

THE CHAUFFEUR AND THE JEWELS

BY EDITH MORGAN WILLET

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CHAPTER XIII.

"You shall hear from me early in the morning," the mock Prince del Pino had told Mrs. Waring when he left her at her house; and then, turning his motor in the direction of his hotel, he gave himself up to the business of the moment, making the most of the brief time left him.

It was half-past ten when he stood outside of a house on 8 street and consulted his watch.

Half-past ten. Very late for a visit, and yet—they were awake in the house!

Through the bowed shutters and open windows came the sound of one of Chopin's waltzes, played by a girl's slightly amateur fingers on a piano that was not of the best. But on that night of witchery, in the silent lighted streets, the air floated out with a certain graceful stateliness.

Curbing his impatience, Sarto waited until the last note of the phrase was played, regardless of the flight of time, and then, mounting the steps, rang the bell.

There was a slight hesitation before a light tread came along the hall and the door opened.

"I had almost given up Your Highness," said Annette Bancroft.

Her visitor stood, hat in hand, looking up at her.

"I am all apologies for the lateness of the hour," he began in a low voice. "But I have been dining at Chevy Chase and was detained longer than I thought I should only stay a moment."

The girl led the way without speaking, into the drawing room, where two candles were burning, revealing the open piano heaped with music. Behind it the window stood open, letting in the light from the street.

"Roses!" ejaculated the mock prince. He daintily sniffed at a bowlful standing on the center of the table. "Papa Gontier," he murmured, lifting the heavy heads. "He has good taste in flowers—the Englishman."

Annette made a faint acquiescence. She had seated herself on the piano stool, a ghost-like little figure in the half light.

Turning away from the table, Sarto moved toward the piano.

"Ah, I had forgotten that!" he said, speaking sotto-voce. "M. Buist remains after I am gone. He has the best of it!"

"After you have gone!" echoed Annette.

She stood motionless, staring with parted lips and widened eyes into the face of the man who bent over the piano, his dark, mobile features so near hers.

"Yes," he said, speaking in very quiet tones, to which his curiously expressive voice lent a certain pathos. "It is to say good-by I am come tonight. Before morning I will have left Washington. I shall never see you again."

The last words rang with an irremediable melancholy that sent a shiver through his listener. Turning, forgetful of all the revealing lights in the street below, she looked up into his face, her own white with the shock of his words—her eyes wide with the secret of her heart.

"Annette!" cried Ludovic Sarto. Love is a great mystery! * * * It moves through the winding passages of our cold, dark hearts so silently that we never suspect its presence until suddenly one day we see it for the first time mirrored in the light of another's eyes.

At some time—when the chauffeur could not tell—some Midas touch had turned the gratitude, the friendship he felt for this girl into the gold of his heart.

And in this instant of miracles the man's whole being, his double nature, even the dark side which had achieved its sinister triumph one short hour ago, seemed touched by that same Divine alchemy—the base metal in him transformed and purified.

There are certain moments in this dull life of ours when the froth is on the wine—moments of dazzling, diamond-like brilliance—moments as sweet as the first taste of a nectar, fine and as evanescent.

Even as Ludovic Sarto and Annette Bancroft gazed into each other's eyes, the moment passed by, never to return.

The next a terrible realization came into the man's heart. "Wait a moment!" he said hoarsely. "I—I have something to tell you!"

Turning sharply away, he took a few turns up and down the room, grappling with the ordeal that was suddenly upon him.

For the girl must be told the truth now! It was inevitable! Alas! the discovery of her secret demanded the revealing of his.

It was a strange psychic fact that to Sarto now, in spite of his slip-

pery, diverse nature, no other course occurred. The man who loved Annette Bancroft—and was loved in return—could no longer mask behind the Prince del Pino.

Ludovic must come forth and bear his responsibilities. The law of self-preservation, which he had only acknowledged so far, had given way to another, diviner. For the first time in his life the mercurial chauffeur bent his head to the law of self-sacrifice.

Turning suddenly, he looked at the girl at the piano.

Annette was leaning forward, facing him, a faint nervous smile on her lips, her eyes full of a dawning, shy expectancy.

Watching her, his wonderfully keen—almost feminine—perceptions dissecting the girl's soul, Sarto saw, with shuddering, sickening horror and self-disgust, all that the girl in her innocent romantic soul was imagining. A fairy tale no less—foolish enough!—with a prince for its hero and for its heroine—

The man who loved her knew, with an inward recoil, that it fell to him to shatter this pretty little castle in the air—with its occupants.

Standing before her, he spoke formally. "Miss Bancroft, tell me, how long have we known each other—you and I?"

Annette raised her eyes to his, and a vivid color tinged her pale cheeks.

"Two weeks," she said, without the faintest hint of coquetry or hesitation. "It was just two weeks ago tonight that we met on board the Majestic."

"No!" Sarto shook his head. "You have known me longer than that. Look at me!"

He drew nearer, with sudden determination. "Where have you seen me before? Think! Remember!"

But the girl only gazed at him with astonished, half-frightened eyes.

"Before?" she faltered; "I—don't understand."

Sarto moved impatiently. The suspense was becoming unbearable.

"Think!" he urged relentlessly. "Of whom did you say I reminded you? Have you forgotten Sarto, the chauffeur?"

"You Sarto?" Annette half-whispered the word. "Sarto—and the Prince del Pino?"

Her irrefragable imagination was at work again.

With a half groan Sarto turned away. "No more fairy tales, child!" he said roughly. "The book is closed now! The man you have known is not the Prince del Pino." His voice vibrated. Only an impostor—a miserable impostor. Listen! He hesitated, standing with his back to the window, a silhouette of a man, looking at the girl between her two candles as a lost soul might look at an angel in heaven.

Then he told his story, from the time that he looked into Mrs. Waring's trunk to the present.

Perhaps never in the course of his checkered career had the chauffeur, pastmaster as he was in the science of the tongue, acquitted himself so ill. By a skillful suppression of a fact here, the strengthening of an episode there—in fact, a little judicious light and shade—the tale might have made a very creditable autobiography, in which Ludovic Sarto, the hero, would have shone forth in an adventurous, seductive—possibly an heroic—light.

To a lover all things are possible, permissible. But for the time being Sarto was not a lover.

He stood as it were in his confessional, speaking to a hidden ear, dissecting his conduct with the scrupulous exactness of the penitent. And the pale girl sitting between the two candles was to him a distant vision in a dim church, silent, inspiring, uplifting! Only at the last, the man looked out through the sinner's eyes, with a faint satisfaction in his own sin, an irresistible pride in his own performance.

"I must say I played the part well!" Sarto boasted. "My acting was successful as far as it went. I dare say there are a score here who would say a good word for me—"

A wall crept into his voice. "Ah, the irony of fate! While they are applauding the Prince del Pino out there in the audience, the poor mountebank must crawl off to hide himself and his broken heart. But I forgot—with a jarring laugh—"chauffeurs—people of a certain class—are not permitted to have hearts!"

He stood, poor Sarto, very human and very much in love, his face working, his heart rebelling at the bitterness of his cup, the injustice that deprived him of the fruits of his own triumphs—the enjoyment of his own happiness.

And there was silence in the little room, while from the street outside came the smooth roll of wheels and a man's tenor in the distance sing-

ing the air from Pagliacci, bird-like staccatos of sound threading the roar of the city.

At last Annette spoke. "What have you done with the diamonds?" she asked very quietly.

The man before her caught his breath. "Ah, the diamonds! I had forgotten about them."

For an instant he stared at the girl blankly. All this time Ludovic Sarto had been thinking of himself as chauffeur. Surely that was low enough! But now, with a heavy, ir retrievable sense of doom, he saw in her eyes whence he had fallen and how far! From the pedestal on which she had placed the Prince del Pino, down to the thief—the robber of Mrs. Waring's diamonds. What a descent! And in the fall—love, that brittle, delicate thing, lay shattered, broken into fragments.

Sarto was suddenly face to face with a judge, young, austere, implacable, in whose clear tones there sounded an echo of some distant Puritan ancestor; in whose glance he saw himself condemned.

"The diamonds," he repeated with an effort, "go to Mrs. Waring tomorrow, with a note of—of explanation. I shall see to it—the first thing in the morning."

—in explanation she spoke of a personal air of a servant, his eyes on the ground, and for a moment Annette listened silently.

"What are you doing here then?" she asked suddenly. "Don't you know that if Count Souravieff is after you, he may be here at any moment?" Her voice rose sharply.

"You will be caught, imprisoned!" But the chauffeur only smiled with a sparkle in his keen eyes which had not been there before. Slight as it was, that note of anxiety had not escaped him. Though in fragments still there was love for him in the girl's heart.

"Oh, I am safe enough indeed!" he answered confidently. "My motor is standing in front of a pharmacy in F street at this moment. For myself, I left the hotel an hour ago and took my valise with its contents to"—he hesitated—"well, never mind where. When one leads a double life, Miss Bancroft, one finds it convenient sometimes to live in two places. And then I came on here. Yes, it is quite safe; but it is well that you remind me that I must go."

"What will become of you?" asked the girl, almost in a whisper.

She still sat, her face turned away, staring fixedly at the opposite wall. Sarto moved toward the door. "What will become of me?" he echoed, with his old fatalistic shrug of the shoulders. "Who knows?" His voice dropped. "I have sinned and I must do penance, make explanation. There is much ahead of me."

He opened the door abruptly and stood hesitating. "Will you not look at me before I go, and pity, forgive, forget?"

For the first time Annette met his glance. She had been listening to the leather-coated chauffeur, shrinking from the thief; now, raising her head, she saw, standing in the doorway, a curiously attractive figure, looking at her with wistful eyes. The man, after all, whom she loved.

Half unconsciously, she leaned toward him with a desolate little cry.

"Pity, forgive, yes!" she repeated. "Yes. But forget? Oh, I cannot and will not give you up!"

Rising to her feet, she stood, her hands clasped tightly, her lips parted, gazing at him with the soul itself shining in her eyes. But Sarto did not move. He stood looking at her standing between her candles, the sculpted image of a saint carved in stone, and a very wistful look came into his face.

"There is a lighted shrine in my heart," he said, speaking to himself, "and the flame can never go out. The candle will be burning there always through the long, lonely pilgrimage—and at the end—"

"I will be waiting," said Annette very softly.

For a long instant their eyes met. Hers were full of tears, but into the man's there came a far-off, ineffable look as of one who sees visions and dreams dreams.

"Some day the pilgrim will come back to you," he said.

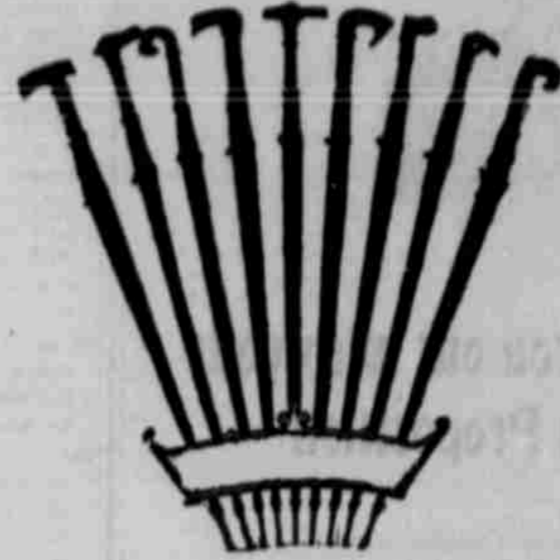
And, with love burning triumphantly at the candles of his shrine, Sarto went out into the night.

At ten o'clock the next morning, while Mrs. Waring was sitting up in bed and sipping her chocolate, her maid brought her a flat, square, be-wrapped parcel, just arrived by a messenger boy.

Giving a glance at the address, written in a delicate, foreign-looking hand, Gussue tore open the wrappings with excited fingers, pulled out the orthodox cottonwool so suggestive of a jeweler, and revealed a chamois glove case!

Planned to it was a card on which was engraved, "Il Principe Roderigo del Pino," and underneath, in pencil, "Better known as Ludovic Sarto, Mrs. Waring's ex-chauffeur, begs to send

(Continued on last page.)



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