

day, October 23, 1919

MAPLETON

Pierce, of Petrolia, who is visiting Miss Violet Brown, 1 home.

et Brown is spending a week with Mrs. Alex.

rs. Peter McNeil are visiting in Chicago.

lter has returned after a week in St. Thomas.

.C.E. are holding their Sunday evenings in the Christ at 8 o'clock.

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"He is a fine man. I think you could hear an echo to the love you cherished for Martel, if you but listened."

Vittoria gazed at her foster sister with a look half tender and half stern. Her voice had lost some of its languid indifference when she replied:

"Any feeling I might have would indeed be no more than an echo. I am not like other women; something in me is dead—it is the power to love as women love. I am like a person who emerges from a conflagration, blind, the eyes are there, but the sight is gone."

"Perhaps you only sleep, like the princess who waited for a kiss—"

Vittoria interrupted impatiently: "No, no! I am not like other women; something in me is dead—it is the power to love as women love. I am like a person who emerges from a conflagration, blind, the eyes are there, but the sight is gone."

"She adores him!" echoed the other. "Che Dio! She only plays at love. Her affections are as shifting as the winds."

"That may be. But he is in earnest. It was he who gave her this social triumph—he made her Queen of the Carnival. He even bought her dress-"

It was that which caused her to send for me this afternoon. Heaven knows I was in no mood to listen, but she chattered like a magpie. As if I could advise her wisely!"

"She is very dear to you," Oliveta ventured.

Indeed, yes. She shares with you all the love that is left in me."

"I think I understand. You have principles, my sister. You have purposely barred the way to your fairy prince, and will continue sleeping."

Vittoria's brow showed faint lines, but whether of pain or annoyance it was hard to tell.

Oliveta sighed. "What evil overhangs us that we should be denied love!"

"Please! Let us speak no more of it." She turned her face away and for a long time her companion soothed her with silent ministrations.

Meanwhile, the dusk settled, the golden flames died out of the western windows, the room darkened. Seeing that her patient slept, Oliveta rose and with noiseless step went to a little shrine which hung on the wall.

She knelt before the figure of the Virgin, whispering a prayer, then lit a fresh candle for her sister's pain and left the room, partly closing the door behind her.

She had allowed the maid-servant to go for the afternoon, and found, upon examination, that the day's marketing had been neglected. There was still time, however, in which to secure some delicacies to tempt Vittoria's taste, so she flung a shawl over her dark hair and descended softly to the street.

A little earlier on this same after-

noon, as Norvin Blake sat at work in his office the telephone upon his wall pealed loudly. He seized the instrument with eager haste, hoping for any news that would relieve the tension upon his nerves. For uncertainty as to Maruffi's whereabouts had weighed heavily upon him, especially in view of the possible danger to the woman he loved and to her devoted companion. The voice of O'Neil came over the wire, full toned and distinct:

"Hello! Is this Blake?"—and then, "We've got Maruffi!"

"When? Where?" shouted Norvin.

"Five minutes ago; at his own house. Johnson and Dean have been watching the place. He went with them like a lamb, too. They've just phoned me that they're all on their way here."

"Good! Do you need me?"

"No! See you later. Good-bye."

The Acting Chief slammed up the receiver, leaving his hearer stunned at the suddenness of the long-awaited denouncement.

Maruffi taken! His race run! Then this was the end of the fight! A ferocious triumph flooded Norvin's brain. With Belisario Cardini in the hands of the law the spell of the Mafia was broken. Savigno and Donnelly were as good as avenged. He experienced an odd feeling of relaxation, as if both his body and brain were cramped and tired with waiting. Then, realizing that the Countess and Oliveta must have suffered an even greater strain, he set out at once to give them the news in person.

As he turned swiftly into Royal Street he encountered O'Connell, who, noted his haste and something unusual in his bearing, detained him to ask the cause.

"Haven't you heard?" exclaimed Norvin. "Maruffi's captured at last."

"You don't mean it!"

"Yes. O'Neil told me over the wire not ten minutes ago."

"O'Connell fell into step with him, saying incredulously:

"And he came without a fight? Lord! I can't believe it."

"Nor I. I expected trouble with him."

"Sure! I thought he was a bad one, but that's the way it goes, sometimes. I reckon he saw he had no chance."

The officer shook his head. "It's just my blamed luck to miss the fun."

O'Connell was one of the few who had been first trusted with the news of Maruffi's identity and for the past fortnight he had been casting high and low for the Sicilian's trail. Ever since that October night when he had supported Donnelly in his arms as the life ebbed from the chief, ever since he had knelt on the soft banquettes with the sting of powder smoke in his nostrils he had been obsessed by a fanatical desire to be in at the death of his friend's murderers.

He left Blake at his destination and hurried on toward Phillip street in the vague hope that he might not be too late to take a hand in some part of the proceedings.

Blake's hand was upon Oliveta's bell when the door opened and she confronted him. Her start, her frightened cry, gave evidence of the nervous strain under which she labored.

"Don't be afraid, Oliveta," he said quickly. "I come with news, good news."

She swayed and groped blindly for support. He put out his hand to sustain her, but she shrank away from him, saying, faintly:

"Then he is captured? God be praised!"

In spite of the words, her eyes filmed over with tears, a look of abject misery bared itself upon her face.

"Where is the Countess?"

"Above—resting. Come; she, too, will rejoice."

"Let me take her the news. You were going out, and—I think the air will do you good. Be brave, Oliveta; you have done your share, and there's nothing to fear."

She acquiesced dully; her olive features were ghastly as she felt her way past him; she walked like a sick woman.

He watched her pityingly for a moment, then mounted the stairs. As he laid his hand upon the door it gave to his touch and he stood upon the threshold of the parlor. Vittoria's name was upon his lips when, by the dim evening light which came through the drawn curtains and by the faint illumination from the solitary shrine candle, he saw her recumbent form upon the couch.

She was lying in an attitude of complete relaxation, her sun-gilded hair straying in long thick braids below her waist. Those tawny robes were of a length and thickness to bind a man about the body. Her lips were slightly parted; her lashes lay dark like shadows against her ivory cheeks.

He was swept with a sudden awed abashment. The impulse to retreat

came over him, but he lacked the will. The longing which had remained so strong in him through the years of denial, governing the whole course of his life, blazed up in him now and increased with every heart-beat. He found that without willing it he had come close to the couch. The girl's slim hands lay upon the cushions, limply upturned to him; it was half open, and there sprang an ungovernable desire to bury his lips in its rosy palm. He knelt, then quailed and recovered himself. At the same instant she stirred, and to his incredulous delight, whispered his name.

A wild exultation shot through him. Why not yield to this madness, he asked himself, dizzily. The long struggle was over now. For this woman's sake he had repeatedly played the part of a bravery in a fever of fear. He had done what he had done to make himself worthy of her, and now, at the last, he was to have nothing, except a memory. Against these thoughts his notions of honorable conduct hastily and confusedly arrayed themselves. But he was in no state to reason. The same enchantment, half physis, half physical, ethereal yet strongly human, that had mastered him in the old Sicilian days, was at work upon him now. Dimly he felt that so mighty and natural a thing ought not to be resisted. He stood stiffly like a man spell-bound.

It may have been Oliveta's accusation that affected the course of the sleeping woman's thoughts, it may have been that she felt the man's nearness, or that some influence passed from his mind to hers. However it was, she spoke his name again, her fingers closed over his, she drew him toward her.

He yielded; her warm breath beat upon his face; then the last atoms of self-restraint fled away from him like sparks before a fierce night wind. A fiery madness coursed through his veins as he caught her to him. Her lips were fevered with sleep. For a moment the caress seemed real; it was the climax of his hopes, the attainment of his longings. He crushed her in his arms; her hair blinding him; he buried his face in it, kissing her brow, her cheek, the curve where neck and shoulder met, and all the time he was speaking her name with hoarse tenderness.

So strangely had the fanciful merged into the real that the girl was slow in waking. Her eyelids fluttered, her breath rose and fell tumultuously, and even while her wits were struggling back to reality her arms clung to him. But the transition was brief. Her eyes opened, and she stiffened as with the shock of an electric current. A cry, a swift, writhing movement, and she was upon her feet, his incoherent words beating upon her ears but making no impression upon her brain.

"You! God above!" she cried. She faced him, white, terror-stricken, yet splendid in her anger. She was still dazed, but horror and dismay leaped quickly into her eyes.

"Margherita! You called me. You drew me to you. It was your real self that spoke—I know it."

"You—kissed me while I slept!"

He paled at the look with which she scorched him, then broke out doggedly:

"You wanted me; you drew me close. You can't undo that moment—you can't. My God! Don't tell me it was all a mistake. That would make it unendurable. I could never forgive myself."

She hid her face with a choking cry of shame. "No, no! I didn't know—"

He approached and touched her arm timidly. "Margherita," he said, "if I thought you really did not call me—if I were made to believe that I had committed an unpardonable offence against your womanhood and our friendship—I would go and kill myself. But somehow I cannot believe that. I was beside myself—but I was never more exalted. Something greater than my own will made me do as I did. I think it was your love answering to mine. If that is not so—if it is all a delusion—there is nothing left for me. I have played my part out to the end. My work is done, and I do not see how I can go on living."

There was an odd mingling of pain and rapture in the gaze she raised to his. It gave him courage.

"Why struggle longer?" he urged gently. Why turn from love when Heaven wills you to receive it, and learn to be a woman? I was in your thoughts and you longed for me, as I have never ceased all these years, to hunger for you. Please! Please! Margherita! Why fight it longer?"

"What have you done? What have you done," she whispered over and over. She looked towards the open door as if with thought of escape or assistance, and despite his growing hope Blake was miserable at sight of her distress.

"How came you here alone with me?" she asked at length. "Oliveta was here only a moment ago."

"I came with good news for both of you. I met Oliveta as she went out, and when I had told her she sent me to you. Don't you understand, dear? It was good news. Our quest is over, our work is done, and God has seen fit to deliver our enemy—"

She flung out a trembling hand, while the other hid itself in the silk and lace at her breast.

"What is this you tell me? Maruffi? Am I still dreaming?"

"Maruffi has been arrested."

"Is it possible?—this long nightmare ended at last like this? Maruffi is arrested? You are safe? No one has been killed?"

"It is all right. O'Neil telephoned me and I came here at once to tell you and Oliveta."

"When did they find him? Where? Not half an hour ago—at his house. We have been watching the place ever since he disappeared, feeling sure he'd have to return sooner or later, if only for a moment. He is under lock and key at this instant."

Blake attributed a stir in the hall to the presence of the maid-servant; Margherita, whose eyes were fixed upon him, failed to detect a figure which stood in the shadow just beyond the open door.

"Does he know of our past in it—Oliveta's part?" she asked.

"O'Neil didn't say. He'll learn of it shortly, in any event. Do you realize what his capture means? I—hardly do myself. For one thing there's no further need for concealment. I—I want people to know who you are. It seems hardly conceivable that Belisario Cardini has gone to meet his punishment. But it is true. Lucrezia has been revenged at last. It has been a terrible task for all of us. I don't intend ever to let you go again, Margherita. I loved you there in Sicily. I've loved you every moment, every hour—"

Blake turned at the sound of a door closing behind him. He saw Margherita start, then lean forward staring past him with a look of amazement, of frightened incredulity upon her face. Some one, a man, had stepped into the dim-lit room and was fumbling with the lock, his eyes fixed upon them, meanwhile, over his shoulder. The light from the windows had faded, the faint illumination from the taper before the shrine was insufficient fully to pierce the gloom. But on the instant of his interruption all triumph and thrilling hope, all thoughts of love fled from Norvin's mind, bursting like iridescent bubbles at a touch. The flesh along his neck writhed, his hair at his neck lifted itself; for there in the shadow, huge, silent and black, stood Caesar Maruffi.

CHAPTER XXI Under Fire

Blake heard Margherita's breath release itself. She was staring as if at an apparition. His mind, working with feverish speed, sought vainly to grasp the situation. Maruffi had broken away and come for his vengeance, but how or why this had been made possible he could not conceive. It was sufficient that the man was there in the flesh, sinister, terrible malignant as hell. Blake knew that the ultimate test of his courage had come.

He felt the beginnings of that same shuddering, sickening weakness with which he was only too familiar; felt the strength running out from his body as water escapes from a broken vessel. He froze with the sense of

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his physical impotency, and yet despite this chaos of conflicting emotions his inner mind was clear; it was bitter too, with a ferocious self-disgust.

There was a breathless pause before Maruffi spoke.

"Lucrezia Ferara!" he said, hoarsely, as if wishing to test the sound of the name. "So Oliveta is the daughter of the overseer, and you are Savigno's sweetheart." His words were directed at Margherita, who answered in a thin, shrill, broken voice:

"What are you—doing here?"

"I came for that wanton's blood. Give her to me."

"Oliveta? She is—gone."

The Sicilian cursed. "Gone? Where?"

"Away. Into the street. You—you cannot find her."

"Christ!" Maruffi reached upward and tore open the collar of his shirt. Blake spoke for the first time, but his voice was dead and lifeless.

"Yes. She's gone. You're wanted. You must go with me!"

Maruffi gave a snarling, growling cry and his gesture showed that he was armed. Involuntarily Blake shrank; his hand groped for his hip, but, half-way, encountered the pile of silken cushions upon which Margherita had been lying; his fingers sank into them nervously, his other hand gripped the carved footboard of the couch. He had no weapon. (Continued on page ten.)

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