

THE DESPERATE LOVER

By E. Phillips Oppenheim
ILLUSTRATED BY FRANK B. DRUEN

WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE:

Palermo is the scene. There an exile, Leonardo di Marioni, has come for love of Adrienne Cartuccio, who spurns him. He meets an Englishman, Lord St. Maurice, who falls in love with Adrienne on sight. Leonardo sees his sister Margherita, who tells him his love for Adrienne is hopeless. But he pleads with her to arrange an accidental meeting, to say farewell, between Adrienne and him.

She consents. That night the Englishman is informed of an attempt being made to carry off Signorina Cartuccio and Margherita, who are walking, by brigands employed by a rejected suitor, on a lonely road. He rushes to the scene, and proves able to rescue the ladies.

Inflamed by the failure of his scheme, Leonardo sees Margherita, who shows him she knows that he was instigator of the attempted attack. The Englishman now sees Adrienne often. The Englishman, sitting in the hotel, finds a dagger at his feet. Looking up, he sees the Sicilian, and scents trouble. "We sat here a week ago," recalls Leonardo. Lord St. Maurice nods.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

"It is well. It is of the events which have followed that night that I desire to speak, if you, Signor, will grant me a few moments of your time."

"Certainly," the Englishman replied courteously. After all, perhaps the fellow did not mean to quarrel.

"I regret exceedingly having to trouble you, Signor, with a little personal history," the Sicilian continued. "I must tell you, at the commencement, that for five years I have been a suitor for the hand of the Signorina Adrienne Cartuccio, my cousin."

"Second cousin, I believe," Lord St. Maurice interposed.

The Sicilian waved his hand. It was of no consequence.

"Certain political differences with the Imperial party at Rome," he continued, "culminated two years ago in my banishment from Italy and Sicily. You, I believe, Lord St. Maurice, are of an ancient family, and it is possible that you may understand to some extent the bitterness of exile from a country and a home which has been the seat of my family for nearly a thousand years. Such a sentence is not banishment as the world understands it; it is a living death! But, Signor, it was not all. It was not even the worst. Alas, that I, a Marioni, should live to confess it! But to be parted from the woman I love was even a sorer trial. Yet I endured it. I endured it, hoping against hope for a recall. My sister and I were orphans. She made her home with the Signorina Cartuccio. Thus I had news of her continually. Sometimes my cousin herself wrote to me. It was these letters which preserved my reason, and consciously or unconsciously, they breathed to me ever of hope."

"Not Adrienne, I'll swear," the Englishman retorted, "himself. He was a true Briton, and there was plenty of dormant jealousy not very far from the surface."

The Sicilian heard the words, and his eyes flashed.

"The Signorina Cartuccio, if you please, Signor," he remarked coldly. "We are in a public place."

Lord St. Maurice felt that he could afford to accept the rebuke, and he bowed his head.

"My remark was not intended to be audible!" he declared.

"For two years I bore with my wretched life," the Sicilian continued, "but at last my endurance came to an end. I determined to risk my liberty, that I might hear my fate from her own lips. I crossed the Alps without molestation, and even entered Rome. There I was watched, but not interfered with. The conclusion I came to was, that as long as I lived the life of an ordinary citizen, and showed no interest in politics, I was safe. I crossed to Palermo unharmed. I have seen the Signorina, and I have made my appeal."

The Englishman dropped his eyes and knocked the ash from his cigar. The fellow was coming to the point at last.

"You, Signor," the Sicilian continued, in a tone which, although it was no louder, seemed to gain in intensity from the smoldering passion underneath. "you, Signor, know what my answer was, for you were the cause. I have not told you this much of my story to win your pity; I simply tell it that I may reason with you. I have tried to make you understand something of the strength of my love for the Signorina. Do you think that, after what I have risked, after what I have suffered, that I shall stand aside, and see another man, an alien, take her from me? I come of a race, Signor, who are not used to see the women they love chosen for other men's wives. Have you ever heard of Count Hubert di Marioni, who, with seven hundred men, carried off a princess of Austria from her father's court, and brought her safely through Italy here to be one of the mothers of my race? It was five hundred years ago, and among the ruins of ancient kingdoms, the Marionis have also fallen in estate. But the old spirit lingers. Lord St. Maurice, I am not a blood-thirsty man. I do not wish your life. Go back to your country, and choose for a bride one of her own daughters. Give up all thought of the Signorina di Cartuccio, or, as surely as the moon yonder looks down upon you and me, I shall kill you."

"As you remark, the ideas and customs of our countries differ," the Sicilian rejoined. "Here a nobleman of my descent would consider it an everlasting shame to stand quietly on one side, and see the woman whom he worshipped become the bride of another man, and that man an alien. He would be esteemed, and justly, a coward. Let us waste no more words, Signor. I have sought you to-night to put this matter plainly before you. Unless you leave this island, and give up your pretensions to the hand of the Signorina Cartuccio, you die. You have climbed for the last time to the Villa Fiolesse. Swear to go there no more; swear to leave this island before day breaks to-morrow, or your blood shall stain its shores. By the unbroken and sacred oath of a Marioni, I swear it!"

To Lord St. Maurice, the Sicilian's words and gestures seemed only grotesque. He looked at him a little contemptuously—a thin, shrunken-up figure, ghastly pale and seeming all the thinner on account of his somber black attire. What a husband for Adrienne! How had he dared to love so magnificent a creature. The very idea of such a man threatening him seemed absurd to Lord St. Maurice, an athlete of public school and college renown, with muscles like iron, and the stature of a guardsman. He was not angry, and he had not a particle of fear, but his stock of patience was getting exhausted.

"How are you going to do the killing?" he asked. "Pardon my ignorance, but it is evidently one of the customs of the country which has not been explained to me. How do you manage it?"

"I should kill you in a duel!" the Sicilian answered. "It would be easily done."

The Englishman burst out laughing. It was too grotesque, almost like a huge joke.

"Damn you and your duels!" he said, rising to his feet, and towering over his companion. "Look here, Mr. di Marioni, I've listened to you seriously because I felt heartily sorry for you; but I've had enough of it. I don't know whether you understand the slang of my country. If you do, you'll understand what I mean when I tell you that you've been talking 'bally rot.' We may be a rough lot, we Englishmen, but we're not cowards, and no one but a coward would dream of giving a girl up for such a tissue of whimpers. Be a man, sir, and get over it, and look here—none of this sort of business!"

He drew the dagger from his breast pocket, and patted it. The Sicilian was speechless and livid with rage.

"You are a coward!" he hissed. "You shall fight with me!"

"That I won't," Lord St. Maurice answered good-humoredly. "Just take my advice. Make up your mind that we both can't have her, and she's chosen me, and come and give me your hand like a man. Think it over, now, before the morning. Good-night!"

The Sicilian sprang up, and looked rapidly around. At an adjoining table he recognized two men, and touched one on the shoulder.

"Signor!" he cried, "and you, Signor le Capitaine, pardon me if I ask you for your hearing for an instant. This gentleman here has insulted me, and declines to give me satisfaction. I have called him a coward and a rascal, and I repeat it! His name is Lord St. Maurice. If he forfeits his right to be considered a gentleman, I demand that his name be struck off the visitors' club."

The three men had risen to their feet. Two of them were gentlemen of the neighborhood with whom Lord St. Maurice had a bowing acquaintance. The third was a French officer. They looked inquiringly at Lord St. Maurice.

"It's quite true, gentlemen," he said with easy self-possession. "He's been calling me all the bad names under the sun, and I have declined to give him what he calls satisfaction. I haven't the least objection to your knowing it."

The two Palmieris looked at one another doubtfully. The officer, giving his moustache a twist, stepped forward and bowed.

"Might we inquire your reasons for declining the duel?" he asked. The Englishman shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't care two straws about your club," Lord St. Maurice answered carelessly. "As for the duel, I decline it, once and for all. We Englishmen have a code of honor of our own, and it is more to us than the custom of the countries which we chance to visit. I wish you good-night, gentlemen."

They fell back, impressed in spite of themselves by the coolness and hauteur of his words. Suddenly, with the swiftness of a tiger-cat, the Sicilian leaped forward and struck the Englishman on the cheek.

"Perhaps you will tell us all, Signor, how the men of your country resent an insult such as that," he cried.

Every one turned round at the sound of the scuffle. The eyes of all were upon the Englishman, who stood there, head and shoulders above all the crowd, with blazing eyes and pale cheeks. He was in a towering passion, but his voice never shook or faltered.

"You shall see for yourself, Signor!" he cried.

The Sicilian struggled, but he was like a child in the Englishman's arms. He had caught him up in a vice-like grasp, and held him high over the heads of the astonished onlookers. For a moment he seemed as though he were going to throw him right out of the restaurant on to the Mains, but at the last moment he changed his mind, and with a contemptuous gesture set him down in the midst of them, breathless and choking.

"You can send your seconds as soon as you like," he said shortly. "Good-night, gentlemen."

They fell back before him like sheep, leaving a broad way right into the hotel, through which he passed, stern and self-possessed. The Sicilian watched him curiously, with twitching lips.

"There goes a brave man," whispered one of the Palmieris to the French officer. "But his days are numbered."

The Frenchman gazed at the Sicilian and nodded. That was death in his face.

Two men stood facing one another on a narrow belt of sand, stripped to the shirt, and with rapiers in their hands. One was the Sicilian, Leonardo di Marioni, the other the Englishman, Lord St. Maurice. Their attitude spoke for itself. They were about to fight for each other's life.

(Continued Next Week)

Gladys—"He sat on the settee beside you—did he propose?" Ethel—"No, but it was an awfully close call."

Illinois Quail Farm Springfield, Ill.—Illinois has purchased its first quail-propagating farm, a 423-acre tract, costing \$130 an acre. Half of the tract is under cultivation and the rest is in wooded and pasture lands. The Vermilion river runs through the tract.

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