“A clever fellow!” he murmured. “He thought to bluff me, but he did not know how closely I had had him watched. If I did not know all that I do, I really believe I should have thought him innocent. A good actor. I will send his broken sword as a present to that doddering old fool, his general – as a souvenir of his visit to Rome without leave!” he laughed to himself, still continuing to sign the commissions and decrees.

Of a sudden there was a rap at the big white doors at the end of the dimly lit room, and a gorgeously dressed man-servant in stockings and gold-laced coat advanced to the table, saying —

“The Onorevole Ricci desires to see your Excellency.”

“Pig’s head! Didn’t I give orders that I was not at home?” he cried, turning furiously upon the man.

“But your Excellency is always at home to the Signor Deputato?” the servant reminded him, surprised at the sudden outburst of anger.

“Ah!” growled his master. “Yes, you are right, Antonio! I forgot that I told you I was always at home to him. I must see him, I suppose,” he sighed, and when the man had gone his brow contracted, his teeth clenched; yet almost before he could recover his self-possession the long white doors reopened, and his visitor – a short, dark-bearded, middle-aged man in evening dress – was ushered in.

“Ah, my dear Camillo!” he cried enthusiastically, advancing towards the Minister, who rose and took his hand. “I only arrived in Rome this afternoon, and heard you had returned from England. Well, and how are you after your holiday? I suppose I may take a cigar?” he asked, crossing to the cigar-box, opening it, and selecting one.

“The rest was welcome,” answered the other calmly, stretching his arms above his head and glancing furtively at the new-comer as though he held him in some suspicion. He was a pleasant-looking man, a trifle stout, with a round, sun-bronzed face, as though fond of good living, while his perfectly fitting dress-suit was cut in a style which showed it to be the garment of a London tailor. He possessed the careless, easy manner of the gentleman, striking a match and lighting his cigar with a familiarity which showed that he was no stranger to the Minister’s roof.

"I too have been in the country for quite a long while," he said – "at Asti. I have to visit the electors now and then just to make them promises and put them in a good-humour."

"Or they would hound you out, Vito – eh? – just as the Socialists would throw me out if they could," laughed His Excellency drily, walking to the cigar-box, selecting one, and lighting it.

"And Her Excellency and the signorina?" inquired the deputy.

"They are up at the villa. They always go there for the vintage."

"Of course, Rome in September is only fit for us politicians and the English tourists. I wonder you are back so early."

"Duty, my dear Vito," replied the other. "One day, when you are Minister, you will find that you had much more leisure as advocate in Turin and deputy for Asti."

"I suppose so," he laughed. Then he added, "I met Angelo in the club an hour ago. He has also been in England, it seems. I think I shall go to England next summer – if you invite me."

"Which is not likely."

"Why?"

"Because when I am in England I like to be away from all my official duties," frankly answered Morini. "They don't even know who or what I am – and I delight in keeping them in ignorance."

"Then why did you invite Angelo? I am jealous, you see."

"Because I wished to consult him upon a confidential matter."

"Regarding an army contract tendered you by a German firm," replied the other, carelessly blowing a cloud of smoke from his lips as he stood with his back to the huge open grate. "You may as well tell the truth, my dear friend."

The Minister, starting, looked at him sharply, and asked —

"How did you know?"

"Never mind how I know, Camillo. It is, as you see, useless for you to try and deceive me. You have given the contract to those Germans – for a consideration. But don't think that I blame you. Why, I should do the very same thing myself. I get a little in my own small way out of certain people in Asti, but not enough. That's why I am compelled, so much against my will, to come to you."

"Ah!" groaned the Minister, facing him quickly and determinedly. "The same old story – eh? Money."

"Like air, it is a necessity of life," he replied, smiling. "I have been in want of it for a month past, but preferred to wait rather than to trouble you while you were on holiday."

"But you surely get enough now!" protested His Excellency. "I've obtained a dozen different favours for you; I've given you appointments; I've allowed you to make recommendations for military decorations in Piedmont; I've allowed you to handle the secret service funds; and I've done all I could so as to place you in a position to receive secret commission. But of course, if you fail to make use of your opportunities, it is not my fault."

"Never fear. I do not stir a finger without some consideration," he laughed. "You surely know me too well after all these years. No; I find that it is not sufficient. Money I want, and money I must have. Recollect what services I have rendered to you in the Camera, my dear Camillo," he went on. "You surely do not forget the dead set made against you a year ago, and how I succeeded in uniting the various groups and inducing them to pass a vote of confidence! You never were nearer downfall than you were that afternoon – except, perhaps, to-night. You have enemies, my dear friend – enemies in the Socialist groups, who declare that you have held office too long," he added.

"I know," exclaimed the other hoarsely. "I know that," and he tossed his cigar away with a quick, impatient gesture.

"While you've been abroad I have been active in secretly ascertaining the real state of political opinion in the north, and much as I regret to tell you, it is distinctly antagonistic. Now that Milan is such a strong Socialist centre the other large towns are following, and an agitation is spreading against

you. They want a fresh man in office as Minister of War – the man who is so cleverly scheming to replace you."

"To replace me!" exclaimed Morini. "And who is this man, pray?"

The words which Vito Ricci had spoken sank like iron into his soul. He knew, alas! how very precarious was his office.

"The man is our friend Angelo," slowly replied the crafty deputy. "Already in the north he is looked upon as your successor. If the groups in the Camera fall asunder, then your dismissal is imminent. I know this is a very unwelcome piece of news, my dear Camillo, but it is a hard fact which I have come here to-night to reveal to you."

Chapter Ten
"For Mary's Sake."

His Excellency's face fell. He was silent for several moments.

The easy-going, well-dressed political adventurer before him was, he knew, in the secrets of the strong party who were his opponents and who were ever plotting his downfall. He had, since his return to Rome, heard rumours through certain quarters in which secret service money was spent that an agitation had been set afoot by his antagonists, but he had never dreamed that the prime mover of it all was the very man in whom he had so implicitly trusted, one of the men who owed everything to him – Angelo Borselli! The revelation staggered him. He really could not believe it to be actually true.

"And so he intends to become Minister – eh?" remarked Morini bitterly, when he at last found tongue.

"He is working for that end," replied Ricci. "I was in Milan and Parma a week ago, and on every hand I saw how cleverly he was stirring up ill-feeling against you. He is secretly allied to the Socialists – of that I am certain."

"Because he sees that through them he can obtain office," replied His Excellency, his pale face now very serious. "You have done well to tell me this, *caro mio*," he added. "I shall know now how to deal with the man who learns my secrets and then seeks to betray me."

"But your position is daily becoming one of graver peril," exclaimed the wily advocate, placing his hand confidentially upon the Minister's arm. "The agitation is widespread. The Socialists intend that the Government shall fall."

"But you will help me, Vito, as before?" Morini urged quickly. "Those shrieking Socialist maniacs shall not gain the ascendency?" he declared, clenching his hands and pacing the room quickly.

Vito Ricci, deputy for the town of Asti, shrugged his shoulders, but did not reply. In the Italian Camera every politician of any prominence had a small body of adherents, and political ability consisted in so manipulating a number of these bodies as to form a majority; therefore for this purpose each Minister secretly bribed one or more of the most unscrupulous deputies to juggle with the party. A group might to-day be on the side of the Government, and to-morrow with the Opposition. There were no real political principles at stake in the policy of these groups, and the only important question was that of party management and judicious bribery.

Vito Ricci was a professional politician, with whom politics was a regular trade. The Government granted him a free railway pass – as it did all the other deputies at Montecitorio – and he made money wherever he could. His position enabled him to obtain many favours for himself and his friends. The system of recommendations and parliamentary influence was one of the worst features of Italian political life, for it was generally regarded as one of the deputy's chief duties that, for a consideration, he should help his friends and constituents to procure favours, promotions, decorations, and concessions of contracts which would not be otherwise obtainable. Political jobbery was regarded as inevitable.

Indeed, Vito Ricci lived upon the bribes he received – and lived well.

"You are silent," remarked His Excellency, looking him straight in his face. "Why?"

"Because I have nothing to say."

"You don't promise to assist me!" he exclaimed. "You don't declare your readiness to unite the groups again in our favour!"

"Because I fear it would be a useless task," responded the other in a calm, mechanical voice.

"A useless task!" gasped the elder man, whose face was blanched. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that matters have assumed an ugly appearance," replied the deputy. "Even the journals who have received so much money from you are silent when they ought to be loudest in your eulogy. They are evidently awaiting the advent of their new masters."

"Then you actually anticipate a catastrophe?" exclaimed Morini hoarsely, halting before the man who had rendered him so many valuable services – the clever, unscrupulous adventurer who had several times turned the parliamentary tide in his favour.

Vito nodded slowly, his bearded face grave and hard set.

"If what you say is really true regarding Angelo, then I am fully aware of the great peril in which I stand," the Minister exclaimed at last, his voice faltering in his agitation. "Borselli will hesitate at nothing in order to gain power."

"Ah, I told you so a year ago, my dear Camillo," was the deputy's reply. "But you would not listen. He was your friend, you said – as though there was such a thing as friendship in any of the ministries."

"I have been deceived," admitted the other in a low voice.

A silence fell between the pair, until the deputy suddenly said hesitatingly —

"I suppose Angelo could make some rather awkward revelations – eh?"

The Minister slowly nodded.

"H'm. I thought as much from what I gathered in Milan. He would denounce you, and by reason of his big Socialist following he would come out with clean hands. He has laid his plans well, without a doubt. Sirena, the Socialist deputy for Pesaro, told me, in confidence, all that is intended."

"They mean to strike a blow at me?"

"Yes, by criticising the army, and by bringing forward some curious story about the plans of the fortress of Tresenta in the Alps being sold to France. Do you know anything about it?"

"Yes. The plans have unfortunately been given to France by a captain named Solaro, who has been dismissed the army and sent to prison. So they intend to make political capital out of that, do they?"

"It seems so," was the other's answer.

Morini slowly repaced the room, his chin upon his breast, deep in thought, the dead silence being broken only by his footsteps upon the marble floor.

"Borselli has formed a plot against me – a deep, dastardly plot!" he exclaimed in a desperate tone, halting again suddenly, a determined look upon his grey features. "He intends that I shall fall. But you, Vito, can save me, if you will – you know you can. With a little of this," and he rubbed his thumb and forefinger together, "you can unite the groups as you did before, and show the country that the Minister of War still possesses the confidence of the kingdom."

"I doubt it," answered Ricci dubiously.

"But you will not desert me now?" implored His Excellency, laying his hand firmly upon the deputy's shoulder. "Recollect the past, Vito. Remember the day when you, a lieutenant, prevented my horse throwing me at the manoeuvres in the Chianti. That was long ago, but both of us have had cause to congratulate ourselves upon that meeting."

Ricci nodded. He recollected well how the Minister, then only a few months in office, had allowed him to resign from the army and complete his studies as an advocate, and how, by a clever stroke of political jobbery, he had been elected deputy for Asti, in order that he should serve the Minister as his secret agent in the Camera. He had become rich in a few years, owing to the various grants and concessions His Excellency had made to him, yet somehow his personal extravagance kept him always poor, always in want of money. He feared to calculate how much of the secret service funds had already found its way into his pocket, and yet with wily ingenuity he was there again for a grant, not from the secret service fund – for he knew well that the sum voted for the present year was already exhausted – but from Camillo Morini's own private purse.

Vito Ricci, with all the outward appearance of a gentleman, was utterly unscrupulous. He worked in the Camera for the master who paid him best – a fact which Morini knew too well. If the Socialists were prepared to pay his price, then the man whom he had trained so cleverly and promoted to place and power would calmly throw him over, and hound him down with just as great an enthusiasm as he now supported him.

"I suppose," he went on at last, "it is, as usual, a matter of price with you – eh, Vito?"

"Well, I must live, just as you must," responded the other with a faint smile as he discerned how terrified the Minister had become at the information he had just given him. "I have no private income, and therefore must make money somehow."

"You have made plenty of it," the other remarked. "Only three months ago you had fifty thousand lire out of the secret service fund."

"And I am now badly in want of an exactly similar amount," the deputy declared.

"Ah! so that is the price – eh? Fifty thousand?"

"Yes. But of course I cannot guarantee success for that sum. It may cost more. I have to bribe the leaders of each of the groups in the Chamber, and I flatter myself that I am the only man who can work them in favour of the Ministry."

"I admit that, my dear Vito. You are a marvel of tact and cunning. What a pity you did not enter the Diplomatic service! But the price. It is too high. I can't really afford to pay so much. Ah! if you knew how heavy my personal expenses are, and how – "

"Of course," the other cried, interrupting. "You made the same excuse last time, but you paid these screaming hounds all the same. It is surely useless to waste breath upon argument. The facts are quite plain, as I've already told you. If you pay for triumph you will probably receive it; if you don't, you must fall, and Angelo Borselli will be given your portfolio. Pardon me for saying it, Camillo, but of late you have lived with your eyes shut. I have watched, and I have observed certain things. Recently you have held me aloof from you, just at a moment when I could be of greatest service. This, I confess, has hurt me. I believed you reposed confidence in me, but it seems that you mistrust me."

"I mistrust all blackmailers," was the Minister's quick reply, his dark eyes flashing at the speaker.

"Because you are one yourself," the other retorted quickly, with a grin. "You yourself taught me the gentle art of blackmailing. But no! do not let us revile each other. Rather let us face the critical situation. I tell you that you are blind – otherwise you would realise how cleverly and with what devilish ingenuity your power is being undermined. You must bribe the groups – you must pay the sum I ask. It is your duty, not only for your own sake, but for that of your family – the signora and the Signorina Mary."

The Minister of War stood undecided. Mention of his family brought home to him the terrible responsibility upon him. Ruin, exposure, condemnation, disgrace, all stared him in the face. Yet by paying what his creature demanded he could once again steer clear of the shoals of the stormy parliamentary waters, and the country would have renewed confidence in Camillo Morini.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.