

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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CHAPTER X.

Mine Enemy intervenes.
(A war of wits, in which I learn that I am very much married indeed.)

I stepped briskly out of my aeroplane and walked over to Zeuxis, who still crouched abjectly before me. As I advanced the superstitious Corsicans gave way again and retreated before me, running in all directions in fear of my supernatural descent from the realms of the heavens. Small wonder; this was the first aeroplane that had ever entered the island. To them I must have appeared none other than some saint, made manifest out of the clouds.

The sight of Zeuxis unnerved me, but for a moment only. At all costs I must keep the dominance that I had won. But six and thirty hours remained at most before I must begin my return flight to France; and during that brief time I must obtain the bonds from him, and then, by hook or crook, so work upon his mind that he would consent to brave the perils of the return flight with me, to give that evidence which would save Charles from the ignominious fate of a traitor.

I stepped toward him and touched him on the shoulder. "Get up!" I said. Then, as he obeyed, like a man dazed, I added in louder tones so that the lisping Corsicans might hear:

"Have you not hospitality enough to offer shelter to such an old friend as I?"

"Yes, yes, mademoiselle," he stammered. "Permit me to conduct you to my house. It is but a poor one—not such as you have been used to—but, if you will condescend, lady—"

"Lead the way!" I answered, stifling a desperate inclination to burst into hysterical laughter. As Zeuxis dragged himself along the straggling road, I at his elbow, and the villagers following at a respectful distance, I cast a glance backward to the aeroplane. I did not like to leave it there. But where else could I take it? I felt confident that superstition would restrain any of the inhabitants of Scoto from laying hands upon it, and then perchance dismissed the matter from my mind. At the very end of the road we turned into a small cottage, a peasant's hovel, containing but two rooms, yet not uncomfortably furnished in their primitive fashion. A tallow candle was burning upon a small table. At the door a dark-browed woman stood and glared sullenly at me before stepping aside and permitting me to enter.

I knew whom she must be. This was the woman for whose sake the Greek spy had deserted his wife in Paris, the woman of whom Mme. Zeuxis had told me.

"You—you will eat, mademoiselle?" faltered my involuntary host.

Indeed I would, for I was famishing. At a few words from Zeuxis the woman stepped into the kitchen, returning with a bowl of curdled goat's milk, a dish of black beans and some rye bread, which she placed before me on the table. I made a hearty meal. When I looked up at last, satisfied, a throng of Corsicans was gathered around the door.

I advanced to the threshold. "Be gone!" I cried, in Italian. They scuttled away like hares. Zeuxis and I were alone together again, the woman having sullenly retired into the kitchen after removing the remains of the repast. I closed the door and began speaking in French to him.

"You know why I have come?" I demanded.

"Signorina — mademoiselle, have mercy," he pleaded. "You will not betray me! All the spies of France are on my track. I have repented, truly. I have burned eighteen candles before the shrine of St. Christopher! I have—"

I cut him short.

"Do you know," I began, "that an innocent man stands in danger of being convicted of having sold the treaty?"

He nodded. "Let him suffer," he answered. "That is between himself and Magnif. I was only Magnif's tool. And he betrayed me, the scoundrel!" he continued, gritting his teeth in rage. "But just wait, mademoiselle. Wait till the spies have forgotten me. Do you know what I shall do? I shall creep back to Paris, so softly that none will know, and I shall draw my sharp knife across Leopold Magnif's throat so—he imitated the action—"in revenge for the money that he stole from me."

His words gave me the clue that I had been searching for.

"Suppose I promised you an amnesty," I hazarded. "If I tell you that you will not be molested, would you be willing to return to Paris with me and to give evidence which will save the Chevalier d'Yves from a shameful conviction?"

He peered at me as if not understanding, or suspecting treachery.

"Will you come back with me to morrow in the aeroplane?" I continued.

Zeuxis uttered a scream.

"The aeroplane?" he cried. "Never! I should die of terror. I would go, perhaps, in a ship—if I were offered money enough," he said, watching me greedily.

died, he would assuredly have suffered that death of the soul which is the penalty for all who are cut off from the ministrations of the church. But now, since he repents, I bid you take him back and pardon him."

My husband! Zeuxis? I was too astounded to utter a word. The priest said:

"Those ignorant peasants think you are an immortal. But I am a scientist and I know that you have flown from France in one of the new airships to win back the vagrant love of the man with whom you plighted your troth. Marriage is a sacrament, my daughter; it cannot be dissolved this side of the grave. Mademoiselle Torlano has consented to relinquish him to you. Forgive him; he will return to France with you. Or, if he refuse—"

He spoke in Italian again and seemed to thunder forth some terrible anathema. The woman bowed her head and wept wildly.

I understood then. The good priest, knowing that Zeuxis had abandoned his lawful wife in France, imagined that I was she, and that the purport of my visit had been to win back the rascal's love.

Indignation overpowered me; then the humor of the situation came to my aid and saved me.

"You agree to accompany me?" I asked the Greek.

"Yes, yes," he muttered hastily. "But not in the airplane."

"And that will not be necessary," the priest replied, "for a yacht has just arrived in the harbor from Marseilles, and doubtless passage can be procured on it. I will recommend you," he added confidently.

As he turned to comfort the weeping woman I whispered to Zeuxis hastily:

"You will come, then? Remember, the government guarantees you an amnesty, provided you give evidence. But you must tell all."

Zeuxis clenched his fists. "Aye, I will come," he muttered back. "And then—I shall seek out my enemy and with my knife—." He stopped to gather his thoughts. "On the yacht—yes, but not in the aeroplane," he concluded.

A roar of voices, rising and falling on the wind, interrupted his soliloquy. We started and looked through the open door. The cries grew louder, and suddenly a mob of men came running along the narrow street, gesticulating and cursing. They swerved toward us with a single motion, as a school of fish that veer in deep water, and forcing the priest, who sought to bar the path, aside, burst into the cottage and surrounded us. And at their head was Leopold Magnif!

Yes, that arch-traitor, to frustrate whose machinations I had made my perilous passage in the aeroplane—and here in Corsica! Doubtless he had arrived in the yacht which, as the priest had told me, lay in the harbor. He must have learned of my movements from the newspapers and, shrewdly surmising the object of my journey, had chartered a vessel at Marseilles and sailed to forestall me.

But this conclusion was the result of subsequent cogitations; for at the moment seeing him here, I was overcome with horror and dread. At the very moment of victory he had circumvented me, raised the peasants against me, cutting off all chance of rescue. They thrust their faces in mine, baying like a pack of hungry wolves.

"Ah, madame, do not look round and think of your aeroplane," said Leopold mockingly. "It is destroyed; it lies, a heap of broken metal and wood, in the center of the market place." He turned to the priest. "I demand possession of my lawful wife," he cried, and flung a forged marriage certificate upon the broken table.

The good father glanced at it and, involuntarily, shrank back from me. He looked at me with trembling lips. "It is false!" I shouted defiantly.

The priest made as if to speak; then, abandoning the effort, which proved beyond his power, turned away, muttering to himself and wringing his hands. I must, indeed have appeared very much married to his eyes. What an abandoned monster of wickedness I seemed to the good man.

I understood now the frenzy of these good peasants against me. The runaway wife is not an object of sympathy in rural districts.

Leopold came to me with a sneer, pushing aside the men who stood in his way.

"Madame," he said mockingly, "come! Our yacht lies in the harbor."

I looked round in desperation to see if aid would come from any quarter. I looked at the priest, but he was making his way sorrowfully toward the door. Zeuxis cowered by this sudden appearance of his erstwhile confederate, had sunk to the floor and stared at him with a mixture of hate and terror.

And all around me the peasants glared at me, waiting upon Leopold's word to tear me limb from limb, if he so ordered.

"Will you come quietly, Madame Magnif?" continued the fellow, "or shall these citizens carry you to our yacht?"

I shrugged my shoulders, and since there was nothing else to be done, moved at his side toward the door. Only, as I did so, with a swift movement which escaped his notice, thrust the rolled up bonds into the bosom of my gown. I do not think, to do the man some justice, that he thought of them then. I alone held the stage, and the triumph of possession had driven all lesser thoughts away.

He stepped down the long street beside me, the peasants keeping guard around. In the market place, as we passed on our way to the wharf, I saw the fragments of the aeroplane, and for the first time moisture dimmed my eyes. So ended all my hopes of saving Charles. Leopold had played his cards better than I, and had conquered.

"My daughter," he began, "you have heard it said that 'the wages of sin is death.' Your husband has sinned against you grievously, and—had he

At any rate, if the worst came, I would choose death rather than life with him. That was a comforting thought. I had been betrothed to Charles; nothing could remove that fact nor anyone usurp his place."

A tiny yacht, which was under steam, was moored to a little pier in the harbor. At the pier end my guard left me and we were received by three figures, ruffianly seafarers attired in picturesque tatters, evidently a bodyguard of my abductor, who watched me with impassive faces. I scanned them quickly. I read no hope in them. Had they been Frenchmen I would have thrown myself upon their mercy even then—but they were ugly-looking Levantines, the scum of the Mediterranean ports, and obviously beyond scuffle. Whether my story were true or false mattered nothing to them; they had their pay; that was their no chivalry perplexed their souls.

They closed closely around me and indicated that I should descend to a small cabin amidships. The hold looked dark and uninviting; my heart pounded as terror swept over me, and I hesitated upon the topmost step. My abductor indicated the way.

"Have no fear, mademoiselle," he said snarly. "These men obey my slightest word. Descend!"

I followed him in silence down the stairway and into the cabin. Then I breathed more freely again, for I could see the tumbling waters through the port-holes, and the room, lighted by electricity, was well furnished and comfortable, while the ruffians halted at the door. Clearly I need apprehend no physical injury.

"Be seated, mademoiselle," said Magnif indicating a chair.

I made no answer but stood by the table facing him. He shrugged his shoulders and, sitting down in an armchair, lighted a gold-tipped cigarette. "Those scoundrels speak no French," he said, indicating our impassive spectators. "But they are absolutely at my beck and call. All hope of safety by appealing to them, therefore, is merely foolish."

I drummed my fingers upon the table idly. Up on deck I heard a creaking, groaning sound.

"The windlass," said Leopold, following my thoughts. "They are hauling in the cable. Tonight we anchor half a mile out at sea; therefore all hope of rescue from the shore is actually a chimera."

"Well," I said, breaking silence for the first time, "what is it you want of me?"

"I want you alone, dear Anne," said Leopold, smirking odiously. "When the news of your gallant flight from Paris reached me it only increased the ardor of my love for you. You see, your cause is absolutely hopeless. Consent to marry me and I shall forgive everything."

"You—forgive!" I answered contemptuously.

I saw him wince through the cloud of tobacco smoke.

"Yes, my dear Anne," he repeated. "I shall forgive you even for the taunts you uttered to me at Clichy, for I know that, once you have transferred your allegiance to me, you will honor me as much as the traitor Charles, who, by the way, will be convicted on Monday morning, if he is not first lynched by an indignant populace. Marry me, Anne, and we will spend our honeymoon abroad, cruising the deep together. Nothing can save your lover. Dismiss all thought of him. You will

I strained at the port-hole fastenings with all my strength. The rusty catch slid back and admitted the fresh night air. The head of Zeuxis was upon a level with my own.

Then I knew that his words had not been vain; he had come to settle his score with my captor, Magnif. There was no need of words; we both understood. I opened the port-hole to its fullest extent. It was just wide enough to admit of the Greek's passage.

He stood up in the rocking boat, clung to the exterior of the orifice with both his hands, and then, heedless of the swaying boat, which rose and fell beneath him, raised himself and thrust his head and shoulders within. He caught at my too willing hands, a moment later and he had wriggled through and stood up on the floor of my cabin. He looked back, nodded, and the boat pulled slowly away. He had cut off his retreat, the single avenue of flight.

In his teeth was the sharp knife that I had seen him flourish in the cottage. I knew the mad determination which inspired him, the hate which had transformed the cringing coward into a hero. I knew the deadly purpose for whose accomplishment he had armed himself with that razor-keen blade. But now, with Charles' liberty at stake, and hope clutching me by the throat, what was the life of Leopold Magnif to me. Should I not in duty let loose this assassin upon the man who had shown me no quarter?

While I was struggling thus between two motives Zeuxis, still without a word, had crept like a cat to the locked door of the cabin. He wrenched at it; then, with a smile at the pitiful weakness of that defense which had seemed insuperable to me, he inserted the thin blade of the knife into the lock and forced back the tongue. A moment later and he had disappeared from sight, leaving me tremulous with alternating terror and hope. I heard his footsteps die away upon the carpeted floor without. I heard Leopold's voice, cool, calm, penetrating, and the voice of the Greek as he raged above him, pouring forth a torrent of accusations, threats and obtrusions. Then came a rush of quick footsteps, the crash of a falling deck-chair, and I pressed my fingers tightly to my ears.

"Yes, but I could not shut out that awful cry that followed, I heard racing below, shouting and struggling, the slamming of doors. Oaths, maledictions, blows came to my ears faintly as I cowered there; the sound of falling bodies—and then a more intense and still more awful silence. I dared not stir.

That silence, that complete absence of sound, was far more terrible to me than had been the sounds, and the shouting. Nothing occurred. There was no murmur in the air. I took my fingers from my ears, and sitting up waited. At last, hours later, it seemed to me, I heard the slow, uncertain tread of heavy footsteps without. A finger appeared round the door, groping uncertainly; a hand followed it, an arm—and Leopold Magnif entered and stood before me, his face convulsed with pain, yet wearing the semblance of a ghastly smile.

Blood dripped from his arms and breast, and there was a deep slash across his face and throat. He stood there, holding for support against the lintel, and, regarding me silently, he continued smiling. When at last he spoke his voice seemed hollow as a spectre.

"See what you have brought me to, Anne," was all he said. "I came to my senses then. I rose to staunch the blood, to bind his wounds; but he waved me aside, and then, as though his sight failed him, he groped uncertainly for me and found my arms.

"Take me back to my cabin, Anne," he whispered. "I think I'm going to die."

Summoning all my fortitude I placed my arm round him. His grasp upon my shoulder made me wince. Slowly, with staggering steps, I led him along the passage way toward his room, outside which a group of sailors clustered, terror-stricken, staring foolishly at one another and at me. One had a long cut across his hand; another a blood-stained head-bandage. And on the stains that led up to the deck dead men were lying, hideously hacked and maimed. I looked into the face of the one nearest me. In those livid and twisted features I recognized all that had been mortal of the Greek Zeuxis.

Leopold waved back the men as they approached, and we entered his cabin. Inside, the table was overturned; pillows and blankets strewed the floor, and there were all the signs of a desperate battle. I placed Leopold upon the table, spoke to him through a mist of blinding tears. When he began to speak I understood how my words of the evening had wounded him. I think that in my horror and hatred for the man I had overlooked the human qualities that lay buried deep, but existent, in his heart.

"It's no use—I'm dying, Anne," he murmured. "I only want your forgiveness. Don't let me go down to hell without your pardon, Anne. My love for you was the one not wholly selfish act of my life. You knew that, Anne?"

I nodded, seeing him through a mist of blinding tears. When he began to speak I understood how my words of the evening had wounded him. I think that in my horror and hatred for the man I had overlooked the human qualities that lay buried deep, but existent, in his heart.

"I am dying, Anne," he whispered, grasping for my hand and holding it fast in his, as though seeking to find some clasp upon that life which was slowly ebbing away. "Do you remember your words last night? That I could know love no more than a toad can know beauty? And that I seemed to you the incarnation of all evil? Well, I think you were right, Anne."

I made no answer, but sat silently beside him, while his grasp tightened cruelly on mine. I knew the struggle that was taking place in his soul.

"I want to tell you something, Anne," he said after a while. "I was not quite so bad as you imagined me to be. You always influenced me for good. Are you glad to hear that, Anne?"

"Very glad," I answered. "I always planned, when I had won you, to turn over a new leaf, as my father would have phrased it. I've been a bad lot, but I was playing for high stakes, Anne, and—and I've lost. And now I'm going to make amends. We must get you to Paris before the trial."

My hopes, so long abased, leaped up incredulously again. With Zeuxis dead I had not dared to think that anything could stay the fate which overhung my lover. But now—if Leopold should take the place of the Greek, if he should confess.

He smiled weakly, as if in anticipation of my thoughts.

"Do you see that little cabinet in the corner, Anne?" he whispered. "Under that pile of papers near it you will find a key. Unlock the cabinet and bring me what you find inside."

I rose and obeyed him. I fitted the little key into the lock and, opening the cabinet, drew forth a bundle of manuscript. I placed it in Leopold's hands.

"These papers contain my confession, Anne," he said. "I wrote it once when under the influence of good thoughts—of you. Often I have been tempted to destroy it. But I felt that if you should escape me and carry out your purpose it would be but fair to give you the means with which to free your lover, the chevalier. These papers will exonerate him completely, even after I am dead, for they contain an entire history of the plot to secure the treaty, and give the names of those who were