

THE DESPERATE LOVER

By E. Phillips Oppenheim

TWELFTH INSTALLMENT

His withered figure seemed to have gathered strength and dignity, and his appearance and tone, as he gazed scornfully down at the girl at his feet, was full of a strange dramatic force. Her heart sank as she listened to him. This was no idle, vulgar passion, no morbid craving for evil, which animated him. It was a purpose which had become hallowed to him; something which he had come to look upon as his sacred right. She understood how her drawing back must seem to him. As though a flash of light had laid bare his mind, she saw how weak, how pitifully weak, any words of hers must sound, so she was silent.

He had commenced walking up and down the room; and watching him fearfully, she saw that his manner was gradually changing. The unnatural calm into which he had momentarily relapsed was leaving him, and he was becoming every moment more and more excited. Fire flashed in his eyes, and he was muttering broken words and sentences to himself. Once he raised his clasped hands to the roof in a threatening gesture, and in the act of doing so she saw the blue flash of a stiletto in his breast pocket. It frightened her, and she moved toward the door.

It seemed almost as though he read her purpose in her terror-stricken face, and it maddened him. He caught her by the wrist and thrust her back.

"You shall not leave this room, girl!" he cried. "Wait, and soon I will bring you news!"

She stood, still panting, overcome for a moment by the strength of his grip. Before she could recover herself, he had caught up his hat and was gone. Outside, she heard the sound of a key in the lock. She was a prisoner!

Her first thought was the window. Alas! It was too small even for her to get her head through. She cried out. No one answered; there was no one to answer. She was alone in the cottage, and helpless, and away over the cliffs, toward Mallory Grange, she could see a small, dark figure walking steadily along, with bent head and swift steps. The cottage stood by itself, a mile from the village, and was approached only by a cliff path. She turned away from the window in despair. It seemed to her then that the time for her final sacrifice had indeed come.

It was a warm, drowsy morning, and the air which floated in through the open lattice window was heavy with the perfume of flowers, mingled with the faint ozone of the sea. Outside, the placid silence was broken only by the murmurous buzzing of insects and the soft lapping of the tide upon the shingly sands. Within the room, a pale-faced girl knelt upon the floor, with her long, slim fingers stretched upward, and the passionate despair of death in her cold, white features. The sunshine laughed upon her, bathing her beautiful face in its fresh, bright glory. Was it an answer to her prayer, she wondered—her prayer for peace and forgiveness? Oh, that it might be so! God grant it!

There was no fear in her face, though only a moment before she had taken out and swallowed the contents of that little packet of poison which had burned in her bosom for those last few days. But there had been just one passing shade of bitterness. Her life had been so short, so joyless, until there had come to her that brief taste of wonderful, amazing happiness. She was young to die—to die with the delirium of that passionate joy still burning in her veins.

"Yet, after all, it is best!" she whispered softly, at the end of those unspoken prayers; and with those words of calm resignation, a change crept softly in upon her face. It seemed almost as though, while yet on earth, there had come to her a touch of that exquisite spiritual beauty which follows only upon the extinction of all earthly passion, and the uplifting into a purer, sweeter life. And her eyes closed upon the sunlight, and darkness stole in upon her senses. She lay quite still upon the floor; but the smile still lingered upon her lips, making her face more lovely even in its cold repose than when the glow of youth and life had shone in her dark eyes, and lent expression to her features. Saints like

St. Francis of Assisi may die thus, but seldom woman.

"Help! For God's sake, help!" A woman's cry of agony rang out upon the sweet morning stillness. Count Marioni, who had been hurrying on with downcast head, stood still in the cliff path and lifted his head. It was the woman whose memory he had cursed who stood before him—the woman on whom his vengeance was to fall.

Her face was as white as his own, and in the swiftness of her flight her hat had fallen away and her hair was streaming in the breeze. Yet in that moment of her awful fear she recognized him, and shrank back trembling, as though some unseen hand had palsied her tongue, and laid a cold weight upon her heart. They stood face to face, breathless and speechless. A host of forgotten sensations, kindled by her appearance, had leaped up within the Sicilian's heart. He had indeed loved this woman.

"Merciful God! to meet you here," she faltered. "You will help me? My husband is being murdered there on the cliff by an escaped lunatic. Oh! Leonardo, save him, and you may strike me dead at your feet. It is I whom you should hate, not him. Oh, come! Come, or it will be too late!"

He stood quite still, looking at her curiously.

"And it is I to whom you dare to come for help—I whom you ask to save him—your husband? Adrienne, do you remember my words on the sands at Palermo?"

She wrung her hands, frantically imploring.

"How can I remember anything—think of anything, now? For the love of God, help him," she begged, seizing his hand. "That was all so long ago. You would not have him killed here before my eyes? Come! Oh, do come!"

"Lead the way," he answered sternly. "Call your loudest for other help. I make no promise, but I will see this tragedy."

She ran back along the path, and he followed her. They turned suddenly an abrupt corner, and came upon two men locked in one another's arms, and swaying backward and forward upon the short green turf. The lunatic, an immense fellow, more than six feet high, was clutching his opponent's throat with his left hand, while with his right he brandished a long table-knife with keenly-sharpened edge. The struggle was virtually over. The madman's strength was more than human, and desperately though he had struggled, Lord St. Maurice was lying exhausted and overcome in his arms.

With a final effort he turned his head at the sound of footsteps, and saw them come—his wife and this shrunken little old man. But close at hand though they were, nothing could help him now. He saw the steel flashing in the sunlight, and he closed his eyes.

The knife descended, but Lord St. Maurice remained unhurt. With a swiftness which seemed almost incredible, the Sicilian had sprung between them, and the knife was quivering in his side. Behind, the lunatic was struggling helplessly in the grasp of three keepers.

There was a wild cry of horror from Lady St. Maurice, a choking gasp of relief from her husband, and a horrid chuckle of triumph from the madman as he gazed upon his handiwork. But after that there was silence—a deep, awe-stricken silence—the silence of those who stand in the presence of death.

Count Marioni lay on the turf where he had sunk, very white and very still, with the blood dropping slowly from his wound upon the grass, and his eyes closed. At first they thought that he was already dead; but, as though aroused by Lady St. Maurice's broken sobs, he opened his eyes and looked up. His lips moved, and she stooped low down to catch the sound.

"Will you tell Margarita that this was best?" he faltered. "I have heard a whisper from over the sea, and—and the White Hyacinth forgives. I forgive. She will understand."

"Leonardo," she sobbed, "your vengeance—"

He interrupted her.

"This is my vengeance!" he said. "I have kept my oath!"

shade stole into his palid face. A breeze sprung up from the sea, and the tall, blood-red poppies, which stood up all around him like a regiment of soldiers, bent their quivering heads till one or two of them actually touched his cheek. He did not move; he was dead.

Lord and Lady Lumley had lingered long in Rome, and now, on the eve of their departure, they had spent nearly the whole of a bright November afternoon buying curios of a wizened old dealer, whose shop they had found in one of the dark narrow streets at the back of the Piazza Angelo. Lady Lumley had taken up a curious old ring, and was examining it with a vague sense of familiarity.

"Ten pounds for that ring, my lady," the curio dealer remarked, "and it has a history. You will see that it bears the arms and motto of the Marionis, once the most powerful family in Sicily. I had it from the late Count himself."

Lady Lumley sank into the little chair by the counter, holding the ring tightly in her hand.

"Will you tell us the history?" she asked in a low tone.

The man hesitated.

"If I do so," he said doubtfully, "will you promise to keep it absolutely secret?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, I have told it to no one yet, but I will tell it to you. Many years ago I was a chemist, and among my customers was Count Leonardo di Marioni. His history was a very sad one, as doubtless you may have heard. When he was quite a young man he was arrested on some political charge, and imprisoned for five-and-twenty years—a cruel time. Well, scarcely more than twelve

months ago he came to me here, so altered that I found it hard indeed to recognize him. Poor old gentleman, when he talked for a while, I felt quite sure that his long confinement had affected his mind, and his errand with me made me sure of it. He came to buy a celebrated poison which I used at one time to be secretly noted for, and I could tell from his manner that he wanted it for some use. Well, I thought at first of refusing it altogether, but what was the use of that? Some one else would have sold him an equally powerfully poison, and the mischief would be done all the same. So, after a little consideration, I made up quite an innocent powder, which might cause a little momentary faintness, but which could do no further harm, and I gave it to him as the real thing. I couldn't take money for doing a thing like that, so he pressed this ring upon me. You see, it really has a history."

Lord Lumley took his wife's hand and pressed it tenderly. In the deep gloom of the shop the curio dealer could not see the tears which glistened in her dark eyes.

"We will have the ring!" Lord Lumley said, taking a note from his pocket-book and handing it across the counter.

The man held it up to the light.

"One hundred pounds," he remarked. "I shall owe your lordship ninety."

Lord Lumley shook his head.

"No, Signor Pachuli, you owe me nothing; it is I who owe you a wife. Come, Margarita, let us get out into the sunshine again."

And Signor Paschuli kept the note. But he has come to the conclusion that all Englishmen traveling on their honeymoon are mad.

THE END

GOVERNOR GARDNER NAMES ROAD DELEGATES

Raleigh, April 29.—Governor O. Max Gardner Wednesday announced the appointment of twenty-eight additional delegates to the seventeenth annual convention of the United States Good Roads association and the fourteenth annual convention of the Bankhead National Highway as-

sociation, meeting jointly in Memphis, Tenn., April 29 to May 2. Among those named Wednesday were Dr. Lucius B. Morse, of Chimney Rock, and Clyde R. Hoey, of Shelby. Among those who were previously named by Governor Gardner is Nat C. Harris, of Rutherfordton.



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