Le Queux William

The Closed Book: Concerning the Secret of the Borgias

William Le Queux

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Содержание

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Chapter One
Which Mainly Concerns a Hunchback

These strange facts would never have been placed on record, nor would this exciting chapter of an eventful life have been written, except for two reasons: first, because the discovery I made has been declared to be of considerable importance to scientists, bibliophiles, and the world at large; and, secondly, because it is my dear wife's wish that in order to clear her in the eyes of both friends and foes nothing should be concealed, misrepresented, or withheld.

It was, indeed, a memorable day when I halted before the white, almost windowless house of the prior of San Sisto and knocked twice at its plain, green-painted door. The sun-blanched, time-mellowed city of Florence lay silent, glaring, and deserted in the blazing noon of a July day. The Florentines had fled to the mountains for air. The persiennes, or sun-shutters, were everywhere closed, the shops shut, the people slumbering,

and the silence only broken by the heat-song of the chirping cicale in the scorched trees at the end of the Lung Arno.

Like many another Tuscan town, it stood with long rows of high, frescoed, and sculptured palaces facing the brown river, its magnificent Duomo and campanile, its quaint fourteenth-century streets, and its medieval Ponte Vecchio all forming a grim, imposing relic of long-past glory. In many places its aspect was little changed since the old quattrocento days, when it was the centre of all the arts and the powerful rival of Venice and Genoa, although its trade has decayed and its power departed. The Lion and Lily of Florence upon a flag is no longer feared, as it once was, even by the bloodthirsty corsairs, and the rich Florentine brocades, velvets, and finely tempered arms are no longer in requisition in the markets of the world.

Save for the influx of scrambling tourists, it is one of the dead towns of Europe. Modern trade passes it by unnoticed; its very name would be forgotten were it not for those marvellous works of art in its galleries and in its very streets.

I had always loved the quaint old city, ever since a boy, when my father, a retired English naval officer, lived in that ancient house with the brown frescoes in the via di Pinti in the days before the shrieking steam trams ran to Prato or the splendid Palazzo Riccardi had been desecrated by the Government. At fourteen I left those quaint, quiet streets, with their cool loggias and silent, moss-grown courtyards, for the whirl of Paris, and subsequently lived and worked in London. Then, after an absence

of nearly twenty years, I found myself living again in my beloved Tuscany by the Mediterranean, at Leghorn, forty miles distant from the medieval city of my childhood. Was it, therefore, surprising that the mood often seized me to go and revisit the old places I had known as a boy? I found them all unchanged – indeed, nothing changes in "Firenza la Bella" save the fortunes of her ruined nobility and the increase of garish hotels for the accommodation of the foreigner.

I was something of an antiquary, and through many years had been collecting medieval manuscripts on vellum, ancient chapters, diplomas, notarial deeds, and such-like documents, none being of later date than the fifteenth century. To decipher the work of the old scribes is, I admit, a dry-as-dust occupation; nevertheless, it is a work that grows on one, and the palaeographist is an enthusiast always. In one's hobbies one should always join advantage to amusement, and seek to gather profit with pleasure.

My collection of musty-smelling parchments and rolls of folded vellum documents, with their formidable seals of wax or lead; of heavy vellum books bound in oaken boards and brass bosses, or tiny illuminated books of hours, so minutely written that a microscope was almost necessary to read them, appeal to very few people. Most of my friends regarded them as so many old and undecipherable books and rolls, without interest and without value. They wondered that, being continually occupied at my desk writing novels, I should take up such an essentially

dry study.

Yet it was this love of collecting that first brought me into contact with Francesco Graniani, a queer little old hunchback, who was a kind of itinerant dealer in antiques. Unshaven, very shabby, and not particularly clean, he dressed always in the same faded drab suit, and, summer or winter, wore the same battered, sun-browned straw hat through all the years I knew him.

Often this strange, rather tragic figure would meet me in the sun-baked streets of Leghorn, raise his battered hat respectfully, and, taking me aside, produce mysteriously from his pocket a parchment charter with its seal, some leaves from a medieval psalter, or perhaps an illuminated codex, or a book of hours with painted miniatures. Where le obtained such gems I have never to this day discovered. None knew who the old fellow was, or where he lived; he was a complete mystery.

One morning while crossing the great square I encountered him, and he informed me in his strange, mysterious manner of the existence of a very rare and interesting manuscript in the possession of the prior of the ancient church of San Sisto, at Florence.

"If the signore goes to Firenze, Father Landini will no doubt allow him to have sight of the parchment book," he said. "Tell him that Francesco Graniani wishes it."

"But what is the character of the manuscript?"

I inquired.

"I know nothing of it," he replied evasively, "except that I

believe it once belonged to the Monastery of the Certosa. I heard of it only last night, and thought perhaps it might interest you."

It certainly did. Any discovery of that kind always attracted me – ever on the lookout as I was for a single folio of the original Dante.

With the object of inspecting the palaeographic treasure I next day took train to Florence, and an hour after my arrival knocked in some trepidation at the prior's green door.

The long grey church, one of the oldest in that ancient city, stood in its little piazza off the via San Gallao, and adjoining it the prior's house, a long, low, fourteenth-century building, with high, cross-barred windows, and a wonderful old-world garden in the rear.

In answer to my summons there appeared a thin, yellow-faced, sharp-tongued house-woman, and on inquiry for the father I was at once invited into a big stone hall, cool and dim after the sun-glare outside.

"Body of a thousand anchovies! Teresa, who has come to worry me now?" I heard a man demand angrily from a door at the end of a darkened corridor. "Didn't I tell you that I was not at home until after mass tomorrow? Plague you, Teresa?"

To the wizen-faced woman I stammered some apology, but at the same moment I saw a huge, almost gigantic figure in a long black cassock and biretta emerge from the room.

"Oh, signore?" he cried apologetically, the instant he caught sight of me. "Do pray excuse me. I have so many of my poor

people here begging that I'm compelled to be out to them sometimes. Come in! Come in?" Then he added reproachfully, turning to his housekeeper, "Teresa, what manners you have to leave this gentleman standing in the hall like a mendicant! I'm ashamed of you, Teresa! What must the signore think – and a foreigner, too!"

In an instant the Very Reverand Bernardo Landini and I were friends. I saw that he was thoroughly genuine, a strange admixture of good-fellowship and piety. His proportions were Gargantuan. His clean-shaven face was perfectly round, fresh, and almost boyish in complexion, his dark eyes twinkled with merriment, his stomach was huge and spoke mutely of a healthy appetite, his hand big and hearty in its shake, and in his speech he aspirated his "e's," which showed him to be a born Florentine.

After I had explained that my name was Allan Kennedy, and that I was introduced by the *gobbo* of Leghorn, he took out his great horn snuff-box, rapped it loudly, and offered me a pinch.

"Ah!" he remarked. "The signore is English, yet how well he speaks our Tuscan?"

I thanked him for his compliment, and went on to explain that I had passed the years of my youth in Florence, and was at heart almost a Florentino.

This pleased him mightily, and from the moment I hinted at my antiquarian tastes he began to chatter as an enthusiast will.

The apartment wherein I sat, darkened by its closed sun-shutters, was certainly a strange one, small, and so crammed with

antiques of every kind and description that one could scarcely move in it. Upon the old Empire writing-table at which he had seated himself stood a small brass crucifix of exquisite design, while all around hung ancient pictures of a religious character – saints, pietas, pictures of the Redeemer, and several great canvases reaching from floor to ceiling, evidently from church-altars. The very chairs were of the fifteenth century, heavy, massive, and covered with stamped leather; the tables were of the Renaissance; and the perfect chaos of valuable objects of art stored there was to me, a collector absolutely bewildering.

And amid it all, seated at his table, was the ponderous, beaming cleric, mopping his brow with his big red handkerchief from time to time, and leaning back in his chair to laugh and talk with me.

Yet when I mentioned that I had been sent by the mysterious old hunchback of Leghorn his face instantly grew serious, and with a low sigh he said: "Ah, poor Francesco! poor fellow?"

"You know him well, *signor priore*," I said. "Tell me about him. I'm very anxious to know who and what he really is. To me he has always been a mystery."

But the stout prior shook his head, replying in a rather hard voice: "No, signore. I regret that my lips are closed."

His response was a strange one, and led me at once to suspect that my new friend was a party to some grave secret. Therefore, seeing that his manner was firm, I dropped the subject, although more than ever interested in the queer, deformed old fellow who

had so long mystified me.

My friend the priest took me around his wonderful collection, and showed me a veritable confusion of valuable antiques: a Madonna by Andrea del Sarto, a Holy Family by Tintoretto, a tiny but exquisite specimen of that lost art of della Robbia, and a quantity of old tapestries, medieval ironwork, and old, carved furniture.

In a room beyond was stored a splendid collection of Florentine armour: helmets, breastplates, gauntlets, and lances, with a heap of ancient swords, rapiers, and poniards. I took up several to examine them, and found that they were without exception splendid specimens of the Spanish armourer's work, mostly bearing upon the finely tempered blades the well-known marks of Blanco, Martinez, Ruiz, Tomas, and Pedro de Lezama.

Some of the work was wonderfully inlaid with brass and copper; and the collection appeared to be a representative one, ranging from the rusty crosshilts of the Etruscas down to the thin Spanish rapiers of the seventeenth century.

A third room, still beyond, was the priest's bedchamber, and even this was so packed with curios and bric-à-brac that there was scarcely room to enter.

Above the narrow little bed was an antique bronze crucifix, mounted upon a carved wooden background covered with old purple brocade, while the whitewashed walls were almost hidden by the profusion of religious pictures. The red-brick floor was carpetless, as were all the other apartments; but the furniture was

all old, and upon the chairs were heaped quantities of silks and velvets from the Genoese looms of the seventeenth century – truly an amazing profusion of relics of Italy's past glory.

The prior smiled at my exclamations of surprise as I enthusiastically examined object after object with keen and critical eye. Then, when I remarked upon the value of the objects of art with which his unpretentious house was filled, he answered:

"I am delighted that you, signore, should feel so much interest in my few things. Like yourself, I am an enthusiast, and perhaps by my calling I am afforded unusual facilities for collecting. Here, in my poverty-stricken parish, are quantities of antiques stored in the cottages as well as in the palaces, and the *contadini* from all the countryside, even beyond Pistoja, prefer to bring me their treasures in secret rather than to offer them openly to the pawnbroker."

"But Graniani told me that you have discovered a manuscript of remarkable character. I possess a small collection; therefore may I be permitted to examine it?" I asked, carefully approaching the subject.

"Most certainly," he replied, after a moment's hesitation, it seemed. "It is in the safe in my study. Let us return there." And I followed his ponderous form back to the small apartment wherein stood his writing-table with the crucifix and heavily bound Bible and missal upon it.

But as I walked behind him, unable to see his face, I was

surprised at the tone of the remark he made as though speaking to himself:

"So Francesco told you of the book, did he? Ah!"

He spoke as though in suppressed anger that the queer old hunchback had betrayed his confidence.

Chapter Two
The Priest and the Book

The prior mopped his round face again with his red handkerchief, and taking a key from his pocket fumbled at the lock of the small and old-fashioned safe, after some moments producing the precious manuscript for my inspection.

It proved to be a thick folio, bound in its original oaken boards covered with purple leather that had faded and in parts disappeared. For further protection there were added great bosses of tarnished brass, usual in fifteenth-century bindings, but the wood itself was fast decaying; the binding presented a sadly tattered and worn appearance, and the heavy volume seemed held together mainly by its great brass clasp.

He placed it before me on the table, and with eager fingers I undid the clasp and opened it. As soon as my eyes fell upon the leaves of parchment I recognised it to be a very rare and remarkable fourteenth-century manuscript, and a desire at once seized me to possess it.

Written by the monk Arnoldus of Siena, it was beautifully executed in even Gothic characters, with red and blue initials, and ornamented with a number of curious designs in gold and colours representing the seven deadly sins. Upon the first page was a long, square initial in gold; and although written with the

contractions common at the time, I managed to make out the first few lines in Latin as follows:

"Arnoldus Cenni de Senis, professus in monasterio Viridis vallis canon regul. S. Augustini in Zonie silva Camerac. dioec. Liber Gnotosolitos de septem peccatis mortalibus, de decem praeceptis, de duodecim consiliis evangelicis, de quinque sensibus, de simbolo fidei, de septem sacramentis, de octo beatitudinibus, de septem donis spiritus sancti, de quatuor peccatis ad Deum clamantibus," etc.

Across the top of the first page, written in a cursive hand in brown ink of a somewhat later date, was the inscription:

"Liber canonicor. regul. monasterii S. Maynulfi in Bodeke prope Paderborn. Qui rapit hunc librum rapiant sua viscera corvi."

The introduction showed that the splendid manuscript had been written by the old Sienese monk himself in the Abbey of Saint Paul at Groenendale. The date was fixed by the "Explicit": "Iste liber est mei Fris Arnoldi Cenni de Senis Frum ordis B'te Marie carmelo. Ouem ppria manu scripsi i anno dni MoCCCoXXXIX. die. XXVIII. Maij. Finito libro Reseram' gra Xo."

I really don't know why I became so intensely interested in the volume, for the ornamentations were evidently by a Flemish illuminator, and I had come across many of a far more meritorious character in the work of the Norman scribes.

Perhaps it was owing to the quaintness of the design; perhaps

because of the rareness of the work; but more probably because at the end of the book had been left fifty or so blank leaves, as was often the case in manuscripts of that period, and upon them, in a strange and difficult cursive hand, was inscribed a long record which aroused my curiosity.

As every collector of manuscripts knows, one sometimes finds curious entries upon the blank pages of vellum books. In the days before the art of printing was discovered, when the use of paper was not general, and when vellum and parchment were costly, every inch of the latter was utilise and a record meant to be permanent was usually written in the front or back of some precious volume. Therefore, the sight of this hundred pages or so of strange-looking writing in faded brown ink, penned with its many downward flourishes, uneven and difficult as compared with the remarkable regularity of the old monk's treatise upon the Seven Sins, awakened within me an eagerness to decipher it.

Horaes, psalters, offices of the Virgin, and codexes of Saints Augustine, Bernard, Ambrose, and the others are to be found in every private collection; therefore it was always my object to acquire manuscript works that were original. The volume itself was certainly a treasure, and its interest was increased tenfold by those pages of close, half-faded handwriting, written probably a century later, and evidently in indifferent ink to that used by the old monk.

"Well, signore," inquired the prior after I had been bending over the ancient volume for some minutes in silence, "what is

your opinion? You are of course an expert. I am not. I know nothing about manuscripts."

His frankness was pleasing. He did not seek to expound its merits or to criticise without being able to substantiate his statements.

"A most interesting codex," I declared, just as openly. "I don't remember ever having met with Arnoldus before; and, as far as I can recollect, Quain does not mention him. How did it come into your possession?"

Landini was silent. His huge, round face, so different from the pinched, grey countenances of most priests, assumed a mysterious look, and his lips pursed themselves up in an instant. I noticed his hesitation, and, recollecting that he had told me how many people in the neighbourhood came to him in secret and sold him their most treasured possessions, saw that my question was not an exactly fair one. Instead of replying, he merely remarked that if I desired to acquire the volume he was open to an offer. Then he added:

"I think, my dear signore, that when we become better acquainted we shall like each other. Therefore I may as well tell you at once that, in addition to the holy office which I hold, I deal in antiques. Probably you will condemn me, just as half Florence has already done. But surely it is no disgrace to the habit I wear? From the sacriligious Government I receive the magnificent stipend of one thousand lire (forty pounds) annually;" and he laughed a trifle bitterly. "Can a man live on that? I have both

father and mother still living, dear old souls! Babbo is eighty-one, and my mother seventy-eight; they live out at the five ways in the Val d'Ema, in the old farmhouse where I was born. With the profits I make on dealing in antiques I manage by great economy to keep them and myself, and have just a trifle to give to the deserving poor in my parish. Do *you* blame me, signore?"

How could I? His charming openness, so like the Tuscan priest, and yet so unlike the Tuscan tradesman, gave me an insight into his true character. The extreme simplicity of his carpetless, comfortless house, the frayed shabbiness of his cassock, and the cracked condition of his huge buckled shoes all spoke mutely for a struggle for life. Yet, on the other hand, his face was that of a supremely contented man. His collection was such that if sold at Christie's it would fetch many thousands of pounds; yet, an antiquary himself, he clung, it seemed, to a greater portion of it, and would not part with many of his treasures.

I told him that I had admiration rather than reproach at his turning dealer, when he frankly explained that his method of selling was not to regard the marketable value of an object, but to obtain a small profit upon the sum he gave for it.

"I find that this method works best," he said, "for by it I am able to render a service to those in straitened circumstances, and at the same time gain sufficient for the wants of my family. Of the real value of many things I am utterly ignorant. This manuscript, for instance, I purchased for a hundred francs. If you give me a hundred and twenty-five, and you think it is worth it, I shall be

quite contented. Does the price suit you?"

Suit me! My heart leaped to my mouth. If he had suggested fifty pounds instead of five I should have been prepared to consider it. Either Quaritch in London, Rosenthal in Munich, or Olschki in Florence would, I felt certain, be eager to give at the least a hundred pounds for it. Such manuscripts were not offered for sale every day.

"The price is not at all high," I answered. "Indeed, it is lower than I expected you would ask; therefore the book is mine." And taking my wallet from my pocket, I counted out and handed to him a dozen or so of those small, well-thumbed notes that constitute the paper currency of Italy, for which he scribbled a receipt upon a scrap of waste-paper which he picked up from the floor – a fact which showed him to be as unconventional as he was frank and honest in his dealing.

Dealers in any branch of antiques, whether in pictures, china, furniture, or manuscripts, are – except well-known firms – for the most part sharks of the worst *genus*; hence it was pleasant to make a purchase with such charming openness of purpose.

When he handed me the receipt, however, I thought I detected a strange, mysterious look upon his big, beaming countenance as he said, "I thank you, my dear Signor Kennedy, for your patronage, and I hope that you will never regret your purchase – never."

He seemed to emphasise the words in a tone unusual to him. It flashed across my mind that the manuscript might, after all,

be a clever German forgery, as a good many are, and that its genuineness had already been doubted. Yet if it were, I felt certain that such a man would never disgrace his office by knowingly deceiving me.

Still, the mystery of his manner puzzled me, and I am fain to confess that my confidence in him became somewhat shaken.

His refusal to tell me anything of the ugly old hunchback whose orders he had obeyed in showing me the book, and his disinclination to tell me whence he had procured it, were both curious circumstances which occupied my mind. It also occurred to me as most probable that Graniani was merely an agent of the clerical antique-dealer, which accounted for his pockets being ever filled with precious manuscripts, bits of valuable china, miniatures, an such-like odds and ends.

Nevertheless, if the "Book of Arnoldus" were actually genuine I had secured a gem at a ridiculously low price. I did not for one moment doubt its authenticity; hence a feeling of intense satisfaction overcame everything.

He showed me several other manuscripts, including a fifteenth-century Petrarca *De Vita Solitaria*, an illuminated Horae of about the same date, and an *Evangelia quatuor* of a century earlier; but none of them attracted me so much as the heavy volume I had purchased.

Then, at my request, he took me along the dark corridor and through a side-door into the fine old church, where the light was dim and in keeping with the ancient, time-mellowed Raphaels

and the dull gilding of ceiling and altar. The air was heavy with incense, and the only sound beyond the echo of our footsteps was the impudent chirp of a stray bird which had come in for shelter from the scorching sun. It was an ancient place, erected in 1089 by the Florentines to commemorate their victories on August sixth, the day of San Sisto.

For more than twenty years I had not entered there. I recollect going there in my youth, because I was enamoured of a dark-eyed little milliner from the via Dante who attended mass regularly. The past arose before me, and I smiled at that forgotten love of my ardent youth. The prior pointed out to me objects of interest not mentioned in the red guide-books, they being known to him alone. He showed me the splendid sculptured tombs of the noble houses of Cioni and of Gherardesca, whereon lay the armoured knights in stone; the Madonna of Fra Bartolommeo; the curious frescoes in the sacristy, and other objects which to both of us were interesting; then, taking me back through his house, we passed out into the tangled, old-world garden – a weedy, neglected place, with orange and fig trees, broken moss-grown statuary, and a long, cool loggia covered with laden vines.

Together we sat upon a bench in the welcome shadow, and at our feet the lizards darted across those white flagstones hollowed by the tread of generations. Father Bernardo took the long Tuscan cigar which I offered him; and, on his calling old Teresa to bring a candle, we both lit up, for the ignition of a "Virginia" in Italy is, as you know, an art in itself. He confided to me that he

loved to smoke – the only indulgence he allowed himself – and then, as we lolled back, overcome by the heat and burden of the day, we discussed antiques, and he told me some strange stories of the treasures that had on various occasions passed through his hands to the national galleries or the wealthy American visitors.

A dozen times I tried to obtain from him the history of the fine old parchment codex I had just bought, but without avail. He made it a rule, he told me frankly, never to divulge from whom he obtained the objects he had to sell, and had he *not* been a cleric I should really have suspected him of being a receiver of stolen property.

Old Teresa, in blue apron and shuffling over the stones, returned to her master presently, informing him that someone was waiting for confession; therefore my friend, excusing himself, flung away his cigar, crossed himself, and hurried back to his sacred duty. He was a strange man, it was true; charming, yet at moments austere, reserved, and mysterious.

Alone, still smoking, I sat where he had left me. Opposite, the overgrown garden with its wealth of fruit and flowers was bounded by the ancient stucco wall of the church, around which, in a line above the windows, ran a row of beautiful della Robbia medallions hidden from the world.

When I had remarked upon their beauty to Landini he had sighed, saying:

"Ah, signore, if I only might sell them and pay for the restoration of my church! Each one is worth at least a thousand

pounds sterling, for they are even finer specimens than those upon the Foundling Hospital. The Louvre Museum in Paris offered me a year ago twenty thousand francs for the one to the right over there in the corner." Yes; the old place breathed an air of a bygone age – the age of the Renaissance in Italy – and I sat there musing as I smoked, trying to fathom the character of the ponderous, heavy-breathing man who had that moment entered the confessional, and wondering what could be his connection with Francesco Graniani.

Across, straight before me, was a small, square, latticed window of old green glass, near which, I knew, stood the confessional-box; and suddenly – I know not why – my eye caught it, and what I noticed there riveted my attention.

Something showed white for a single instant behind the glass, then disappeared. But not, however, before I recognised that some person was keeping secret watch upon my movements, and, further, that it was none other than the forbidding-looking little hunchback of Leghorn.

In Italy one's suspicion is easily aroused, and certainly mine was by that inexplicable incident. I determined then and there to trust neither Graniani nor his clerical friend. Therefore, with a feeling of anger at such impudent espionage, I rose, re-entered the prior's house, and walked up the dark passage to the study, intending to obtain the precious volume for which I had paid, and to wish my host a hurried adieu.

On entering the darkened study, however, I discovered,

somewhat to my surprise, a neat-waisted, well-dressed lady in black standing there, evidently waiting, and idling the time by glancing over the vellum pages of my newly acquired treasure.

I drew back, begging her pardon for unceremonious intrusion, but she merely bowed in acknowledgment. Her manner seemed agitated and nervous, and she wore a veil, so that in the half-light I could not well distinguish her features.

She was entirely in black, even to her gloves, and was evidently the person to whom Father Bernardo had been called, and after confession had passed through the little side-door of the church in order to consult him upon some matter of extreme importance, the nature of which I could not possibly divine. In all this I scented mystery.

Chapter Three
In which the Prior is Mysterious

The prior entered his study behind me with a hurried word of excuse, expressing regret that he had been compelled to leave me alone, and promising to join me in a few moments.

Therefore I turned, and, retracing my steps along the stone corridor wherein antique carved furniture was piled, went back again into the garden, glancing up at the window whereat I had detected the hunchback's face.

Landini had closed his study door after I had gone, thus showing that his consultation with his visitor was of a confidential nature. I regretted that I had not passed through into the church and faced Graniani, for I could not now go back and pass the closed door, especially as the keen eyes of the reverend's housewoman were upon me. So, impatiently I waited for the stout priest to rejoin me, which he did a few moments later, carrying my precious acquisition in his hand.

Perhaps you are a collector of coins or curios, monastic seals or manuscripts, birds' eggs, or butterflies? If you are, you know quite well the supreme satisfaction it gives you to secure a unique specimen at a moderate and advantageous price. Therefore, you may well understand the tenderness with which I took my treasured Arnoldus from him, and how carefully I wrapped it

in a piece of brown paper which Teresa brought to her master. The priest's house-woman, shrewd, inquisitive, and a gossip, is an interesting character the world over; and old Teresa, with the wizened face and brown, wrinkled neck, was no exception. She possessed a wonderful genius for making a *minestra*, or vegetable soup, Father Bernardo had already told me, and he had promised that I should taste her culinary triumph some day.

Nevertheless, although the prior was politeness itself, pleasant yet pious, laconic yet light-hearted, I entertained a distrust of him.

I referred to my intrusion in his study while he had a visitor, but he only laughed, saying:

"It was nothing, my dear signore – nothing, I assure you. Pray don't apologise. My business with the lady, although serious, was brief. It is I who should apologise."

"No," I said; "I've been enjoying your garden. Enclosed here by the church and by your house, right in the very centre of Florence, it is so quiet and old-world, so full of antiquity, that I have much enjoyed lingering here."

"Yes," he answered reflectively; "back in the turbulent days of the Medici that remarkable figure in Italian history, Fra Savonarola, owned this garden and sat beneath this very loggia, on this very bench, thinking out those wonderful discourses and prophecies which electrified all Florence. Nothing changes here. The place is just the same today, those white walls on the four sides, only the statuary perhaps is in worse condition than it was

in 1498 when he concluded his remarkable career by defying the commands of the Pope as well as the injunctions of the signoria, and was hanged and burned amid riot and bloodshed. Ah, this garden of mine has seen many vicissitudes, signore, and yonder in my church the divine Dante himself invoked the blessing of the Almighty upon his efforts to effect peace with the Pisans."

"Your house is a truly fitting receptacle for your splendid collection," I said, impressed by his words and yet wondering at his manner.

"Do you know," he exclaimed a moment later, as though a thought had suddenly occurred to him, "I cannot help fearing that you may have acted imprudently in purchasing this manuscript. If you wish, I am quite ready to return you your money. Really, I think it would be better if you did so, signore."

"But I assure you I have no wish to return it to you," I declared, astonished at his words. If he believed he had made a bad bargain, I at least had his receipt for the amount and the book in my hand.

"But it would be better," he urged. "Better for you – and for me, for the matter of that. Here are the notes you gave me;" and taking them from his pocket he held them towards me.

I failed utterly to comprehend his intention or his motive. I had made a good bargain, and why should I relinquish it? Place yourself in my position for a moment, and think what you would have done.

"Well, *signor reverendo*," I exclaimed, "I paid the price you asked, and I really cannot see why you should attempt to cry off

the deal." Truth to tell, I was a trifle annoyed.

"You have paid the price," he repeated in a strange voice, looking at me seriously. "Yes; that is true. You have paid the price in the currency of my country; but there is yet a price to pay."

"What do you mean?" I asked quickly, looking him squarely in the face.

"I mean that it would be best for us both if you gave me back my receipt and took back your money."

"Why?"

"I cannot be more explicit," he replied. "I am a man of honour," he added, "and you may trust me."

"But I am desirous of adding the codex to my collection," I argued, mystified by his sudden desire to withdraw from his word. "I asked you your price, and have paid it."

"I admit that. The affair has been but a matter of business between two gentlemen," he replied, with just a touch of hauteur. "Nevertheless, I am anxious that you should not be possessor of that manuscript."

"But why? I am a collector. When you come to Leghorn I hope you will call and look through my treasures."

"Treasures?" he echoed. "That is no treasure – it is a curse, rather."

"A curse! How can a splendid old book be a curse in the hands of a palaeographical enthusiast like myself?"

"I am a man of my word," he said in a low, distinct tone. "I tell you, my dear signore, that your enthusiasm has led you away.

You should not have purchased your so-called treasure. It was ill-advised; therefore I urge you to take back the sum you have paid."

"And on my part I object to do so," I said a little warmly.

He shrugged his broad shoulders, and a pained look crossed his big features.

"Will you not listen to me – for your own good?" he urged earnestly.

"I do not think that sentiment need enter into it," I replied. "I have purchased the book, and intend to retain it in my possession."

"Very well," he sighed. "I have warned you. One day, perhaps, you will know that at least Bernardo Landini acted as your friend."

"But I cannot understand why you wish me to give you back the book," I argued. "You must have some motive?"

"Certainly I have," was his frank response. "I do not wish you to be its possessor."

"You admit that the volume is precious, therefore of value. Yet you wish to withdraw from a bad bargain!"

His lips pursed themselves for a moment, and a look of mingled regret and annoyance crossed his huge face.

"I admit the first, but deny the second. The bargain is a good one for me, but a bad one for you."

"Very well," I replied with self-satisfaction. "I will abide by it."

"You refuse to hear reason?"

"I refuse, with all due deference to you, *signor reverendo*, to return you the book I have bought."

"Then I can only regret," he said in a voice of profound commiseration. "You misconstrue my motive, but how can I blame you? I probably should, if I were in ignorance, as you are."

"Then you should enlighten me."

"Ah?" he sighed again. "I only wish it were admissible. But I cannot. If you refuse to forego your bargain, I can do nothing. When you entered here I treated you as a stranger; and now, although you do not see it, I am treating you as a friend."

I smiled. Used as I was to the subtleness of the trading Tuscan, I was suspicious that he regretted having sold the book to me at such a low price, and was trying to obtain more without asking for it point-blank.

"Well, *signor priore*," I said bluntly a moment later, "suppose I gave you an extra hundred francs for it, would that make any difference to your desire to retain possession of it?"

"None whatever," he responded. "If you gave me ten thousand more I would not willingly allow you to have it in your possession."

His reply was certainly a strange one, and caused me a few moments' reflection.

"But why did you sell it if you wish to retain it?" I asked.

"Because at the time you were not my friend," he replied evasively. "You are now – I know you, and for that reason I give

you warning. If you take the book from this house, recollect it is at your risk, and you will assuredly regret having done so."

I shook my head, smiling, unconvinced by his argument and suspicious of his manner. Somehow I had grown to dislike the man. If he were actually my friend, as he assured me, he would certainly not seek to do me out of a bargain. So I laughed at his misgivings, saying:

"Have no fear, *signor reverendo*. I shall treasure the old codex in a glass case, as I do the other rare manuscripts in my collection. I have a number of biblical manuscripts quite as valuable, and I take care of them, I assure you."

My eye caught the ancient window where I had seen the white, unshaven face of the old hunchback, and recollecting that there must be some mysterious connection between the two men, I tucked my precious parcel under my arm and rose to depart.

The prior knit his dark brows and crossed himself in silence.

"Then the signore refuses to heed me?" he asked in a tone of deep disappointment.

"I do," I answered quite decisively. "I have to catch my train back to Leghorn; therefore I will wish you *addio*."

"As you wish, as you wish," sighed the ponderous priest. Then placing his big hand upon my shoulder in a paternal manner, he added, "I know full well how strange my request must appear to you, my dear signore, but some day perhaps you will learn the reason. Recollect, however, that, whatever may occur, Bernardo Landini is a friend to whom you may come for counsel

and advice. *Addio*, and may He protect you, guard you from misfortune, and prosper you. *Addio*."

I thanked him, and took the big, fat hand he offered.

Then, in silence, I looked into his good-humoured face and saw there a strange, indescribable expression of mingled dread and sympathy. But we parted; and, with old Teresa shuffling before me, I passed through the house and out into the white sun glare of the open piazza, bearing with me the precious burden that was destined to have such a curious and remarkable influence upon my being and my life.

Chapter Four
By the Tideless Sea

When a man secures a bargain, be it in his commerce or in his hobbies, he always endeavours to secure a second opinion. As I hurried across to hug the shadow of the Palazzo Pandolfini I glanced at my watch, and found that I had still an hour and a half before the *treno lumaca*, or snail-train, as the Florentines, with sarcastic humour, term it, would start down the Arno valley for Leghorn. Therefore I decided to carry my prize to Signor Leo Olschki, who, as you know, is one of the most renowned dealers in ancient manuscripts in the world, and whose shop is situated on the Lung Amo Acciajoli, close to the Ponte Vecchio. Many treasures of our British Museum have passed through his hands, and among bibliophiles his name is a household word.

Fortunately I found him in: a short, fair-bearded, and exceedingly courteous man, who himself is a lover of books although a dealer in them. Behind those glass cases in his shop were some magnificent illuminated manuscripts waiting to be bought by some millionaire collector or national museum, and all around from floor to ceiling were shelves full of the rarest books extant, some of the *incunabula* being the only known copies existing.

I had made many purchases of him; therefore he took me into

the room at the rear of the shop, and I displayed my bargain before his expert eyes.

In a moment he pronounced it a genuine Arnoldus, a manuscript of exceeding rarity, and unique on account of several technical reasons with which it is useless to trouble those who read this curious record.

"Well, now, Signor Olschki, what would you consider approximately its worth?"

The great bibliophile stroked his beard slowly, at the same time turning over the evenly-written parchment folios.

"I suppose," he answered, after a little hesitation, "that you don't wish to sell it?"

"No. I tell you frankly that I've brought it here to show you and ask your opinion as to its genuineness."

"Genuine it is no doubt – a magnificent codex. If I had it here to sell I would not part with it under twenty-five thousand francs – a thousand pounds."

"A thousand pounds?" I echoed, for the price was far above what I had believed the manuscript to be worth.

"Rosenthal had one in his catalogue two years ago priced at sixteen thousand francs. I saw it when I was in Munich, and it was not nearly so good or well preserved as yours. Besides – this writing at the end: have you any idea what it is about?"

"Some family record," I answered. "The usual rambling statements regarding personal possessions, I expect."

"Of course," he answered. "In the fifteenth and sixteenth

centuries they habitually disfigured their books in this way, as you know. It was a great pity."

Having obtained the information I desired, I repacked my treasured tome while he brought out several precious volumes for my inspection, including a magnificent French *Psalteriolum seu preces pia cum calendario*, with miniatures of the thirteenth century, which he had catalogued at four hundred and fifty pounds; and an Italian *Psalterium ad usum ord. S. Benedicti*, of two hundred leaves, written at Padua in 1428, that he had just sold to the National Museum at Berlin for fifteen thousand marks. In addition to being an expert and dealer, he was a true lover of books and manuscripts; and, knowing that my pocket would not allow me to indulge in such treasures, he would often exhibit to me his best volumes and gossip about them as every bibliophile will gossip, handling them tenderly the while.

I caught my train and returned to the white villa facing the sea, outside Leghorn, which was my bachelor home, entirely satisfied with my visit to the Tuscan capital.

Three miles beyond the noisy seaport, close down where the clear waters of the Mediterranean lazily lapped the shingly beach at the little watering-place of Antignano, stood the square, sun-blanched house, with its wide balcony, and its green sun-shutters now open to the soft breeze that came across the water with the brilliant sundown. The faithful Nello, my old Tuscan man-servant, who was cook, housekeeper, and valet all in one, had been watching for my arrival; and as I rang at the big iron gate

before my garden the old fellow came hurrying to admit me, with his pleasant bow and words of welcome on his lips:

"*Ben tornato, signore; ben tornato*."

I thanked him, carried my precious parcel to the study upstairs, and then, descending again, ate hurriedly the dinner he placed before me, anxious to examine my purchase.

My old servitor moved noiselessly in and out as I ate, fidgeting as though he wished to speak with me. But I was looking through my letters, and took but little notice of him. Italian servants are always a nuisance, being too loquacious and too ready to offer opinions or advice. I had suffered for years from a succession of unsatisfactory men, until my friend Fra Antonio of the Capuchin monastery brought old Nello to me. He had little in exterior appearance to recommend him, for his countenance was that of a Mephistopheles, and his attire neglected and shabby. He was an old soldier who had served Italy well in the days of Garibaldi, and had for years been engaged as steward on board one of the Prince line of steamers between Naples and New York.

Fra Antonio knew him well; therefore I took him on trial, and very quickly discovered that even though he had a wife and family living high up in one of the odorous back streets of Leghorn, to whom some of my provisions secretly found their way, he was a treasure of a servant.

Although old in years, he was not decrepit. His physical strength often amazed me, and after three years of service his devotion to me was often remarked by my friends. His only vice

was smoking; and as he consumed the very rankest of tobacco, which clung about the house for days afterwards, I had set apart an arbour in the garden beneath the vines where he might poison the air whenever he wished.

Having dined, I ascended the wide marble staircase to my study, a big, high room, with frescoed ceiling, that looked out across the open sea. Houses are large and cheap in Italy – mine was far too large for a lonely man like myself. There were half a dozen rooms into which I never entered, and I opened my drawing-room only when I had visitors, for I have a man's dislike for silk-covered furniture, mirrors, and standard lamps.

The long windows of my study were open, and the place was at that moment filled with the crimson afterglow. I stood upon the balcony and breathed the pure air from the sea, delightfully refreshing after the stifling heat of the day. Across, in the far distance, the islands of Corsica, Capraja, and Gorgona loomed purple against the blood-red sunset, while up from the beach the evening stillness was broken by a young fisherman playing his mandolin and singing in a fine musical voice the old love-song with that chorus which every one in Italy knows so well:

"Amarti soltanto
Non basta al mio cor:
Io voglio parlarti,
Parlarti d'amor!"

Love! Ah! those words he sang brought back to me, an exile,

all the bitterness of the past – all the bitterness of my own love. A lump arose in my throat when I recollected the might-have-been; but I crushed it down just as I had done a hundred times before, and re-entered the room, closing the windows to shut out the words of the song, and, sighing, seated myself at my writing-table to occupy myself with the book I had bought from the fat prior of San Sisto.

Old Nello – whose correct name was Lionello, although, as usual in Tuscany, everyone had called him Nello ever since his birth, sixty years ago – brought in my coffee and liqueur, setting it down at my elbow, and afterwards crossed to reopen the window.

"I closed it, Nello," I snapped. "Don't open it. There's too much confounded music outside."

"*Bene, signore*," he answered. "I forgot to say that the *signor console* called at four o'clock."

"And what did the consul want?" I inquired.

"He wishes to see you tomorrow to luncheon," was the old fellow's response. "And, oh! I forgot – another man called to see the signore only a quarter of an hour before his return – the *gobbo*; Graniani."

"Graniani!" I echoed. "And what did he want, pray?"

"To sell you some more old rubbish, I suppose," was Nello's blunt reply, for he always looked upon my purchase of antiques as a terrible waste of good money. "He said he would return later."

I was very surprised at this. He had probably returned to Leghorn by an earlier train from Florence; but why he wished

to see me after secretly spying upon my movements I was at a loss to know. One must, however, be clever to comprehend the ingenuity of the Italian, with all his diplomatic smiles and ingenious subtleties.

"If he comes I will see him," I responded; adding, "Do you know, Nello, I don't like that man."

"Ah, signore!" answered the old fellow, "you should never trust a hunchback."

"But when I asked you about him you knew nothing to his detriment. I look to you to make inquiries about such people."

"At the time I was in ignorance, signore," he said apologetically; "but I have learned several things since."

"Things that are not very creditable, eh?" I asked, regarding his weird, almost grotesque figure in ill-fitting black coat and crumpled shirt-front.

He hesitated as though unwilling to tell me the whole truth. He was always reserved regarding any person of bad character, and, generally speaking, a Tuscan never cares to denounce his compatriots to a foreigner.

"If I were you, signore," he said, "I'd have nothing to do with any *gobbo*."

"But I've bought several good manuscripts from him," I argued.

"The signore must please himself," he remarked. "I have warned him."

I really did not desire any warning, for the mysterious

appearance of the old hunchback's face at the church window was sufficient to cause me grave suspicion. But Nello for three years past had exercised a kind of paternal care over me, seeming to regard with wonder that I could scribble piles upon piles of paper and get paid for it. It was really wonderful how I wrote roman, he often declared. He read two of them translated into Italian and published serially in the *Tribuna*, and kept the copies neatly tied in bundles, which he proudly showed to his friends as the work of his *padrone*.

"Well, had I better see the *gobbo*?" I asked.

"No, signore, I would not," was his prompt advice. "He has no business to come here. His place is in the piazza, and it is impudence to call upon a gentleman."

"Then tell him I'm engaged. I'll want nothing more tonight. Don't disturb me."

"*Benissimo, signore; buona notte*." And old Nello went softly out well satisfied, leaving me to my coffee and my old manuscript.

I had not asked Nello to give his reason, because I knew that he would refuse to be drawn. He was a clever old fellow, and would, in argument, get the better of me.

So, the music having ceased, I reopened the window, and in the fading light settled myself to a pleasant hour with my latest acquisition.

Further acquaintance with the splendid volume was not disappointing. It was certainly a treasure; and having glanced

casually at the coloured miniatures and gilt initials, I turned to the first page of the record written upon the blank pages at the end.

The cursive writing with its long flourishing was extremely difficult to decipher, and the ink much inferior to that used by the old monk Arnoldus, for it was faded and brown, having evidently been penned by one who had no acquaintance with the Gothic or book-hand. The writing was undoubtedly that of the early sixteenth century.

The first line I was able to make out read as follows:

Qui scripsit scripta manus eius sit benedicta, while, as far as I could decipher it, the record ended in the following manner:

> Qui me scribebat Godefridus nomen habebat
> Godefridus Lupellus
> de Croylandia
> me scripsit anno
> domini 1542 in no
> no die mensis
> Janua rij.

This final page was so ill-written and half-obliterated by a great yellow damp-stain that I had not before noticed it. But by it my curiosity became further aroused, for, translated into modern English, it showed that the addition had been made to the book by one Godfrey Lupellus or Lovel, of Crowland, in Lincolnshire, probably one of the monks of that once celebrated Benedictine abbey which is now but a magnificent pile of ruins familiar to many by photographs.

The discovery that it had been penned by a person living in England caused me to set to work at once to learn what was written there, so I took a sheet of plain paper, and, assisted by that valuable little work of reference, the "Dictionary of Abbreviations," commenced to disentangle slowly the calligraphical riddle before me.

The task was extremely difficult; and, whether from the heat of the evening or owing to the fatigue I had undergone, I felt a curious, indescribable sensation slowly creeping over me.

It commenced with small shooting pains that paralysed the muscles of my jaws, gradually increasing in intensity. At first I believed that it was merely a touch of neuralgia, until all in a moment a quick, sharp pain shot down my spine, paralysing me so completely that I could neither move nor utter a sound.

My head swam. My jaws were fixed. I tried to rise, but could not; I tried to cry out for my faithful Nello, but my tongue refused to utter a sound.

A curious drowsiness seized me, and I struggled against it vainly. Never before had I experienced such a feeling. Then a second pain ran down my back far more acute and excruciating than the first, and I believe I must have fainted.

At any rate, all became an utter blank. The fat priest's solemn warning was, it seemed, no idle one.

Chapter Five
Shows Something Suspicious

Life has no labyrinth but one's steps can track it, and mind acts on mind though bodies be far divided.

Following the strange sensation that crept upon me while examining that half-faded, uneven screed came a complete blank. My muscles were paralysed, my breathing difficult, my throat contracted, and my manhood's energy utterly sapped, until I was helpless as a child. It seemed as though the unseen power had touched me with the finger of death, and I had withered and fallen.

Yet slowly and painfully I struggled back to a sense of my hapless position, and on opening my eyes, sore in their sockets, I found, to my amazement, that I was lying in a heap on the carpet beside my overturned chair, my head close to the carved leg of my writing-table. The light dazzled me, and I quickly became aware that I was lying full in the morning sunshine which streamed in at the open window.

I had fallen from my chair and remained insensible the whole night. Nello had not discovered me, as I had dismissed him, wishing to be alone.

In Tuscany it is light early in summer, and the July sun soon gathers power. I glanced at the clock, and saw that it was already

a quarter to five.

Outside, a fisherman was singing a gay song as he unloaded his boat, and children were already shouting as they bathed in the sunlit water; but the brightness in the world beyond only jarred upon me, soured and embittered man that I was. Could that curious sensation be a precursory sign of some terrible malady – epilepsy or paralysis, perhaps?

I struggled to my feet and stood beside the table, dazed, unbalanced, and so weak of limb that my legs could scarcely bear me. I felt as though I had just risen from a sick-bed after months of suffering.

The book lay open at the final page whereon the writer of the record, Godfrey Lovel, had inscribed his name and date as already reproduced here. My thoughts ran back to the moment when I had experienced that sudden seizure, and I recollected how interested I had been in the few lines I had succeeded in deciphering.

The unmistakable paralysis that had stricken me down at the very moment my curiosity was aroused was certainly alarming, and even mysterious, especially after the prior's hints as to the evil that would pursue me if I determined to continue in possession of that fine old volume.

The fat priest's words recurred to me with a deep and hidden meaning, and I admit that my spirit was mightily disturbed. It seemed that I had raised a foe where I might have won a friend.

I locked the book away in my safe, and went forth upon

the balcony and breathed the fresh air of morning. Across the sparkling waters of the tideless sea the islands stood grey and mysterious in the blue haze, Gorgona, peopled only by its convict-gangs, showing most distinctly of all. A veil of mystery seemed to have fallen upon everything – upon all save a mighty battleship, with black smoke belching from her three yellow funnels and flying the white ensign of England as she approached an anchorage outside the port.

A desire for fresh air seized me; therefore, feeling faint, I took a liqueur glass of neat brandy, and then descended to the big marble entrance-hall that always echoed so dismally to my lonely footsteps. Recollect that I was a man without kith or kin, self-exiled for private reasons over which I had been unable to exercise control, and although living among a people that I loved because of their sympathy and charm, I was yet homesick for England and suffering from the nostalgia that those whose lot it is to spend their lives abroad know, alas! too well.

Outside I took the old sea-road – that shadeless road that runs with so many windings away along the edge of the deadly Maremma and on to Rome. I walked it often, for it led out along the edge of the brown cliffs through a wild and uninhabited tract of country, a district which until ten years ago had been dangerous on account of a band of lawless brigands. The latter had, however, all been exterminated by the carabineers, and the loneliness of the country suited well my frame of mind.

I met no one save an old barefooted fishwife whom I knew,

trudging onward with her basket poised on her head. So I lit my pipe and gave myself up to reflection, trying to account for my strange seizure. I hesitated to consult a doctor, for I entertained an Englishman's want of faith in the Italian *medico*. I longed to be able to consult my own doctor in London, and ask his opinion whether the strange stupor were an actual warning.

Although Italy possesses such distinct charm; although Tuscany was the home of my youth; although I had hosts of friends among the fishermen and honest *contadini* about me; although my friends at the white old monastery away among the olives on the side of the Black Mountain were always warm in their welcome and eager to render me the very smallest and humblest service, yet I was suddenly tired of it all. Sweet as were the pleasures of Tuscany, as Byron, Shelley, Smollett, and George Eliot had found, yet I was English, and England was my home.

I threw myself down on the grass of the cliff-top and thought it all out. Through seven long years I had led that life of utter loneliness, returning to London only for a fortnight or so each year, and then sadly leaving Charing Cross again for another twelve months of exile. I had my work, the writing of romance, to absorb my attention, it was true; but the writer of novels must live in congenial surroundings, otherwise the influence of a solitary life must show in his work.

Letters I had received from home during the past few days showed, too, that there was really no further reason why I should

not return and live in England among my friends; therefore, after long reflection and carefully considering the whole question, I at length made up my mind to pack up my collection of pictures, old furniture, manuscripts, and antiques, and remove them to some country home in England.

I have a habit of acting with precipitation. My father, full of old-fashioned caution, used to chide me for it. In his day there was no such thing as smartness. But in the profession, as in business, old-fashioned stolidity has now passed away. Today, if one sees the legend, "Established 1792," over a shop, one avoids it, knowing that its proprietor is not content with up-to-date small profits. Time was when the solid professional or business man was as black-coated and serious as an undertaker; but it is all of the past. The smart, speculative man, who acts promptly and has the courage of his own convictions, is the man who succeeds in the present scramble for daily bread. In every walk of life one must keep abreast of the flood; hence, with my mind made up, I entered the consulate at eleven o'clock and announced my immediate departure to my old friend and confidant, Jack Hutchinson, one of the most popular of his Majesty's representatives abroad, and whose name with every skipper up and down the Mediterranean is synonymous with geniality of manner and kindliness of heart.

When I sank into a chair in his private room and announced to him that I was going his face fell. I knew well that he had no other English friend there, and my departure would leave him

utterly alone. He was an exile, like myself; only, there was for him a comfortable pension at the end of it.

"Well," he exclaimed after a moment, "I'm awfully sorry you're going, my dear old fellow – awfully sorry. But I think you are acting wisely. You've been here too long, and have grown misanthropic. A little London life will take you out of yourself. Besides, of late you've been working far too hard."

I told him of my strange seizure; and, having heard me, he said:

"Exactly. Just what I expected. Pellegrini, the doctor, feared a collapse, and told me so weeks ago. That I'm very sorry to lose you, old chap, you know too well. But you'll be better in England. You're homesick, and that never does in Italy, you know. I and my wife both were so when I was first appointed here twelve years ago; but we've got over it – you never have." Then he added: "By the way, have you seen old Graniani today? He stopped me half an hour ago in the Corso Umberto and asked if I had seen you this morning."

It was on the point of my tongue to tell Hutchinson all that had passed in Florence on the previous day, but I thought it useless to trouble him with what seemed but vague suspicions.

"Why does he want to see me?" I inquired.

"Oh, he has got something or other to sell you, I suppose," was the consul's reply. "Somehow, Kennedy, I don't like the old fellow. Whether it's his ugliness, his deformity, or his manner, I can't tell; only, I instinctively dislike him – and more than ever

when I met him just now."

"Why?"

"Well, to me his manner was as though he expected to hear some grave news regarding you."

"Grave news?" I echoed. Then it occurred to me that the old hunchback was, of course, privy to the mysterious evil following the possession of the "Book of Arnoldus."

"What grave news did he expect?"

"How do I know, my dear fellow? These Italians, and especially men of his class, are so subtle and cunning that you can never get at the bottom of their motives."

"But I've always given Graniani his price – with a little bargaining, of course. Why, I've paid him hundreds of francs. You recollect what I paid for that miniature of the missing dauphin of France?"

"But you obtained a gem, even though you had to pay heavily for it," was my friend's answer. "If it had been in old Confessini's hands you'd have had to pay double, or he would have sent it to London."

"I know that," I laughed. "Graniani has had some good things now and then, and I've been a good customer; therefore I can't see why he should entertain any hostile thought towards me."

"As I've already said, you never know the Italian character. The man who is your best friend today will be your worst enemy tomorrow. That's what makes life so insecure here and affrays with the knife so frequent. All I can say is that I noticed about

the old scoundrel a distinct expectation to hear bad news of you, and I judged from his manner that he was disappointed when I told him that for aught I knew you were all right. If I were you I wouldn't have any more dealings with him. Now you're leaving Antignano, cut him. He has served your purpose well, and you can't afford to be mixed up in any quarrel with a man of his stamp."

"Yes, I will," I answered. "I don't like him myself. Of late he has been far from straight."

"And of late, it seems, he has been making secret inquiries of one of the Italian clerks here about your antecedents in England."

"Whatever for? How can my antecedents concern him?"

"Ah, that's the point, my dear Kennedy. He's forming some ingenious plot or other; therefore we must be on the alert. When a man bribes one of the clerks to obtain information about an Englishman's past, his parentage, and all the rest of it, there's something devilish suspicious about it."

"I should think so! I wonder what the old scoundrel is up to?"

"Some blackmailing business or other, most probably. If so, act with discretion, and we'll have a chat with the chief of police. The present *questore* is terribly down on blackmailers."

"But what can be the motive?"

"That's more than either of us can tell. We must watch and form our own conclusions," was the consul's reply, leaning back in his white linen suit and stretching his arms above his head. "You see now," he added, "why I am in favour of your leaving

Tuscany without delay."

"Yes, I see. But there's some mystery about old Graniani, and we ought to clear it up."

"Why should we trouble to do so?" he asked.

I had told him nothing about the incident which had occurred to arouse my suspicions while I was waiting for the fat prior of San Sisto; therefore, in a few words I briefly recounted what I had witnessed.

"Strange?" he exclaimed. "Remarkably strange! We must watch him, Kennedy. It almost looks as if, for some mysterious reason, he means mischief."

We agreed as to this, and then fell to discussing the best means by which I might get rid of my house and have my collection of antiques packed for transmission to England.

Soon after noon I returned home to luncheon, and in crossing the Piazza Vittorio Emanuelle to take the electric tram my eyes caught a glimpse of a neat female figure in black, which struck me as strangely similar to that of the dark-eyed woman who had been closeted with the fat prior in Florence on the previous day. My first impulse was to turn and follow her, but not being sufficiently certain of her identity, I stepped upon the tram, although sorely puzzled. Was she in Leghorn for some secret purpose? I wondered. Somehow I felt convinced it was she.

On my arrival home, however, my suspicion became more than ever aroused, for I found old Nello in a terrible state of anxiety. On getting up he had discovered that my bed had not

been slept in, and that I was absent. Being Italian, he feared that some *disgrazia* had happened to me.

Then, when I assured him that I had merely been out for a long walk instead of sleeping, he said:

"The hunchback antique-dealer is awaiting you, signore. He says it is most important that he should see you, so I have shown him upstairs to the study."

His announcement took me aback. The old scoundrel was the last visitor I expected. Nevertheless, I drew a long breath to steady my nerves, and with calm resolution mounted the stairs.

Chapter Six
The Opening of the Book

"Scusi, signore!" exclaimed the ugly, disreputable-looking old man, holding his battered straw hat behind him, and bowing with as much studied grace as his deformity would allow. The Tuscan, always the essence of politeness, is a marvellous diplomatist. "I regret to disturb the signore," he went on in his soft, musical speech; "but I was anxious to know if he met yesterday in Florence the prior of San Sisto?"

"I did," I replied, amused at his ingenious attempt to affect ignorance of our meeting.

"And did you make any purchases?"

"I bought one book – a rare Arnoldus."

"In manuscript?"

"Yes."

"Bound in original oak boards, with an old brass clasp – eh?" he inquired, with a queer smile about the corners of his mouth. "May I be permitted to see it?"

His demand aroused my suspicions at once. It was evident that the prior had regretted having sold it to me, and had sent his agent to endeavour to get it back at any cost. Therefore, knowing the unscrupulous ways of some Italians in a cosmopolitan city like Leghorn, I did not intend to give the cunning old fellow sight of it.

"Why do you wish to inspect it? I've packed it away, and it would give me great trouble to get at it again."

"Then the signore does really send things to England to sell again, as I have heard the people say?" suggested the old man somewhat rudely.

"No, I'm not a dealer," I responded angrily. "Who told you so?"

"It is common gossip, signore," replied the queer old fellow blandly. "But if you wish it, I'll take steps to correct public opinion on that point."

"Let the gossips say what pleases them," I snapped. "I've never yet sold anything I've bought. I suppose they think that by the quantity of my purchases I must be going to set up a curiosity shop. But," I added, "tell me, Graniani, why do you wish to see the manuscript I bought yesterday?"

"Oh, mere curiosity," was his quick answer. "You know I'm interested in such things, and wanted to know how the prior treated you after my recommendation."

"He treated me well enough, and I brought a bargain."

"A bargain?" he echoed, and I fancied I detected a strange curl in his lip. "The *reverendo* does not sell many bargains. How much did you pay?"

"Ah!" I laughed, "I suppose you want to charge him commission – eh?"

The hunchback grinned, displaying his toothless gums, whereupon I took up the receipt and showed him the amount I

had paid.

Again he expressed a desire to be allowed to see the book; but, feeling certain that he had come to me with some hidden motive, and at the same time wondering what plot against me the evil-looking old fellow was forming, I point-blank refused. I did not tell him that I knew of his presence in Florence on the previous day, deeming it best to reserve the knowledge to myself. Without doubt he had seen the book in Landini's possession, and the desire to inspect it again was only a clever ruse.

"I think, signore, that hitherto my dealings with you have shown me to be trustworthy," he said in a tone of complaint, "and yet you refuse to allow me to see a volume that I understand is most interesting."

"And rare," I added. "It has already been valued by Olschki, who declares it to be a unique specimen, and worth very much more than I gave for it."

"I know, I know," he replied with a sly wink. "The person who sold it to the prior knew its value and told me. But it is not a bargain, signore – depend upon it that you never get a bargain from the *signor reverendo*."

"To whom, then, did it originally belong?"

"Ah, that I regret I am not at liberty to say, signore. I gave my word not to divulge the name. Our nobility who become so poor that they are compelled to sell their treasures to the rich foreigners, like yourself, are naturally very reticent about allowing themselves to be known as needy." True, I had believed

that the old fellow himself was a broken-down noble, some count or marquis who had a knowledge of antiques and who had fallen upon evil times; but the events of the last couple of days had caused me to change my opinion, and to regard him rather as a clever and crafty adventurer.

I could see by his manner that he was ill at ease, and after some conversation regarding an old Montelupo plate he had offered me at a fabulous price, I waited for him to speak.

"I really wish, signore, you would show me the manuscript," he blurted forth at last. "Believe me, I have always acted in your best interests, and surely you will not refuse me such a small favour?"

"But why are you so desirous of seeing it?" I demanded.

"In order to verify a suspicion," was his response.

"Suspicion of what?"

"A suspicion which I entertain, and of which, if true, you should be warned."

I was surprised at his words. Had not the actual seller of it warned me by strange hints?

But an instant later, on reflection, I saw the cunning of the two men, who, acting in collusion, wished to repossess themselves of the book, and I resolved to combat it.

"I have no use for any warning," I laughed. "I suppose you'll tell me some fairy story or evil pursuing the man in whose possession the volume remains – eh?"

The hunchback raised his shoulders and exhibited his grimy palms, saying:

"I have come to the signore as a friend. I regret if he should seek to treat me as an enemy."

"Now, look here," I exclaimed, rather warmly, "I've no time to waste over useless humbug like this! I've bought the book at the price asked, and neither you nor the prior will get it back again. Understand that! And further," I added, "I shall not require anything more that you may have to sell. I've finished buying antiques in Leghorn. You can tell all the touts in the piazza that my purse is closed."

Again the ugly old man raised his shoulders expressively and opened out his hands – this time, however, in silence.

I rang the bell for Nello to show the fellow out. Then, when I had done this, he turned to me with knit brows and asked:

"Does the signore refuse absolutely to show me the 'Book of Arnoldus'?"

"Absolutely."

"Then it must be at the signore's peril," he said slowly, with a strange, deep meaningness and a curious expression on his brown, wrinkled face.

"I don't believe in prophecy," I cried in anger. "And if you mean it for a threat – well, only your age saves you from being kicked downstairs."

The old fellow muttered beneath his breath some words I did not catch, then bowed as haughtily as though he were a courtier born, and, turning, followed the silent Nello through the long white door.

I believe it was a threat he uttered at the moment of parting; but of that I was not quite sure, therefore was unable to charge him with it.

Still the strange warning caused me to reflect, and the old hunchback's movements and his secret inquiries about my antecedents all combined to induce within me a vague sense of anxiety and insecurity.

Through an hour in the blazing, breathless afternoon I dozed with cigarettes and my three-day-old English newspaper, as was my habit, for one cannot do literary work when the sun-shutters are closed and the place in cooling darkness. I was eager now to get back to England, and had already ordered Nello to make preparations for my departure. He was to go into town that afternoon and inform the professional packer to call and see me with a view to making wooden cases and crates for my collection of old furniture and pictures, all of which I intended to ship direct to London. Italy was a lovely country, I reflected, but, after all, England was better, especially when now, through no fault of my own, I had stumbled into a slough of mystery.

The faithful old man was heart-broken at my sudden decision to leave.

"Ah, *signor padrone*," he sighed, when he returned to report, "this is a sorry day for me! To think – the signore goes to England so far off, and I shall never see him again! I have told them in the town, and everyone regrets."

"No doubt," I answered, smiling. "I suppose I've been a pretty

paying customer to the tradespeople. They must have made good profit out of me – eh, Nello?"

"They did, *signor padrone*, before I came to you; but of late it has been different. I've continually threatened to tell you when I've found them attempting to cheat. They don't like to be thought thieves by an Englishman, signore."

(A section of five lines missing, page 52.)

Faltered the white-haired old man. "Ah, signore, you don't know – indeed you don't. You have always been so good to me that somehow – well, to tell the truth, I've served you as though you were my own son. Could you not take me with you to England?"

"Impossible!" I said. "You don't know English, in the first place; besides, you have your family here. You'll be far better off in Leghorn than in England, with its grey skies and damp climate. You, a Tuscan, couldn't stand it a month."

"But Beppo Martini, from the Hotel Campari, went to London, and now he's one of the head-waiters at the Hotel Carlton – a splendid post, they say," urged Nello.

"I know. But he was younger, and he'd been in Paris years before," I answered decisively. "I regret, Nello, but to take you to England is utterly impossible. When I am gone, however, I hope to hear of you often through the *signor console*."

"But you do not know," he urged. "You can't know. All I can tell you is that when we part you will be in peril. While I am at your side nothing can happen. If you discharge me, then I fear

for your safety."

I laughed at him, deeming his words but a blundering attempt to compel me to keep him. Italians are experts in threats and insinuations of evil.

"Well, Nello, I haven't any fear, I assure you," I replied. "You've been a most excellent servant to me, and I much regret that we should be compelled to part; but as for evil falling upon me during your absence, I must say frankly that I don't anticipate anything of the kind."

"But will not the *signor padrone* be warned?"

"Warned of what?" I cried, for everyone seemed to have some warning in his mouth for me. "Of what I have told you?"

"You want to go to England as my personal body-servant and guardian – eh?"

"I do," replied the old man gravely.

"And because of that you've hit upon an exceedingly clever ruse by which to induce me to let you have your way," I laughed. "No, once for all, Nello, you cannot go with me."

He stood in silence for a few minutes, as still as though he were turned to stone.

Tears stood in the eyes of the affectionate old servitor. A lump had arisen in his throat, and I saw that with difficulty he swallowed it.

"You do not know my fears, *signor padrone*," he said huskily. "It is for your own sake that I ask you to keep me as your servant – for the sake of your own future. If, however, you have decided,

so it must be. Nello will leave you, signore; but he will not cease to be your humble and devoted servant."

Then he turned slowly, and went out, closing the doors after him.

I felt sorry that I had jeered at him, for I had not known how deeply he was attached to me. Still, to take a man of his age to England would be an utter folly, and I could not help feeling that the warning he had uttered was a false one, spoken with a motive.

At last I rose, and, ascending to the study, where the windows were still closed against the heat and sun-glare from the sea, took forth my treasured Arnoldus, and seated myself at my writing-table with the determination of deciphering at least some of that record written at the end.

The first line only of the uneven scrawl was in Latin, as I have already given, and for a long time I puzzled over the next, so sprawling and faded was it; but at length I discovered to my utter surprise and satisfaction that the rest was not in Latin, but in the early sixteenth-century English.

Then slowly and with infinite pains I gradually commenced to transcribe the mysterious record, the opening of which read as follows:

"For soe much as the unskilfull or the ungodly cannot of themselves conceyve the use of thys booke, I have thought it good to note unto them what fruite and comoditie they maye tayke thereof in soe plane forme of manner as I can devise.

"Fyrst, therefore, they maye here lerne who and what manner

of man I am. Next, they maye knowe of mi birthe and station, of mi lyfe at the Courte of mi Lorde Don Giovanni Sforza, Tyrant of Persaro, of mi confydences wyth mi ladie Lucrezia, of my dealynges with the greate Lorde Alexandra P.P. VI., the terryble Pontiff, of mi adventures among the fayre ladyes of Pesaro and Rome, and of dyvers strange thynges in Yngolande."

Written in rather difficult sixteenth-century English, which I have modernised somewhat, it continued:

"Then may they further mark the deep significance of this my secret record, and of how with speed I made amends for my slowness beforetime. Lastly have I here noted at the request of certain that by their own labour and without instruction or help they cannot attain the knowledge of The Secret Hidden. The studious man, with small pains, by help of this book, may gather unto himself such good furniture of knowledge as shall marvellously enrich the commonplace.

"Do you, my reader, think of death? The very thoughts disturb one's reason; and though man may have many excellent qualities, yet he may have the weakness of not commanding his sentiments. Nothing is worse for man's health than to be in fear of death. Some are so wise as neither to hate nor fear it; but for my part I have an aversion to it, for it is a rash, inconsiderate thing that always cometh before it is looked for; always cometh unseasonable, parteth friends, ruineth beauty, jeereth at youth, and draweth a dark veil over the pleasures of life. Yet this dreadful evil is but the evil of a moment, and that which we

cannot by any means avoid; and it is that which makes it so terrible for me, sinner that I am; for were it certain, hope might diminish some part of the fear; but when I think I must die, and that I may die every moment, and that too in a thousand different ways, I am in such a fright the which you cannot imagine. I see dangers where perchance there never were any. I am persuaded 'tis happy to be somewhat dull of mind in this case; and yet the best way to cure the pensiveness of the thoughts of death is to think or it as little as possible.

"Let him that learneth this my secret, and surviveth, seek and so gain his just reward. But if thou, my reader, hath terror of the grave seek not to learn the contents of this closed book. Tempt not the hidden power that lieth therein, but rather let the clasp remain fastened and the secret ever concealed from thy knowledge and understanding.

"I, Godfrey Lovel, one time of the Abbey of Croylande, brother of the Order of the Blessed Saint Benedict, warneth thee to stay thy curiosity, if thou fearest death as I do fear it.

"TO SEEK FURTHER IS AT THINE OWN PERIL."

Chapter Seven
Forbidden Folios

The words of warning inscribed there in large, uneven letters, shaky in places as though penned by an aged hand, stood out from the time-stained vellum page like capitals of fire.

It really seemed absurd to heed them, and yet on every side I seemed to be warned by those whom I believed to be in ignorance that any endeavour to open the Closed Book would result in disaster. Surely the manner in which the precious volume had come into my possession was romantic enough, yet why should even the faithful old Nello be apprehensive of impending evil? There was something uncanny about the whole affair – something decidedly unsatisfactory.

Italy is a land of superstition, shared alike by count and *contadino*, hence I at first put it down to some vague belief in the evil eye, of which I was in ignorance. During my residence in Tuscany I had often been surprised by the many popular beliefs and terrors. Our true Tuscan sees an omen in everything, and an exhortation to the Virgin or to good Sant' Antonio is ever upon his lips, while his first and last fingers are ever outstretched when he sees a *gobba*, or female hunchback – the harbinger of every evil.

Whether the warnings uttered to me were the outcome of

mere superstition, or whether part of one of those ingenious conspiracies which he who lives among the suave Italians so often has to thwart, one fact remained – namely, that in the almost undecipherable record itself a further warning was plainly penned. And this, instead of creating fear and hesitation within me, only further aroused my curiosity.

I was determined to possess myself of the secret at all hazards.

The pale, tragic face of that dark-eyed woman whom I had discovered in the fat prior's study, and whom I had afterwards seen in the noisy, crowded city, haunted me. Yes, there was a calm sweetness in that proud and beautiful countenance, Tuscan most certainly, and yet mystery and tragedy were written there but too plainly.

How I longed to question Father Bernardo about her; for, strange as it may appear to you, my reader, her strange, subtle influence seemed upon me, and I felt myself helplessly beneath a kind of spell which, even to this day, I cannot define.

In turning those vellum leaves listlessly, I paused and gazed across my half-darkened room, deep in thought. Outside, the cicala in the dusty tamarisks kept up their cricket-like song, and in the far distance from the blue hills came the clanging of a village bell. Beyond that all was quiet – the world was hushed and gasping beneath that summer heat that ripened the maize in the fields and the grapes and oranges in my garden.

But I was sick of it all – yes, heartily sick. Italy had charmed me once; but over my heart its white dust had accumulated, and I

longed for the fresh, green fields of England, longed for my own friends and my own tongue. Nostalgia had seized me badly, and I was world-weary and homesick – longing now for the day of my departure.

Presently I returned again to the study of the ill-written script before me, half-fearful of the strange warning inscribed upon the page; but slowly, and with considerable difficulty, I deciphered it as follows:

> "This be the causes following why that
> I, Godfrey Lovel, have made
> labour to write this secret record.

"First, immediately after my birth at Winchelsea, my father, Sir Richard Lovel, baron of the King's Exchequer, died of plague, and my mother in brief time married my lord of Lincoln. The goode monks of Winchelsea learned me, but at fifteen I left their habit and religion, crossed unto France, and became a soldier of fortune with the army of the King of Navarre. Full many a strange adventure had I in those days of youth with the mercenary bande in Italy, untill, in the year of God's grace 1495, I was in Pesaro, where I entered the service of my lord Don Giovanni Sforza and his lovely lady Donna Lucrezia, who was daughter of His Holiness the Pope. At firste I was made captain of my lord duke's gentlemen-at-arms, but afterwardes my lady Lucrezia, of her gracious bounty, found me worthy to be her grace's secretary. Furthermore, pleaseth it you to understand that in the palace of the Sforza Tyrant I saw that which was not a little

to my discomforte; nevertheless I must be content recording it briefly.

"But now, as touching my own part, I most humbly beseech you to bare with me, for of a verity I saw and knew what no man did; and you, my reader, who make bold sufficient after my warning and admonition, will find herein a chronicle of fact that will astound you. God be thanked there are not such thynges done in England as in Italy under the red bull of the Borgias.

"As concerning the revelations, these be the things that I have heard and have knowledge in. At the beginning thereof, the which was in the ember week of 1496, the Pope's Holiness the lord Alexander P.P. VI. sent his son the boy-cardinal to our Court at Pesaro. From the firste tyme I saw him dysmounting from hys hors in the corte-yard of the palace I dysliked hym. Although but eighteen years of age, his father had made him cardinal-deacon of Santa Maria Nuova, a vain and sinful elegaunt whose ambition knew no bounds. He had come on secret mission from the Vatican to his sister, my lady Lucrezia, and to her he spake in privy during my lord duke's absence. The lord Don Giovanni was a brutal and ill-living man, cruel to his golden-haired, beautiful wife, that I vouch; but even to my lady Lucrezia, whose life was so unhappy that she had shed tears unto me, her man of confidence and humble servitor, the object of the Cardinal Cesare's secret mission was appalling.

"At the downe of the sun on the same day my lord, having returned from a visit to the Malatesta at Rimini, welcomed

the cardinal warmly and entertained him in the great banquet-hall, wherein four hundred persons supped. The revels did not end with midnight, but my lorde and his guest retired at that hour. Some tyme later I had occasion to pass along the great corridor where the chamber of my ladie Lucrezia was, and herd the sound as of a woman crying within. It was my ladie; and, obtaining permission, I entered and found her plunged in grief and remorse. Most humbly desiring her grace to accept mi poor mind towards her most noble self, I induced her to tell me the truth.

"She tore her hair in desperation as she confessed unto me, with promise of secrecy, that her brother the cardinal had been sent by her father His Holyness in order to envenom her husband the duke, because the Terrible Pontiff wished to marry her more advantagiosly for the increase of the Borgia power. Never in my life have I seene a beautiful woman in such despair, and I, her grace's confidential servitor, chamberlain, and secretarie, did I in my moste humble wise seeke to assist her, whereupon did she tell me with tears that she feared to disobey the will of His Holiness. I suggested that her grace should separate from her lord, and that the marriage should be annulled by His Holyness; but in desperation she told me that her brother Cesare had already poisoned him secretly with a certaine deadly and irrevealable compound only known to her father, her brother, and herself.

"My lord Don Giovanni Sforza, the Tyrant of Pesaro, whose reign was one of oppression, murder, bloodshed, and infamy, was

doomed. In a few houres he must die. Notwithstanding that my ladie hated hys evil ways she yet wished that he should live. But she feared the wrath of His Holiness if she went unto him and told him what the lorde-cardinall his guest had done, the lord-cardinal being then wyth him discussyng the best menes of suppressing the rebellious Orsini. At last, however, my lady, makinge me give my bonde to help her, did resolve to leave Pesaro for Rome. First, being desirous of carrying wyth her the costly jewels given her on her marriage, she unlocked her jewel-chest and caused me to fill my pouch and doublet with those the most precious. Whereupon this having been done, she took from a golden caskett preserved wythin the chest a small cross-hilted poignard with perforated blade, telling me to go unto her lord the duke and strike him with it in a part not mortal. The lorde-cardinal being present, and believing that it was an assassinacion, would make no effort to secure me; therefour, having struck the blow, I was to escape at once to Rome and there await her. Within the golden caskett were three delicate tubes of greeny-white glasse, sealed carefully, the which my lady told me in confidence contained the secret and all-powerful venom of the Borgias. They had beene given her by her father as a marriage-gift, together with the poignard with thin, hollow blade containing the secret antidote.

"Concerning the Casket: This casket aforementioned, with its three glass tubes, each the length of the first joint of a man's little finger, the which place in one's hands the power of secret death, and the one tube containing the antidote, did she gyve into my

safe keepinge, as well as her wondrous jewels, the like no man had before seen.

"I took the poignard, kissed my lady's hand in pledge of servitude devout, and flew to do her bidding, entering to where my lorde duke sat drinkynge with his treacherious guest, stryking hym in the arme wyth the knife bearing the antydote – thus saveing hys life, although he believed it to be an attempt at assassination – and then escaping by the Gate of the Rocchetta under cover of night, arriving in Rome at sundown on the sixth, daye following. Wherefore wyll it be seen that not only did I carry the priceless emeralds of my ladie Lucrezia and the secret venom of the Borjas – the presence of the which cannot be detected – but I also held in my possession the antidote.

"In Rome I did hide away the treasures given into my safe keepinge in a place whereof no man knewe; while mi ladie, having fled from Pesaro, entered the convent of San Sisto; while the lorde Alexander P.P. VI., finding that his poison sent by the worshipfull cardinal had been unavailing, issued a decree annulling the marriage. Now, His Holiness had lost by death many friends in Rome, including several members of the Sacred College, and by their decease had become goodly enriched and empowered; hence the failure of the banal substance to take effect in the case of Don Giovanni must have caused him much surprise.

"Praise be to God, who, of His infinite goodnes and mercy inestimable, hath brought me out of darkness into light, and from

deadly ignorance into the quick knowledge of truth, from the which through the fiend's instigation and false persuasion I have grately swerved, I was enabled to save the life of mi lord, although he be a tyrant and a man of ill-living. The lord-Cardinal Cesare returned to Rome, and six months after the divorce of my ladie His Holiness brought her forth from the convent, and gave her as wife unto the Lord Don Quadrata and Salerno, and likewise gave them the palace of the Cardinal of Santa Maria in Portico, by the Vatican, in the which to live. And here again did I return unto my ladie as her confidential chamberlain; for now, knowinge how that she were but the innocent tool in the infamous hands of the lorde Alexander and his creature the Cardinal Cesare, I resolved to devote myself unto her protection. I told unto my ladie the hiding-place of her jewels; but she would not allow me to bring them to the palace, lest they should remind her of her past unhappiness. They were best to remain where I had secreted them. Again was my unfortunate lady's marriage without love, her happiness constantly disturbed by the terror in which she lived, being compelled by the Terrible Pontiff and her ambitious brother to act in treachery and dishonour, to entice men and women to their ruine, and to place death-trappes with the secret venom."

Following this sentence was a blank space wherein was rudely drawn a curious geometrical design, some of the shaky lines – intended most probably to be straight – bearing numbers. It was almost like a plan; but careful inspection showed me that it was

not, and for a long time I tried to make out its connection with the old monk's remarkable record.

Chapter Eight
Concerns a Woman's Serfdom

After long examination I came to the conclusion that the rudely executed sketch must have been placed there by another hand, as it seemed in somewhat different ink, a trifle more faded than the writing. As is so often the case in old manuscripts, blank spaces were used by subsequent posessors to note memoranda at a time when every inch of parchment or other writing surface was precious.

It apparently had no connection with the text; therefore, placing it aside for further examination, I turned the page and continued to decipher this remarkable and forbidden document regarding the perfidy of the terrible House of Borgia.

As an antiquary I had become intensely interested in the strange record, for it apparently threw an entirely new light upon the notorious Lucrezia Borgia, the woman who had brought secret poisoning to a fine art.

And as I proceeded, I found it continued as follows:

"In my most humble wise I served my ladie Lucrezia, wrapping myself, I fear, in manifold errors, and being privy to the detestable crimes of the Cardinal Cesare. Both my ladie and myself knew that it was Cesare who, with his own hand, stabbed his elder brother Giovanni Duke of Gandia and threw

him into the Tiber on the night of the feast given by his mother the Madonna Giovanni at San Pietro ad Vincula. We knew, too, of many dark and foul crimes beyond those in which my lady's father and brother compelled here to partake. After the assassination of the lord of Gandia, the Cardinal Cesare threw aside his scarlet hat and became capitain-general of the Church, with the title of the Lord Duke Cesare de Valentinois. He shrank from neither sacrilege or murder, readily doffing the purple to assume the breastplate, and at head of his army crushed the feudal power of the barons in the Romagna.

"For a short space, alas! did he tarry, and brief was my lady's respite from the horrors thrust upon her. You, mi reader, who hath noe fere OF DEATH may still continue to scann this recorde; but I yet do warn and beseache of you to stay thine inquisitiveness, or the gaining of the secret, as it must be at thine own rysk and peril. Truely I affirm unto you that the thinges done in the palace of my lord Prince of Bisceglia at instigation and order of the fat-faced, double-chinned Borgia Pope were the foulest and blackest that ever man did conceive. To His Holiness's enemies the mere touch of my ladie's soft hand meant certain death, and feastes were given at the which those singled out were swept away like flies. None who dared to thwart the Borgia Pope or the lord Duke of Valentinois escaped swift and certain destruction. For them, death lurked at all times no matter how much care they took of their personal safetie. The fiendish ingenuity of Cesare Borgia showed itself in divers and sundry

ways all to encompass the death of rivals that the House of Borgia became paramount, and its power overwhelming.

"Pleas it your goodness to understande that I be so bold as to put it to writing that which I have seene that you who live after me shall know and learn this my secret contained herein."

Here, again, was a second drawing, slightly more complicated than the former, and at the bottom was written, evidently in old Lovel's hand, the single and inexplicable word, in no language known to me, "*treyf*."

At one corner was a sketch of a circle with radiating lines which might be intended to represent the sun; but so crude was the drawing that it might be meant for anything. Therefore, after a few minutes' minute examination, I came to the conclusion that my first theory was wrong, and that both had been drawn by the same hand that had inscribed the curious record.

Continuing my task of deciphering, I suddenly became seized by violent neuralgic pains in the head and back, attended by excruciating cramp in the hands, similar to that I had once experienced through writing too much. Notwithstanding this, however, I further prosecuted my investigation of the secret record which, as will be seen, proved a very remarkable one. After the inexplicable design, it continued:

"I suppose it to be the will of God that I remained the humble servante of my ladie Lucrezia obstinately determined to suffer all extremities rather than to leave her in the hands of those secret assassins. Many times did mi unhappie ladie seek

my counsel, remorseful of the part she was forced to bear by His Holiness and the lord Duke of Valentinois. To mine own knowledge many who visited at the palace were envenomed in secret and went to their homes to die. Of these, one was my lord Don Ludovico Visconti, who had allied himself to the Doge and Senate of Venice, and upon the hilt of whose sword, whych he unbuckled while he sat at meat, was there placed a drop of the Borgia poison. Another was the lord Alessandro Farnese, cardinal-deaycon of San Cosina, who died suddenly after leaving the presence of His Holiness and my lady Lucrezia; a third victim was the Madonna Sancia, daughter of His Majesty Don Alonso II., to whom my lady Lucrezia was forced by her father to sende a ringe of gold, and who died one hour after plaicinge it upon her finger. Again, my lady Lucrezia was compelled to invite to a great banquet the Don Oliverotto da Femo, Don Giovanni Fogliani, Don Vitellozo of Citta di Castello, Don Paolo Orsini of Sinigaglia, Don Lorenzo Manfredi of Faenza, the white-faced cardinal-chamberlain Riarjo, and Don Juan Vera, cardinal of Santa Balbina. His Holiness and the Duke Cesare were both presente, the feaste beinge gyven in order to effect a peace with the fiefs of the Romagna. Myself I sat at the ende of the table next my lord Orsini; but a foule treachery was practised, for every guest, wythout exception, was secretely poisoned, and at breake of daye not one was alive, although no effect was felt by anyone before they left the palace. By such means as these did the Romagna fall beneath the power of the Borgias.

"Full many a woman hateful to the House of Borgia became envenomed by dainty comfits handed to her by my lady's lisping child the Duke Roderico, who was thus a poisoner at two years old, but of whose sweetemeats the ladies were unsuspecting. And be it known to you by this my record that my lady's husband, my lord Prince of Bisceglia, was but of the age of twenty and one years at this time, and helpless in the venomous hands of the Duke Cesare. Rome was filled wyth assassyns. Myself, like every man who valued his safety, put on a mail-shirt when I left my bed, and set no foote in the streetes till I had buckled a sword or at least a poignard at my side. But the red bull was rampant, for the whole power of the Borgias was contained in the deadly potency of those small phialls of glass and the impossibility of detection of the fatal *cantarella*.

"Think you, my reader, that any indifferent man, knowinge these things, and knowing also that the position of the lady Lucrezia was hateful unto her, could but suffer himselfe to remain as her faithful chamberlain, and seek to guard her from the fearsome perils that surrounded her. Forthermore, one night at nine of the clock, my ladie came to me in terror, saying that she having quarrelled with her father, His Holiness had sent for her to his private apartment in the Vatican, where he spoke unto her and took her hand in forgiveness. As she withdrewe it she saw that he wore the venome ring the which is hollow, like that in my possession, and containeth the deadly *cantarella*! Then did my lady know that she had been victym of treachery, and was

doomed. Already her beautiful face was pale, and upon her were the pains in the jaws and tongue, the whych told us the truth. Not loosing a moment of time, I obtained the poignard containing the antidote, and with it struck deep into her white forearm, and whych she held for me withoute flinching untill the blood flowed, and by this meanes was her life, attempted by His Holiness the lord Alexander P.P. VI., given back unto her.

"Twyce myself was I envenomed by the Duke Cesare (accursed be his memory for ever), and twice was I able to counteract the poison with the antydote that my ladie Lucrezia had given me. The Borgia poison lurked in everything. A flower could be so impregnated that its perfume was rendered fatal; gloves were treated so that the wearer died wythin twelve hours; the hat, the boots, the staff, the mail-shirt, the woman's kirtle or the man's hose were all envenomed; nay, even unto the very chair upon the which a gueste sat. No poison was placed in the cup, it beinge always external and impossible to detect; beside which its action could be so regulated that I have known death to take place in an hour in some cases, while in others the fatal conclusion would not arrive for a week or even a month, according to the wishes of the Pope Alexander and his ambicious son. In very truth the possession of that secrete venom gave to the house of the Borgias power over both Church, state, and the riches and treasures of the world, all of whych they conquered by the vilest treachery known unto man.

"My singular good reader, my duty presupposed, pleaseth it

your good readership to understande that as in the case of my lorde Sforza of Pesaro, so in the case of my lorde Prince of Bisceglia, His Holiness finding himself foiled in the attempt to kill his daughter, soon wished to rid her of her husband, seeing that to marry her again unto one of the new lords of the Romagna would support the papal power in those parts. The crisis occurred on the morrow after my lord prince had returned from Naples, the VIIIth day of August in the year of grace 1500. My lord had been secretely envenomed twice, and escaped death by meanes of the antidote; but on the night afore named, at eleven of the clock, he went forthe to Saint Peter's, but while ascending the steps was greviously stabbed by a bande of masqued men in the pay of the Duke Cesare. Weak from loss of blood, he dragged himselfe unto the Pope's apartmentes, where my ladie Lucrezia, chancing to be there, swooned at sight of him. There were fifteene wounds upon him, but his life had been saved by his mail-shirte; yet for three weekes he lay ill in the Borgia tower, my lady Lucrezia never leaving him, and, fearful of poison, preparinge his food with her own hands. None the less, before my lorde had recovered, the Duke Cesare, accompanied by one Don Michelotto, visited him one night, and havinge driven my lady and the Madonna Sancia from the room, they remained alone with him. My ladie flew down to the chamber of the Segnatura, that had been set apart for me duringe my lord's illness; and, hearinge what had transpired, I rushed up to my lord's apartment only to discover he had been foully strangled.

The bravo Michelotto aimed a blow at me; but his blade turned by my mail-shirte, he made his escape. When my brave lady came and found her lord dead, her sorrow knew no bounds, for she saw that he, like unto the others, had fallen at last a victim of the Borgia treachery. Both the lord Alexander P.P. VI. and his son Cesare had the habit of saying 'That which is not done at noon can be done at sunset.'

"Reader, who darest to seek within this book, curb thy curiosity and inquisitiveness, and stay thine hand, for herein is written strange things, secrets which concern you not, and have remained hidden mysteries from the world – things the knowledge of which must render you among the greatest on earth, yet must bring evil and destruction unto you. Having gained knowledge so far, I do entreat of you, brave as thou art, to seek no further to reopen this Closed Book. Again, harken to this warning of a dead man, and save thyself."

Again those extraordinary, excruciating pains cramped my brow and limbs, while my throat once more became contracted, just as it had been on the previous night when I had commenced to make investigation.

But with my brain reeling and my senses confused I turned the time-stained page, and overleaf saw written there in capitals in the centre of one blank folio the ominous words:

"O AVARICIOUS READER
WHO HAST HEEDED NOT THE WARNING!
TRULY THOU ART ENVENOMED AND MUST

DIE. TO THEE NO POWER OF ANTIDOTE CAN AVAIL, NO HAND CAN SAVE. THE SHARPNESS OF DEATH IS UPON THEE."

Then, for the first time, the terrible truth flashed upon me.

The vellum leaves of that secret record were impregnated by some unknown and subtle poison, probably that secret compound of the House of Borgia that could be used to envenom any object and render it deadly to the touch; and I, disregarding the premonition, was poisoned.

I cast the heavy volume from me with a cry of horror and despair. The pain was excruciating. The sting of death was already upon me.

I had reopened The Closed Book – an action that was fatal.

Chapter Nine
Doctor Pellegrini's Opinion

I have very little recollection of what occurred immediately afterwards, for I was far too confused and full of pain.

All I remember was that I rushed downstairs to old Nello, crying that I had been suddenly taken unwell; and he, seeing my pale, distorted features, was greatly alarmed. I recollected at the moment that I had an appointment with the wife of a wine-grower, with whom I was in treaty for the purchase of an exquisite little fourteenth-century picture of St. Francis of Assisi; and, telling my faithful man that if a lady called he was to ask her to wait, I dashed out, sprang into a cab, and drove along the sun-blanched sea-road into Leghorn, where, in a high, old palace in an unfashionable quarter, I discovered my friend, Doctor Pellegrini, a short, stout, round-faced Italian, with iron-grey hair and a pair of dark eyes which had a hard and severe expression.

"Why, my dear signore," he cried in Italian as I entered his big, half-darkened study, the marble floor carpetless, and furnished barely in Tuscan style, "whatever ails you?"

"I've been poisoned, *signor dottore*!" I gasped.

"What are your symptoms? Tell me quickly," he demanded, springing towards me and taking my wrist quickly, being convinced that there was no time to lose.

"I have great difficulty in breathing," I managed to gasp. "And now there seems to be a strange, biting taste as though I'd swallowed some quinine. My neck aches and seems to be bending back, and I am in great agony."

"Very likely it is strychnine," the professor remarked. "How did you take it? Was it an accident?"

"I will explain later," I responded. "Do give me something to relieve these terrible pains. The poison, I can explain, is not strychnia, but the fatal secret compound of the Borgias."

"The Borgias! Rubbish!" he snapped. "All imagination, most probably."

"But I tell you it is. I have been envenomed by a poison, the secret of which is unknown, and the antidote was lost ages ago."

The doctor smiled in disbelief, probably remarking within himself that the English were a queer race, with all their fads, fancies, tea drinking, and smart tailoring.

"Well," he said. "I'll first give you a little chloroform, and then see what we can do. Don't upset yourself, my dear signore. We shall find an antidote somehow."

And he gave me some chloroform, which produced insensibility. Then, on recovering consciousness, I found myself on a bed in a room almost totally dark, with blankets piled upon me until they had reduced me to a state of profuse perspiration.

My head felt as though bound tightly with a band of steel, but I had no further difficulty in breathing. My limbs were no longer cramped, and my neck was again movable.

I was better, and told Pellegrini, who was seated patiently by my side watching me.

"Of course," he said, with that cool, cynical air of his which caused one instinctively to dislike him on first acquaintance.

"But I was very bad," I declared. "I've never experienced such excruciating pains before in all my life."

"And I may tell you," he said in the same calm tone, "that you've never been nearer death than you were an hour ago. I certainly thought you wouldn't pull through. I telephoned to Cassuto at the hospital, and he rushed round and helped me. I didn't believe you had really been poisoned. It certainly was not strychnia after all, although the symptoms were very like it. Tell me how it happened."

I turned on my bed towards him and briefly related how I had purchased the curious volume, and how, on two separate occasions, I had been suddenly seized while examining the secret history written at the end.

"H'm!" he grunted dubiously; "very remarkable, especially as the record mentions the unknown poison used by Lucrezia Borgia and her brother. A matter for investigation, certainly. You must allow me to submit one of the vellum pages to analysis; and perhaps we might clear up forever the ingredients of the compound which has so long remained a mystery."

"Most willingly," I answered. "We may make a discovery of the utmost interest to toxicologists. Hitherto they have declared that to produce a substance sufficiently venomous to penetrate

the skin and cause death to those who touch it is impossible. Here, however, I think we have an illustration of it."

"It really seems so," he answered thoughtfully. "I should strongly advise you, when handling the book again, to wear gloves as a precaution. Having once narrowly escaped death, as you have, you cannot be too careful."

"I'll take your advice, *signore dottore*," I responded. "And I've to thank you for saving me, as you've done today."

"You had a narrow escape – a very narrow one," he remarked. "I do not think that in all my experience I have seen a man come so near death, and then recover. When you first told me that your hands had become impregnated with the Borgia poison I was, of course, sceptical. You English sometimes become so very imaginative when you live here in our climate. But I am compelled to admit that the symptoms are not those of any known poison; and if what you tell me is correct, then it really appears as though we are at last actually in possession of an object envenomed with the ancient compound about which so much has been written during the past three centuries. For my own part, I am deeply interested in the curious affair, and shall be only too happy to investigate it analytically, if you will allow me. My friend Marini, the professor of chemistry at Pavia, is at present here for the sea-bathing, and he will, I am sure, help me. As you know, he is one of the most expert analysts in Italy."

And so it was agreed that a chemical investigation should be made, in order to discover, if possible, the secret of the Borgia

poison which was so subtle and could be so regulated that no effect might be felt for half an hour or for a month, as the poisoner wished, but the end was always the same – death.

By secret use of that fatal compound the Duke Caesar detto Borgia undoubtedly swept away his enemies, and more than one old chronicler alleges that his father, the Pope Alexander VI. himself, did not hesitate to use it to rid himself of obnoxious cardinals who were wealthy, or other persons who aroused his enmity. He fully lived up to his official title of Ruler of the World, and it is more than likely that by the aid of this secret compound he broke the back of the turbulent, selfish baronage which had ravaged the papal states for centuries. Certainly his reign was full of diabolical atrocities and wanton, ingenious cruelty, documentary evidence of which is still preserved in the secret archives of the Vatican and of Venice. As to the alleged crimes of the beautiful Lucrezia, a long tress of whose yellow hair is still preserved in the Ambrosian Library at Milan, those who have read Italian history know well how she has been represented as placed outside of the pale of humanity by her wantonness, her vices, and her crimes. Yet what was written in that curious record of Godfrey Lovel, soldier, courtier, and monk by turns, seemed to demonstrate that in her youth, with no initiative, no choice permitted to her, she was rather the too pliant instrument in the hands of Alexander and his son Caesar.

Anyhow, the fact remained that the writer of that secret record was absolutely in the confidence of Lucrezia Borgia, and also in

possession of some of the venom, with which, in all probability, he envenomed the book in order that those who gained the secrets it contained should never live to profit by them.

Knowledge of the secret written there, he alleged, would place its possessor among the greatest upon earth. Was not that sufficient to arouse one's curiosity to proceed – to continue handling those envenomed pages, unconsciously seeking his own doom?

Surely the secret must be an important one, placed on record upon vellum, and yet so protected that the seeker after it must inevitably die ere the entire truth could be revealed.

The whole affair was most puzzling. As I sat in the swift, open cab that took me back along the sea-road to Antignano, the crimson sun was setting, and the gaily dressed Italian crowd was promenading under the ilexes and acacias beside the Mediterranean. Leghorn is a fashionable bathing-place during July and August, and from the hour when the sun sinks behind Gorgona until far into the night no fairer prospect than the Viale Regina Margherita, as the beautiful promenade is called, with its open-air cafés and big bathing establishments, can be found in the south of Europe.

Through the little wood that lies between the fashionable village of Ardenza and the sea, where the oleanders were in the full blaze of their glory, my cab sped homeward; and having left the gaiety of the outskirts of Leghorn behind, I fell to reflecting upon the future, and wondering what, after all, was the hidden

truth contained in The Closed Book – the knowledge that would place its possessor among the greatest on earth?

I thought of the strange circumstances in which I had purchased the old tome, of the inexplicable manner of Father Bernardo, of the old hunchback's evil face at the church window, and, most of all, of that singularly handsome young woman in black whom I had encountered in the prior's study – the woman with whom the fat priest had spoken in private.

Why should Father Bernardo have urged me to relinquish my bargain? Why should Graniani have come to me on the same errand, and have warned me? Surely they could not be aware that the pages were envenomed, and just as surely they could have no motive in preventing my falling a victim!

If they were acting from purely humane motives, they would surely have explained the truth to me.

Besides, when I reflected, it became apparent that the vellum leaves at the end whereon was inscribed old Godfrey's chronicle had not been opened for many years, as a number of them had become stuck together by damp at the edge, and I had been compelled to separate them with a knife.

At last I sprang out, paid the driver, passed through the echoing marble hall of the *villino*, and up the stairs towards my study.

Old Nello, who followed me, greeted me with the usual "*Ben tornato, signore*," and then added, "The lady called to see you, waited about a quarter of an hour in your study, and then left,

promising to call tomorrow."

"She said nothing about the little panel of St. Francis?"

"Nothing, signore. But she seemed an inquisitive young lady – from Bologna, I should say, from her accent."

"Young lady!" I exclaimed. "Why, the wine-grower's wife is sixty, if a day. Was this lady young?"

"About twenty-six, signore," was his reply. "Hers was a pretty face – like a picture – only she seemed to wear a very sad look. She was dressed all in black, as though in mourning."

"What?" I cried, halting on the stairs, for the description of my visitor tallied with that of the woman I had seen in the priest's study in Florence and afterwards in Leghorn. "Had she black eyes and a rather protruding, pointed chin?"

"She had, signore."

"And she was alone in my study a quarter of an hour?" I exclaimed.

"Yes. I looked through the keyhole, and, seeing her prying over your papers, I entered. Then she excused herself from remaining longer, and said she would call again."

"But that's not the woman I expected, Nello?" And with a bound I rushed up the remaining stairs into the room.

A single glance around told me the truth.

The Closed Book had disappeared! It had been stolen by that woman, who had been following me, and whose face lived in my memory every hour.

I rushed around the room like a madman, asking Nello if he

had placed the volume anywhere; but he had not. He recollected seeing it open upon my writing-table when he had ushered the visitor in, and had not thought of it until I now recalled the truth to him.

My treasure had been stolen; and as I turned towards my table I saw lying upon the blotting-pad a sheet of my own note paper, upon which was written in Italian, in an educated feminine hand, the axiom of Caesar Borgia as chronicled in the missing book:

"*That which is not done at noon can be done at sunset.*"

Chapter Ten
Across Europe

The Closed Book had been filched from me at the very moment when I was about to learn the secret it contained.

I put a few well-directed questions to Nello, and became confirmed in my suspicion that the woman who had stolen it was actually the same whose face had so attracted me that it had lived within my memory every moment since our first meeting.

Curious how the faces of some women haunt us, even when we have no desire for their affection! The fascination of a woman's eyes is one of the unaccountable mysteries of life, being far beyond human ken or human control, and yet one of the most potent factors in man's existence.

In the half-open drawer of my writing-table were certain private papers that I had taken from my despatch-box two days before, intending to send them to my solicitors in London, and these the unknown in black had apparently been examining. She had called with a fixed purpose, which she had accomplished – namely, to pry into my private affairs, and to gain possession of my treasured Arnoldus, the Book of Secrets.

As I knew Tuscany and the Tuscans so well, this ingenious conspiracy was scarcely surprising. The little plots, often harmless enough, that I had detected about me during my

residence by the Mediterranean had shown me what a cleverly diplomatic race they were, and with what patient secretiveness they work towards their own ends. It annoyed me, however, to think that I should thus fall a victim to that handsome woman's ingenuity. Veiled as she had been in Father Bernardo's study, I had judged her to be much older than I found she was when I had noticed her in the streets of Leghorn. Who could she be, and what could be her motive in stealing my property if she were not in league with the prior himself?

My old servant Nello, standing there beside me, knew something more than he would tell. Of that I felt convinced. Possibly he had participated in the plot, admitting her, well knowing her errand. He had warned me; therefore he must know something. What was the object of it all I utterly failed to conceive.

"That woman is a thief?" I exclaimed angrily a few moments later. "Who is she?"

"I – I do not know her, *signor padrone*," stammered the old man.

"She gave no name?"

"None. She said that you expected her."

"But she could not have taken away a big book like that without your noticing it?" I pointed out suspiciously.

"She had on a big black cloak, signore," was the crafty old fellow's response.

I closed my writing-table and locked it, for in that moment

I had decided to go straight to Florence and charge Bernardo Landini with being a party to the theft. Having sold the book to me, he wished to repossess himself of it, and on my refusal, had, it seemed, put in motion a kind of conspiracy against me.

The old hunchback was undoubtedly the director of it all.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.