

THE DESPERATE LOVER

By E. Phillips Oppenheim

"Yes."
 "Lumley, twenty-five years have passed away, and he is free."
 "But, Miss Briscoe?" he asked, bewildered. "How does all this concern her?"
 "She is his niece."
 "His niece! his niece!"

Lord Lumley could say nothing. With all the swift selfishness of a man his thoughts were centered round one point. Would this new development hinder his purpose, or was it favorable to him?

"Leonardo's sister, Lumley, was my dear friend. She married a man named Briscoe, and died very soon afterward. Margarita is their daughter, and, Lumley, there is no English blood in her veins. She is a Marioni! I can see his eyes and his forehead every time I look at her. They seem to tell me that some day he will stretch out his hand and redeem that murderous threat. Lumley, there have been times when it has terrified me to look at that girl."

His face was clearing. A smile even began to dawn upon his lips.

"Why, mother, don't you see that so far as Miss Briscoe is concerned that is all fancy," he said. "You feel in that way toward her simply because she happens to resemble the Count di Marioni. Isn't that a little unfair to her? What can she know of an oath which was sworn five-and-twenty years ago, long before she was born. Why I don't suppose that she ever heard of it."

She smiled a little sadly.
 "Lumley, I do not attempt to defend my feeling. Of course it is absurd to connect her with it, really."

"I was sure that you would say so, mother."

"But, Lumley, although I cannot defend it the feeling remains. Listen. No woman has known greater happiness than I have. My life has been sometimes almost too perfect, and yet I never altogether forgot those passionate words of Leonardo's. They lay like a shadow across my life, darkening and growing broader as the years of his confinement passed away. The time of his release came at last—only a few months ago, and only a few months ago Lumley, I saw him."

"You saw him! Where?"

"In London, Lumley! Why did he come, almost on the day of his release, here to England? It was a country which he hated in his younger days, and yet, instead of visiting his old home, his love for which was almost a passion, instead of lingering in those sunny southern towns where many friends still remain who would have received him with open arms, he came straight to London alone. I found him at a hotel there, broken down, and almost, as it were, on the threshold of death! Yet, when he saw me, when he heard my voice, the old passion blazed out. Lumley, I prayed to him for forgiveness, and he scorned me. He had never forgotten! He would never forgive! He pointed to his person, his white hairs, to all the terrible evidences of his long imprisonment, and once more with the same passion which trembled in his tone twenty-five years ago, he cursed me! It was horrible! I fled from that place like a haunted woman, and since then, Lumley I have been haunted. Every feature in the girl's magnificent face, and every movement of her figure, reminds me that she is a Marioni!"

She had risen and was standing by his side, a beautiful, but a suffering woman. He took her into his arms and kissed her forehead.

"Mother, you have too much imagination," he said gently. "Look at the matter seriously. Granted that this old man still harbors a senseless resentment against you. Yet what could he do? He forgets the days in which he lives, and the country to which you belong! Vendettas and romantic vengeance, such as he may have dreamt of five-and-twenty years ago, are extinct even in his own land; here, they cannot be taken seriously at all!"

She shivered a little, and looked into his face as though comforted in some measure.

"That is what I say to myself, Lumley," she said; but there are times when the old dread is too strong for me wholly to crush it. I am not an Englishwoman, you know; I come of a more superstitious race!"

"I am sorry that Miss Briscoe

should be the means of bringing these unpleasant thoughts to you," he remarked thoughtfully. "Mother!"

"Yes, Lumley."
 "Would it be a great trouble to you if—some day—I asked you to receive her as a daughter?"

She stood quite still and shivered. Her face was suddenly of a marble palor.

"You—you mean this, Lumley?"

"I mean that I care for her, mother."

"You have not—spoken to her?"

"No. I should not have said anything to you yet, only it pained me to think that there was anything between you—any aversion, I mean. I thought that if you knew, you would try and overcome it."

"I cannot!"

"Mother!"

"Lumley, I cannot! She looks at me out of his eyes; she speaks to me with his voice; something tells me that she bears in her heart her hate toward me. You do not know these Marionis! They are one in hate and one in love; unchanging and hard as the rocks on which their castle frowns. Even Margarita herself, in the old days, never forgave me for sending Leonardo to prison, although I saved her lover's life as well as mine. Lumley, you have said nothing to her?"

"Not yet."

"She would not marry you! I tell you that in her heart she hates us all! Sometimes I fancy that she is here—only—"

"Mother!"

He laid his hand firmly upon her white trembling arm. She looked around, following his eyes. Margarita, pale and proud, was standing upon the threshold, with a great bunch of white hyacinths in the bosom of her black dress.

"Am I intruding?" she asked quietly. "I will come down some other evening."

Lord Lumley sprang forward to stop her; but his mother was the first to recover herself.

"Pray don't go away, Margarita," she said, with perfect self-possession. "Only a few minutes ago we were complaining that you came down so seldom. Lumley, open the piano, and get Miss Briscoe's songs."

He was by her side in a moment, but he found time for an admiring glance toward his mother. She had taken up a paper knife, and was cutting the pages of her book. It was the savoir-faire of a great lady.

A CORRESPONDENCE

Letter from Count Leonardo di Marioni to Miss M. Briscoe, care of the Earl of St. Maurice, Mallory Grange, Lincolnshire.

"Hotel de Paris, Turin.

"My beloved Niece: Alas! I have but another disappointment to recount. I arrived here last night, and early this morning I visited the address which I obtained at Florence with so much difficulty. The house was shut up. From inquiries made with caution among the neighbors I learned that Andrea Paschuli had left a few months before for Rome. Thither I go in search for him."

The delay is irksome, but it is necessary. Although my desire for the day of my vengeance to come is as strong as ever, I would not have the shadow of a suspicion rest upon you. Truly, yours will be no crime, but the world and the courts of justice would have it otherwise. You will, in verity, be but the instrument. Upon my head be the guilt, as mine will be the exceeding joy, when the thing for which I crave is accomplished. Bless you, my child, that you have elected to aid me in carrying out this most just requital! Bless you, my child, that you have chosen to bring peace into the heart of one who has known great suffering!

"Your last letter was short; yet I do not wonder at it. What is there you can find to say to me, while our great purpose remains thus in abeyance? My health continues good, I am thankful to say, yet were it otherwise, I know that my strength would linger with me till my oath is accomplished. Till that day shall come death itself has no power over me. Even though its shadow lay across my path I could still defy it. Think not that I am blaspheming, Margarita, or that I believe in no God. I believe in a God of justice, and he will award me my right. Oh, that the time may be short, for I am growing weary. Life is very burdensome, save only for its end."

"Sometimes, my beloved Margarita, you have sought to lighten the deep gloom through which I struggle, by picturing the happy days we may yet spend together in some far-distant country, where the shadows of this great selfish world barely reach, and its mighty roar and tumult sound but is a faint, low murmur. I have listened, but I have answered not; for in my heart I know that it will never be. Those days will never come. I have shrunk from throwing a chill upon your warm, generous heart; but of late I have wondered whether I do well in thus silently deceiving you. For, Margarita, there is no

such time of peaceful happiness for me. I am dying! Nay, do not start! Do not pity me! Do not fear! I know it so well; and I feel no pang, no sorrow. The limit of my days is fixed—not in actual days or weeks, but by events. I shall live to see my desire accomplished, and then I shall die. The light may flicker, but, till then, it will not go out. You will ask me: Who am I that I dare to fix a limit to an existence which God alone controls? I cannot tell you, Margarita, why I know, or how, yet it is surely so. The day which sees me free of my vow will also be the day of my death."

"Trouble not, my child, at this thought, nor wonder why I can write of the end of my days so calmly. Ask yourself rather what further life could mean for me. There is no joy which I desire; my worn-out frame could find no pleasure in dragging out a tasteless and profitless existence. I look for death as one looks for his couch who has toiled and labored through the heat of the day. I

shall find there rest and peace. I have no other desire.

"For yourself, Margarita, have no fear. I have made your fortune my care, and God grant that it may be a happy one. Honest men have made good profit out of my lands during my imprisonment. I have wealth to leave, and it is yours. The Castle of the Marionis will be yours, and well I know you will raise once more and uphold the mighty, though fallen, traditions of our race. I leave all fearlessly in your hands, at your entire disposal. Only one thing I beg of you, and that without fear of refusal. Marry not an Englishman. Marry one of the nobility of our own island, if you can find one worthy of you; if not, there are nobles of Italy with whom your alliance would be an honor, and also a profit. You will be rich as your are beautiful; and the first lady in Italy, our distant kinswoman, Angela di Carlotti, will be your guardian and your friend. May you be very, very happy, dearest; and all that comes to you you will deserve, for you have lightened the

heart of a weary old man, whose blessing is yours, now and for ever.

"Leonardi di Marioni."
 (Continued Next Week)

LEWIS-CARROLL

Mr. Clyde L. Carroll, well known son of Mr. O. T. Carroll of Forest City, R-1, was married Wednesday March 20th to Miss Nell Irene Lewis, the attractive daughter of Mr. and Mrs. W. E. Lewis of near Forest City, at the home of Rev. Z. D. Harrill in Ellenboro. Both the bride and groom are from well known families and have many friends who extend congratulations and best wishes.

CINDERELLA'S

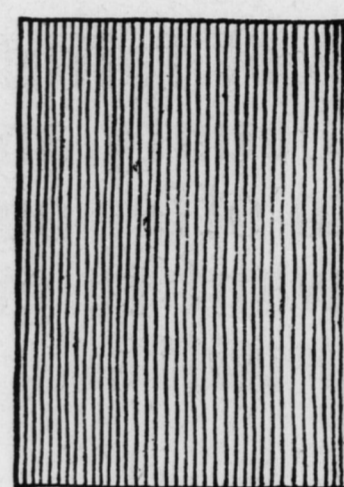
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