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McRoberts, of Browns, a good crowd of ears, who thoroughly enjoyed so full of earnest appeal.

Mrs. Milton Hatch, of St. James, and Mrs. Prosser, of St. James, were present.

of the chestnut tree has been bountiful one this year, up harvested unprecedented long years and enjoyed by

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Author of

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CHAPTER XXII A Misunderstanding

Several days later Vittoria Fabrizi led Bernie Dreux into the room where Norvin lay. The little man walked on tiptoe and wore an expression of such gloomy sympathy that Blake said:

"Please don't look so blamed pious; it makes me hurt all over." Bernie's features lighted faintly; she smiled in a manner bordering upon the natural.

"They wouldn't let me see you before. Lord! How you have frightened us!" My nurse won't let me talk.

Blake's eyes rested with puzzled interrogation upon the girl, who maintained her most professional air, as she smoothed his pillow and admonished him not to overtax himself. When she had disappeared noiselessly, he said:

"Well, you needn't put a rose in my hand yet awhile. Tell me what has happened? How is Myra Nell?" "She's heartbroken, of course. She came here that first night; but the smell of drugs makes her sick."

"I suppose Maruffi got away?" Dreux straightened in his chair; his face flushed proudly; he put on at least an inch of stature. "Haven't you heard?" he inquired incredulously.

"How could I hear anything when I'm doctored by a deaf-mute and nursed by a divinity without a tongue?" "Maruffi was captured that very night. Sure! Why, the whole country knows about it." Again a look of mellow satisfaction glowed on the little man's face.

"My dear boy, you're a hero, of course, but—there are others." "Who caught him?" "I did." "You!" Norvin stared in open-mouthed amazement.

"That's what I said. I—be—Mr. Bernard Effingwell Dreux, the prominent cottilion leader, the second-hand dealer, the art critic and amateur detective. I unearthed the notorious and dreaded Sicilian desperado in his lair, and now he's cooling his heels in the parish prison along with his little friends."

"Why—I'm astonished." "Naturally! I found him in Joe Poggi's house. Mr. Poggi also languishes in the bastille." "How in the world?" "Well—it's quite a story, and it all happened through the woman—"

Bernie flushed a bit as he met his companion's eye. "When I told you about Mrs. Poggi I didn't exactly go into all the intimate—er—details. The truth is she became deeply interested in me. I told you how I met her—"

Well, she wasn't adverse to receiving my attentions—Heavens, no! She ate 'em up! Before I knew it I found myself entangled in an intrigue—"

and couldn't let go. When I didn't follow her around, she followed me. When I didn't make love, she did. She learned about Felicite, and there was—Excuse me!" Bernie rose and put his head cautiously outside the door to find the coast clear, then said: "Hell to pay." I tried to back out; but you can't back away from some women any more than you can back away from a prairie fire."

He shook his head gloomily. "It seems she wasn't satisfied with Poggi; she had ambitions. She'd caught a glimpse of the life that went on around her and wanted to take part in it. She thought I was rich, too—"

my name had something to do with it. I presume at any rate, she began to talk of divorce, elopement, and other schemes that terrorized me. She was quite willing that I murder her husband, poison her relatives, or adopt any little expedient of that kind which would clear the path for our true love. I was in over my depth, but when I backed water she swam out and grabbed me. When I stayed away from her she looked me up. I tried once to tell her that I didn't really care for her—only once. The memory brought beads of sweat to the detectives brow.

"Between her and Felicite I led a dog's life. If I'd have had the money I'd have left town." "I'd been meeting her on street corners up to that point; but she finally told me to come to the house while Poggi was away—it was the day you were hurt. I rebelled, but she made such a scene I had to agree or be arrested for blocking traffic. She carries a dagger, Norvin, in her stocking, or somewhere; it's no longer than your finger, but it's the meanest looking weapon I ever saw. Well, I went along, about dark, determined to have it out with her once for all; but those aristocrats during the French revolution had nothing on me. I know how it feels to mount the steps of the guillotine.

The Poggi's parlor furniture is upholstered in red and smells musty. I sat on the edge of a chair, one eye on her and the other taking in my surroundings. There's a fine crayon enlargement of Joe with his uniform, in a gold frame with blue mosquito netting over it to disappoint the flies—four ninety-eight and we supply the frame—done by an old master of the County Fair school. There's an organ in the parlor too, with a stuffed fish-hawk on it.

"She seemed quite subdued and coy at first, so I took heart, never dreaming she'd wear her dirk in the house. But say, that woman was raised on raw beef. Before I could wink she had it out; it has an ivory hilt, and you could split a silk thread with it. I suppose she didn't want to spoil the parlor furniture with me, although I'd never have showed against that upholstery, or else she's in the habit of preparing herself for manslaughter by a system of vocal calisthenics. At any rate we were having it hot and heavy, and I was trying to think of some good and unselfish actions I had done, when we heard the back door of the cottage open and close, then somebody moving in the hall.

"Mrs. Poggi turned green—not white—green! And I began to picture the headlines in the morning papers! 'The Bachelor and the Policeman's Wife,' they seemed to say. It wasn't Poggi, however, as I discovered when the fellow called to her. He was breathing heavily, as if he had been running. She signalled me to keep quiet, then went out; and I heard them talking but couldn't understand what was said. When she came back, she was greener than ever and told me to go, which I did, realizing that the day of miracles is not done. I fell down three times and ran over a child, getting out of the neighborhood."

Blake who had listened eagerly, inquired: "The man was Maruffi?" "Exactly! I got back to the club in time to hear about his arrest and escape and your fight here. The town was ringing with it; everybody was horrified and amazed. What particularly stunned me most was the news that Maruffi, not Poggi, was head of the Mafia; but my experience in criminal work has taught me to be guided by circumstances, and not theory, so when I learned more about Caesar's escape I fell to wondering where he could hide. Then I recalled his secret meetings with Joe Poggi and that scalding volcano of emotion from whom I had just been delivered. Her fright, when she let me out, something familiar in the voice which called to her came back, and—well, I couldn't help guessing the truth. Maruffi was in the house of one of the officers who was supposed to be hunting him."

"But his capture?" "Simple enough. I went to O'Neil and told him. We got a posse together and went after him. We descended in such force and so sudden-

ly that he didn't have a chance to resist. If I'd known who he was at first I'd have tried to take him single-handed."

"Then it's well you didn't know," Blake smiled. "What bothers me most," Dreux confessed, "is how Mrs. Poggi regards my action. I—I hate to appear a cad. I'd apologize if I dared."

Vittoria appeared to warn Dreux that his visit must end. When the little man had gone Norvin inquired: "You knew of Maruffi's arrest?" "Oh yes!" "Why didn't you tell me?" "You were in no condition to hear the news of importance."

"Is that why you have been so silent?" "Hush! You have talked quite enough for the present."

"You act strangely—differently," he insisted. "I am your nurse. I am responsible for your recovery, so I do as I am ordered."

"And you haven't changed?" he inquired wistfully. "Not at all. I am quite the same—quite the same girl you knew in Sicily!" He did not relish her undertone, and wondered if illness had quickened his imagination, if he was forever seeing more in her manner, hearing more in her words than she meant. There was something intangibly cold and distant about her, or seemed to be. During the first feverish hours after his return to consciousness he had seen her hanging over him with a wonderful loving tenderness—it was that which closed his wounds and brought him back towards health so quickly; but as his brain had cleared and he had grown more rational this vision had disappeared along with his other fancies.

He wondered whether knowledge of his pseudo-engagement to Myra Nell had anything to do with her manner. He knew that she was in the girl's confidence. Naturally, he himself was not at his ease in regard to Miss Warren. The rumor about his advancing the money for her Carnival expenses had been quieted through Bernie's efforts, and the knowledge of it restricted to a necessary few. Although Myra Nell had refused his offers of marriage and treated the matter lightly, he could not help feeling that his attitude was assumed or exaggerated to recover his humiliation—or was it something deeper? It would be terrible if she really cared for him in earnest. Her own character protected her from scandal. The breaking-off of his supposed engagement with her could not hurt her—unless she really loved him. He closed his eyes cursing Bernie inwardly. After a time he again addressed Vittoria.

"Tell me," he said "how Maruffi came to spare you. My last vision was of him aiming—"

"He had but four shots." "Four?" "Yes, he had used two in his escape from the officers before he came here."

"I see! It was horrible. I felt as if I had failed you at the critical moment, just as I failed—"

"As you failed whom?" "Martel!" The word sounded in his ears with a terrible significance; he could hardly realize that he had spoken it. He had always meant to tell her, of course, but the moment had taken him unawares. His conscience, his inmost feelings, had found a voice apart from his own volition. There was a silence. At length she said in a low-constrained tone: "Did you fail—him?"

"I—I did," he said chokingly; and the way once opened he made a full and free confession of his craven fear that night on the road to Terranova, told her of the inherit cowardice which had ever since tortured and shamed him, and of his efforts to reconstruct his whole being. "I

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wanted to expiate my sin," he finished, "and, above all, I have longed to prove myself a man in your sight."

She listened with white, set face, slightly averted. When she turned to him at last, he saw that her eyes were wet with tears.

"I cannot judge of these matters," she said. "You—were no coward the other night, amico mio. You were the bravest of the brave. You saved my life. As for that other time do not ask me to turn back and judge, or perhaps blame yourself too much. It was not as if you could have saved Martel. It is rather that you should have at least tried—that is how you feel, is it not? You had to reckon with your own sense of honor. Well, you have won the fight; you have become a new person, and you are not to be held responsible for any action of that Norvin Blake I knew in Sicily, who, indeed, did not know his own weakness and could not guard against it. Ever since I met you here in New Orleans I have known you for a brave, strong man. It is splendid the way in which you have conquered yourself—splendid! Few men have done it. Be comforted," she added with a note of tenderness that answered the pleading in his eyes—"there is no bitterness in my heart."

"Margherita," he cried desparately, "can't you—won't you—"

"Ah," she interposed, peremptorily, do not say it. I forbid you to speak." Then as he fell silent, she continued in a manner she strove to make natural. "That dear girl, Myra Nell Warren, has inquired about you (Continued on page four)

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