

THE SOVEREIGN POWER

BY MARK LEE LUTHER



Chapter XX.

THEY passed for coffee into the winter garden, a dim, deserted, glass domed place of palms, wicker furniture, and somnolence. Overheated for the sake of thin clad women, it soon proved a purgatory to full blooded Justin, who escaped, taking Saccarello with him. Rodoslav remained biding his time for a word with Ann. He had not long to wait. The dinner, the day's journey, the devitalized air, and a hypnotic little fountain joined forces to stupefy Mrs. Blair. After she had dozed twice, wrenched her neck, and, she suspected, compromised her dignity, she rose with a superhuman effort and declared that she must go to bed.

Alone with Rodoslav, Ann turned to him with a gesture of contrition. "I'm sorry," she said, "oh, so sorry!"

"I understood. He frightened you."

"He did frighten me. I'm a coward, I know; but I could not help it."

"It's his name."

"Not altogether." A shudder passed over the shoulders the Italian deemed so faultless. "He looks precisely what my aunt called him in Paris when I met him first—an old vulture. But I wasn't afraid of him then. I wasn't afraid of him in Italy. Now—it may be folly—but now I feel that he knows I'm shamming."

"He can't actually know; but he suspects. We must lull that suspicion somehow."

"How can we? I want to help you,—I realize how important it is,—but while I am near him—" She broke off with another shudder which told him that it defied rational defense.

"But if he was at a little distance?" asked Rodoslav after a moment's thought. "Would you feel the same?"

"Perhaps not. I cannot tell."

"Will you try an experiment?"

"Of course," she assented, eager to make amends for her failure. "If only I need not be so close to him, or say much—"

"You need not say anything. I simply want him to see us together."

"To see us together?" she repeated. "You mean—"

"I mean as if it was not a sham."

"O-oh!"

Her pursed lips made him smile. "Don't take alarm," he reassured. "It involves only the pose of a moment, a tableau vivant, no more, as Saccarello comes back."

"He may not return."

"Ah, yes, he will. He must satisfy himself about us. Trust me, he'll come, and come soon. You promised you would not mind tonight, remember."

"I'll keep my word," she answered; "but I don't want surprises. You must explain what you mean to do."

"I mean to give the impression that I am kissing you," he said. "Sit just as you are with your head half turned toward the door. As he comes down the corridor I will stoop over you." He illustrated. "So."

Ann slid to the opposite corner of the seat. "Must it be quite so—so near reality?" she asked, with a half-laugh.

Rodoslav remained grave. "I can't keep farther away and have it seem real," he explained. "We mustn't forget that Saccarello is an excellent judge in such matters."

"Very well," Ann yielded. "Do as you think best."

"Thank you," he said, and for an interval they waited.

Then Ann started. "What if it is somebody else?" she questioned.

"I know Saccarello's gouty step too well to be mistaken."

"But Uncle Justin may come with him. If he does—"

"If he does, we'll have to find another opportunity."

"Thank you," she said in turn, and again they listened.

At last came the shambling footfall they awaited. "Saccarello!" she breathed.

"And alone!"

With the word he caught her hand to his breast and bent over her with his lips all but touching hers. Ann, straining her ears, heard the pattering step come nearer, slacken, stop. Whereupon, as if it was her cue, dramatic intensity carried her over the last slight boundary and she met Rodoslav's lips with her own.

On the threshold there was stillness. After a moment, an eternity of a moment, came the sound of a discreet retreat down the corridor. But the arms that had locked her the instant her kiss proclaimed itself real still held her fast. Rodoslav's lips still pressed hers. Coming to herself, Ann thrust both hands against his breast and sprang to her feet with the wicker seat between them.

"You had no right!" she cried, her face aflame.

"No right?"

"It was unfair of you, detestable! You should have known why I did it!"

Rodoslav stared at her strangely, and over his wonted pallor swept a flush which matched her own. "Was it only to help?" he asked haltingly.

Her pulses still in tumult, her thoughts a ferment of wonder, dismay, and self inquisition, Ann caught at his words. "Was I not here to help?" she demanded. "Why else, pray, should I have done such a thing as that?"

His face became dull under her eyes. "Why else, to be sure," he replied, and turned away.

Ann veered, a lovely weathercock, between the temptation to stay and the instinct to fly. Temptation won. "Are you satisfied?" she asked, her head high.

"Satisfied!" It was an echo with an inflection of its own.

"I have surely atoned for what I failed to do before. I have done what you asked—and more."

He faced her again. "It's true," he admitted broodingly.

"Can that terrible old man still be in doubt?"

Rodoslav seemed to drag the Italian from a far corner of his mind. "Was he there long, watching?" he asked.

"You know as much about it as I."

"I forgot time," he answered. "I forgot Saccarello."

She feigned vast impatience. "I should like at least to feel that we succeeded," she said, turning to go. "Otherwise—"

"Otherwise?" he prompted, again at her side.

"Don't come back with me," she forbade. "I wish to go alone. I have earned a rest."

"As you will." He halted by the door to let her pass. "Have I offended you beyond pardon? Is there nothing I can do to make amends?"

"You might at least say you think we succeeded in deceiving Saccarello."

"Why not?" he said. "You deceived me."

She went down the corridor feeling as if she had slain a Samson. She had not needed his final admission to insure her triumph. His embrace had told her that he loved her. She stood in his thoughts beside his great ambition. In the moment of their kiss she had even transcended that ambition. Had he not, by his own confession, forgotten time, forgotten the grim watcher who stood for Europe? He could lord it over her no more! He was her vassal!

ISSUING into the lobby, the first person upon whom her victorious glance fell was Saccarello. Hunched on the arm of a chair, one leg drawn back beneath his body, his chin propped in his clawlike hand, his lid-drooping, a vulture on its lookout, there, commanding the door, he perched.

At her coming he straightened. "I am the sole chaperon on the scene," he said. "Your aunt has gone to bed. Your uncle has thought of a business letter and is swearing at the pens in the writing room. I alone am vigilant."

At first she meant to say that she would not tax his strength further and then bid him good-night; but his last word changed her mind. She did not feel as afraid as she had at dinner. The kiss had oddly fortified her courage.

"Do I seem to require vigilance?" she asked.

His shrug evaded a direct re-



When His Glance Came Back to Ann
It Twinkled with Diabolical Amusement.