

# THE SOVEREIGN POWER

BY MARK LEE LUTHER

## SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

ANN MILBURN, heroine of the story, was a niece of Justin Blair, just making a trip through Europe, with his wife and Ann, after serving a term as United States Senator from a Middle Western State. At the aeroplane races at Rheims they encountered Oliver Page, who had thrown up a commission in the United States army to devote himself to perfecting an airship. He had been smitten with Ann when she was a schoolgirl attending a convent. The other leading characters in the story are Price Buckley, an attaché of the American Embassy in Paris, a fat, loquacious individual; Rodoslav, a poetic Servian Prince of great wealth and standing, strongly attracted to

Ann; and Mrs. Virginia Truscott, a garrulous, somewhat snobbish society woman who delighted in sensations.

Page distrusted Rodoslav's attitude toward Ann. Rodoslav was a thorn in the flesh of European diplomats, on account of his suspected schemes to bring about a revolution in the Balkans, and, under the leadership of Baron Saccarello, an Italian, considered the ablest of their number, they hoped to divert his patriotic plans by bringing about a love affair between him and Ann.

Ann agreed to form a friendly alliance with Rodoslav for the purpose of deceiving the diplomats of Europe and achieving independence for his people.

one of the crack poker players of Europe," he added casually. "I may be able to sit in at a game."

THE chance presently befell. As the old man limped into the lobby, he cast a leisureed glance round and, remarking the Americans, joined their group with a smiling allusion to his mishap. Justin followed up the introduction with an invitation to coffee, and the Italian sat down with them.

"I had a glimpse of you the last time you visited Washington," said Justin.

Saccarello displayed one of the feats of memory that had often won him the blind devotion of lesser men.

"And I had a glimpse of you," he returned unexpectedly. "In fact, I heard you speak in the Senate. They were discussing immigration, and you rose to defend the character of the Italian laborer from an unjust attack."

"I had no notion you were there."

"I was delighted at what you said," alleged Saccarello. "I repeated the substance of it to the King on my return."

Justin's square hewn face beamed. "I'm not a public speaker," he said; "but I couldn't keep out of that debate. First and last, I've employed a good many Italians, and I like them."

Their talk drifted from topic to topic, and presently the women left them. Two hours later Ann saw them together in an alcove. They were not playing poker!

On the morrow Justin briefly announced his intention of leaving for Milan.

"I may get as far as Rome," he said.

"Business?" asked his wife.

"Business," he assented. "I've struck an Italian proposition which interests me. I dare say Ann can amuse herself for a few days longer," he added, with a quizzical glance at his niece. "I'll leave my card on the new adorer before I go, so that everything may be in form."

Ann answered him in his own humor. "Mind your promise!" she warned. "No thunders till he mentions the dot!"

"That's understood."

THE same afternoon she met Saccarello equipped for travel.

"Going?" she said. "You are soon done with your beloved Como."

"Yes, I'm off. It's well I haven't that villa, isn't it? But Pliny had no telegraph to ruin his holidays. *Addio, Signorina*. It's nearly boat time, I think."

"If you are taking the boat south, you will have my uncle for company."

"So! Fortune follows me. You ladies convoy me into Cadenabbia; the head of the house softens the pang of my departure."

Justin, followed by his luggage, came suddenly upon them. "I'm ready!" he called.

He looked at Saccarello as he spoke, and most certainly addressed him; but with an adroit maneuver the old man consigned the remark to Ann.

"Miss Milburn tells me we are to be fellow travelers," he said suavely. "We Italians abhor a solitary journey."

The American met his eye. "Yes," he returned dryly, "I find I have to go to Milan." As Saccarello moved on he stared after him thoughtfully; but, on realizing that Ann was in turn watching him, he became abruptly frivolous and pinched her ear. "I looked after that bit of social red tape," he told her.

"No thunders?" she smiled.

"Not even heat lightning."

"Did you see him?"

"Yes."

"You did!"

"I ran into him after I left my card. Goodby."

Ann anchored him by a lapel. "Would you run off without telling me what he talked about?" she reproached.

Justin grinned and detached himself. "Aëroplanes," he vouchsafed. "Not a girl was mentioned."

She saw the two men take their departure from the hotel in separate vehicles; but she was none the less sure that they left by prearrangement and that their journey had a common object. Of what had they talked last night? Was her uncle still busy with the affairs of Oliver Page? What was it the aviator had really accomplished? The situation bristled with riddles, to which Justin Blair alone held the master key.

WHEREUPON Rodoslav once more imposed himself upon her attention. Turning in at the Bella Vista as the travelers drove away, he saluted each of them ceremoniously, and then, followed by a long backward look from the Italian, pressed on with eager step to meet her. His bearing as he bent over her hand was nothing if not loverlike; but the eyes he lifted to hers were full of triumphant amusement.

"Half a minute later and the tableau would have been spoiled," he said. "The chief spectator would have been gone."

"Do you mean my uncle?"

"I mean Saccarello. How long have you known that old man? How came he to be driving into Cadenabbia with you yesterday?"

She explained in a sentence. "Is it good news or



## Chapter IX.

MRS. TRUSCOTT had also received a princely call, and was beside herself with the glory of it. "I was out when he came," she told Ann, waylaying her in a corridor; "but I met him going away and insisted on his having tea. You should have seen the faces of that snobbish English family who always monopolize the best table! They were green, my dear, positively green! They all knew who he was, of course; but, so there shouldn't be any doubt, I once or twice addressed him by his title. What do you suppose he talked about? What do you suppose?"

"Your frock?" hazarded Ann.

Virginia fluttered a complacent hand over the zebra striped costume. "He did say it was striking," she assented; "but that wasn't the leading motive of his rhapsody. It certainly was a rhapsody, and all about you!"

"About me!" She did her best to appear amazed. "Yes, you! And after the way you treated him yesterday afternoon! I simply can't understand it!"

"Perhaps it was his princely idea of small talk." "Not a bit of it! He hasn't another idea in his handsome head."

She plunged into details which Ann scarcely heard. Seeming to attend, she in reality battled with misgiving at the abandon with which Rodoslav flung himself into the game. Decidedly he was in earnest! He had followed his first move with a second, even more downright in its publicity. Recognizing Mrs. Truscott's value as an advertising medium, he had deliberately fed her gossip to peddle. What she knew, Cadenabbia would know also, and what Cadenabbia, in the height of its Anglo-Saxon season, talked about, presently attained the dignity of Continental news.

"Oh, yes, you'll see him back here promptly," declared Mrs. Truscott, giving emphasis by repetition to a prophecy Ann had missed. "But he is not stopping next door, as we thought. He just happened to be strolling round the gardens of the villa when we met him. He knows the owner, of course, and wanders all over the place whenever he likes; but he's really staying at a rather plain little hotel in the town. Odd, isn't it? Perhaps he is one of those queer modern hybrids who are half aristocrat and half socialist. For my part, I prefer to see people one thing or another—something I can comfortably classify. Then I know where I am and can talk brotherhood of man or scandal, as the case may be. But I dare say you won't mind what he talks. Actions do speak louder than words, don't they? I'm delighted at the turn of affairs, my dear. I never expected to play Cupid to a semiroyal match!" And then, in final arch injunction, "Don't forget your untitled friends when you become a Princess."

Ann could not resist the opening. "You shall be court jester," she promised, and went her way.

IN her heart she reflected that she might yet need a fool in motley. She had listened to serious things last night. She had engaged to play a difficult part. What would her Aunt Helen think? What would be the point of view of that stanch republican, Justin Blair?

She had a partial answer to the latter query as she crossed the threshold of her room. Through the half open door of the adjoining salon she heard her uncle's voice in jocosa comment upon the situation which, amid her greetings, Mrs. Blair had somehow found time to sketch.

"Yes, I'll return his call," he was saying. "Since he's left his card for me, I'll play mine back again, strictly according to Hoyle. But just let him mention settlements! Then he'll wake up to the fact that he is dealing with a business man!"

Ann pushed open the door and entered. "Please

don't crush him till he does mention settlements," she petitioned. "You'll spoil my fun."

Justin laughed and kissed her. "I agree to that," he said. "I guess your head is screwed on straight."

Ann changed the subject. "And now," she catechized, "what about Brescia? Is Oliver Page a genius, after all?"

Her uncle's face became impassive. "What do you mean by genius?"

"You know what I mean. Has he finally succeeded? Did he actually make that wonderful flight?"

"Which?"

"The one the Milan paper described this morning. Somebody went up at Brescia, was seen not long after at Cremona, then at Mantua, and finally at Verona, all in one afternoon."

Justin smiled. "Sounds almost like a home paper, doesn't it? No, I didn't read that tale; but I heard about it."

"And wasn't it true?" demanded his wife. "Hasn't Oliver Page flown, after all?"

"Oh, yes. Oliver has tinkered his motor into shape at last! His machine really begins to look practical. But how about dinner? Must I dress?"

His helpmate abandoned the pumping process; but Ann made one more attempt.

"I believe there is something behind that newspaper story," she said, "and I'm sure you know what it is. Don't be a sphinx!"

Justin drew a newspaper from his pocket. "Nobody can be a sphinx over something everybody knows," he replied. "In its afternoon edition the Milan daily clears up its own mystery. I quarried out the sense of it with the help of a pocket dictionary. Suppose you give your aunt the polished version while I worry into a stiff shirt." He stabbed the illuminating paragraph with his pipestem and took himself off to his dressing room.

Ann found the item as concise as most afternoon explanations of a morning mystery. Rosy theory gave place to gray fact. It was true that there had been an ascent at Brescia. An aviator, said to be an American, had given a new motor a trial. He had, as stated in the previous despatch, succeeded in getting as far as Lake Garda. But, as for Cremona and Mantua, inquiry had developed the fact that bird shaped kites, which inexperienced people everywhere mistook for aëroplanes these days, were flown in both cities yesterday. This rational explanation of the credulous visions of Cremona and Mantua naturally precluded any further consideration of the absurd story from the suburbs of Verona, which, emanating from ignorant peasants, bore the stamp of unreality on its very face. Forced to descend in his homeward flight, the Brescian aviator had not returned to his shed until an hour too late to admit of an interview.

Ann read with growing doubt, and flung down the paper in absolute disbelief. "Those people did see something extraordinary!" she declared. "I know it! I'm convinced that Oliver Page did make that flight, and that Uncle Justin not only knows he made it, but is behind this newspaper denial. What does it mean?"

"Dollars!" suggested Mrs. Blair sententiously.

THERE was nothing more to be had from the head of the family. Neither Brescia nor aëroplanes crossed his lips; nor, for that matter, anything else save his dinner. His fellow guests passed before his scrutiny without remark and apparently without speculation, until, in leaving, they approached a table where, quite alone, his bird of prey expression salient, Saccarello sat consuming an ice. He perceived them and bowed.

"Where did you meet that man?" Justin put the question as soon as they were out of earshot.

His wife mentioned "Rigoletto," and detailed the odd encounter of the afternoon.

"Do you know who he is?" asked Ann.

He nodded abstractedly. "If you have an opportunity that doesn't seem forced, present me," he said; then, after a moment's rumination, "I understand he's