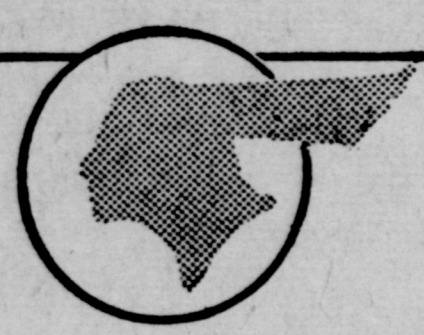




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TRY IT—AND SEE FOR YOURSELF

THE DESPERATE LOVER

By E. Phillips Oppenheim

SECOND INSTALLMENT

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

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

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY
She laid her troubled, tear-stained face upon his shoulder.

"It is wrong of me, Leonardo. Yet, if you will promise me to say farewell, and farewell only—"

"Be it so! I promise."

"Well, then, each night we have walked past the Marina, and home by the mountain road. It is a long way round and it is lonely; but we have Pietro with us, and on these moonlight nights the view is like fairyland."

"And will you come that way home tonight, after the concert?"

"Yes."

"It is good."
It was almost midnight, and Palermo lay sleeping in the moonlight. The concert was over. One by one the promenaders had left the Marina, in the shadow of a cluster of orange trees.

He sat dreaming, with a burned-out cigar between his teeth, and his eyes idly wandering over the blue Mediterranean. Suddenly the stillness was broken by the sound of a soft gliding footstep close at hand. He had heard no one approach, yet when he looked up quickly he found he was no longer alone. A man in the garb of a native peasant was standing by his side.

Naturally the Englishman was a little surprised. He half rose from his seat, and then resumed it as he recognized the dark, swarthy face and black eyes of the waiter who had told him Ardiene Cartuccio's name.

"Hullo! What are you doing here?"

"I was in search of the Signor!" was the hasty response. "For an hour I have sought him everywhere, and now it is by chance that I am successful."

The Englishman looked at him with suspicion. This change of dress was doubtless for the purpose of disguise. What was the meaning of it?

"Well, and now you've found me, what do you want?" he asked, watching him closely.

"I will tell the Signor. Is it not that he has an admiration for Mademoiselle Cartuccio, the singer? Well, she is in danger! It is for the Signor to rescue her."

The Englishman sprang up with sparkling eyes, and pitched his dead cigar into the sea.

"In danger!" he repeated breathlessly. "Quick! Tell me where!"

The man pointed inland. "Do you see that belt of white road there, leading up into the hills?"

"Yes; what about it?"

"Have you noticed anything pass along it?"

"There was a heavy cart or carriage and some mules, I think, went by half an hour ago."

The native shrugged his shoulders. "It was an hour, Signor, but no matter! Step back with me into the shadow of those olive trees. That is better. Now we cannot be seen, and I will explain."

The Englishman beat the ground with his foot.

"Explanation be damned," he exclaimed. "Where is Mademoiselle Cartuccio? Quick!"

The man held up his hands, and spoke more rapidly.

"This evening I heard by accident of a plot to carry off Signorina Cartuccio by a rejected suitor. I hasten to inform the police, but on the way I pause. I say to myself, what shall I get for my pains, and for the risk I run? Nothing! Then I think of the Signor. I watched his face when the Signorina passed by, and I say to myself he has the passion of her. If I show him the way to save her he will be generous. He will reward poor Andrea."

"That's all right. Tell me what to do, and I will give you fifty pounds—anything you like. Don't waste time. Speak up!"

The man's eyes shone with cupid-ity. He went on rapidly:

"The Signor is a prince. Listen! Along yonder road, before many minutes have passed, will come the Signorina Cartuccio with her friend, attended only by an aged servant. Men are waiting for them in the grove of orange trees above

the Villa Fiolesse. Their orders are to carry off the two ladies to the other side of the island, where a place has been prepared for them. For an hour I have searched for the Signor, that he might rescue, aid, and to encounter these brigands, but in vain. I was in despair."

"I want no help! How many of the blackguards are there?"

"Four, Signor!"

"Natives?"

"Yes, Signor."

"And cowards, I suppose?"

The man smiled.

"They have not much bravery, Signor. I know the men."

"I wouldn't have anyone else here for the world," the Englishman said, shaking his fist.

"Does the Signor want a knife?" asked the man, thrusting his hand into his inner pocket.

"Not I. We don't understand that sort of thing in our country, my brave Andrea. Fisticuffs will settle this little matter, you'll see!"

The man looked up admiringly at the Englishman's commanding figure and broad shoulders.

"I think they will run away from the Signor when they see him," he whispered. "But let the Signor remember this: if one of them thrusts his hand inside his coat, so, do not wait one moment—knock him down or get out of his way. He will have the knife, and they know how to use it, these brigands."

"Tell me the name of their leader—I mean the fellow who is trying to carry off the Signorina. Will he be there?"

The man shook his head. "I cannot tell the Signor his name. I dare not. I was once in his service, and he has powers—hush!"

[The two men held their breath, keeping well in the shadow of the orange grove. They had reached the road, and in the distance they could hear the sound of approaching voices.

"I leave you now, Signor," whispered his companion to the Englishman. "I dare not be seen. To-morrow, at the hotel."

He glided noiselessly away. The Englishman scarcely heard him, he was listening intently. Light footsteps were coming along the winding road toward him, and soon a laughing voice rang out up the night air.

"My dear Ardiene, don't you think we were a little foolish to walk home so late as this? See, there is not a soul upon the promenade."

"Tant mieux!" was the light answer. "Is it not to escape from them all, that we came this way? The stillness is exquisite, and the night breeze from the sea, after that hot room, is divine. What a view we shall have of the bay when we get to the top of the hill."

"They say that this place is infested with robbers, and it is terribly lonely," was the somewhat fearful answer. "Why would you not let poor Leonardo come with us?"

"Because I did not want Leonardo, chérie. Leonardo is very good, but he wears me by persisting to dwell upon a forbidden subject; and as for protection—well, I fancy Giovanni is sufficient."

They were passing him now so close that he felt impelled to hold his breath. He had only a momentary glimpse of them, but it was sufficient. A few yards behind, a sullen-looking servant was trudging along, looking carefully around. In the white moonlight their faces, even their expressions, were perfectly visible to him; Ardiene's rapt and absorbed by the still restful beauty of the dreaming night, and indifferent to all fear; her companion, whose dark eyes were glancing somewhat anxiously around her, and Giovanni's whose furtive looks, more expectant than apprehensive, marked him out to the Englishman as an accomplice in whatever devilry was afoot. Unseen himself he watched them pass, and listened to their voices, growing fainter and fainter in the distance. They were out of sight and out of hearing.

He was preparing to follow them, when suddenly another sound broke the stillness. He held his breath, and crouched down, watching. In a minute, two dark forms, keeping carefully in the shadows by the side of the road, crept stealthily past.

He waited till they, too, were out of sight, and then stood up with tingling pulses, but quite cool. Moving on tiptoe, he stepped lightly over the low stone wall into the road, and gazed after them.

The ascent was steep, and the road curved round and round in zig-zag fashion. On one side it was bordered by a thickly-growing orange grove, whose delicate perfume was sweetening the still languid air. On the other was a stretch of waste open country, separated from the road by a low wall. He chose the

seaward side, and keeping under the shadow of the trees, followed them, his footsteps sinking noiselessly into the thick dust.

Once the two ladies paused to look back. He stopped too; and the two bending figures between them drew closer into the shadows, and waited. He was some distance away, but the sound of her voice floated clearly down to him on a breath of that faint night air.

Again they turned, and again he followed. Suddenly his heart gave a great bound. About fifty yards in front of the two girls was a rudely-built country carriage, drawn by a pair of mules and with a single man on the box. They had paused at such an unexpected sight, and seemed to be deliberating in whispers whether or no they should proceed. Before they had come to any decision, the two men had crept out from the shadow of the wall and trees into the road, and with bent bodies hurried toward them.

He did not shout out or make any noise; he simply lessened the distance between him and them by increasing his pace. The two stooping forms, casting long, oblique shadows across the white, hard road, were almost level with their intended victims. Now the shadow of one of them crept a little in advance of the ladies, and Ardiene Cartuccio, seeing it, stepped suddenly back with a cry of alarm.

"Giovanni! Giovanni! There are robbers! Ah!"

The cry became a shriek, but it was instantly stifled by a coarse hand thrust upon her mouth. At the same moment her companion felt herself treated in a similar manner. They could only gaze into the dark ruffianly faces of their captors in mute terror. The whole thing had been too sudden for them to make any resistance, and Giovanni, their trusted escort, seemed suddenly to have disappeared. As a matter of fact, he was watching the proceedings from behind a convenient boulder.

The man who was holding Ardiene pointed to the carriage, the door of which the driver had thrown open.

"This way, Signorina," he said. "It is useless to struggle. We shall not harm you."

She shook her head violently, and with a sudden effort thrust his hand away from her mouth.

"What do you want?" she cried. "Who are you? You can have my jewels, but I will never step inside that carriage. Help! Help!"

He wound his arms around her, and without a word, commenced dragging her across the road.

"You may shout as much as you like," he muttered. "There will only be echoes to answer you."

A sudden warning cry rang out from his companion, and with a start, he released his victim. The Englishman had stepped into the middle of the group, and, before he could spring back, a swirling left-hander sent him down into the dust with a dull, heavy thud.

"You blackguard!" he thundered out. Then turning quickly round he faced the other man, who had sprung across the road with bent body, and with his right hand in his breast. There was a gleam of cold steel, but before he could use the knife which he had drawn, his arm was grasped and held as though by a vice, and slowly bent backward.

He dropped the weapon, with a shriek of pain, upon the road, and fell on his knees before his captor.

The Englishman's grasp relaxed, and taking advantage of it, the man suddenly jumped up, leaped over the wall, and disappeared in the plantation. Pursuit would have been impossible, but none of them thought of it.

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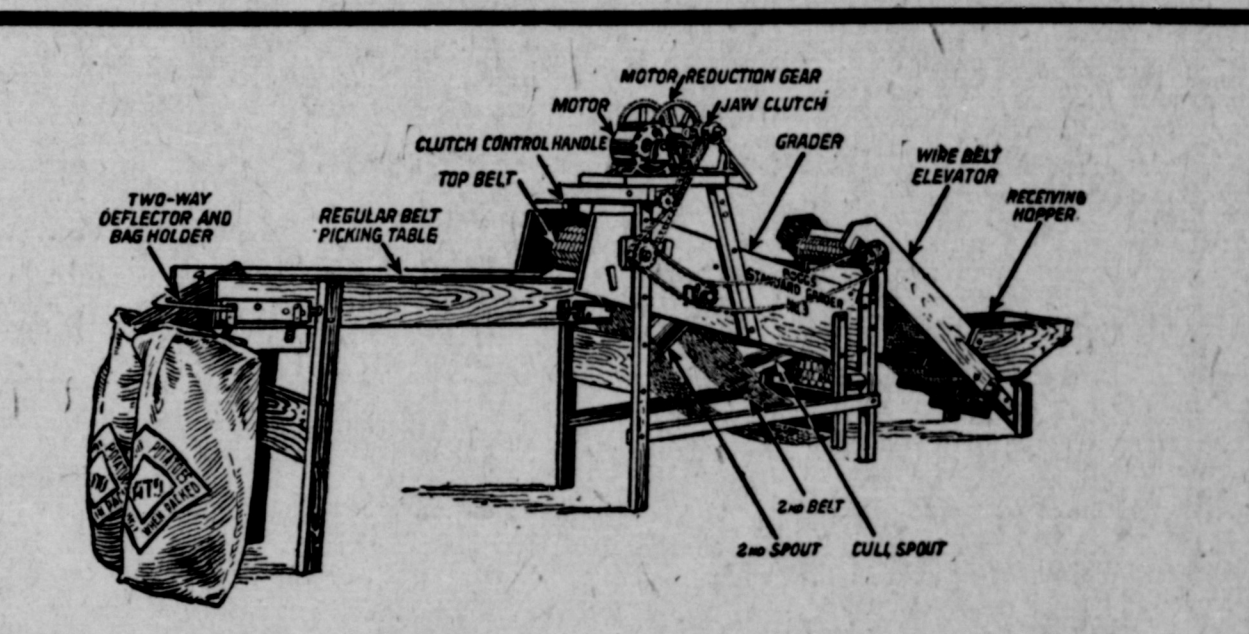
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