A DAUGHTER OF THE MARIONIS

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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CHAPTER VI.—(Continued).

"I think that I was quite happy when I was a little girl. I do not remember very much about that time, or about my mother, for she died when I was six years old. Papa was very good to me, but he was stern and cold always. I do not think that he ever smiled after mamma died, and he had money troubles, too. A bank failed, and he lost a great deal; and then he had a great many shares in a company which failed. I don't understand much about it, but when he died three years ago, nearly everything he had went to pay people. I had to go and live with my father's brother, and I hate it. I hate them all—my uncle, my aunt and my cousins. They are vulgar, common people. They are in business, and they are fearfully rich, but their manners are dreadful, and they are always talking of their money. They have no taste, no art, no refinement. I was going to leave them when I heard that you were here. I was going to be a governess—yes, even earn my own bread—rather than stay with them any longer, I hated them so, and their life, and everything to do with them. Oh, uncle, uncle, let me live with you. Let us go away from this wretched England. Let us go to some southern country where the sun is warm, and the people do not talk of their money, and there are beautiful things to see and admire. It is ugly and cold here, and I am weary of it."

She broke off in a sudden fit of sobbing. He took her face gently in his hands, and held it up to him. It was he, now, who was to play the part of consoler.

"Margharita, I am a lonely old man whose life is well-night spent. Yet, if you will come to me, if you will really live with me, then you wil lmake my last days happy. When I die all that I have will be yours. It is settled, is it not?"

Like summer lightning the tempest of her grief died away, and her face was brilliant with smiles.

"I will never, never leave you, uncle," she cried joyously. "We will live together always. Oh, how happy we shall be!"

Then she looked at him—looked at his shrunken limbs and worn, pinched face, and a sudden darkening fire kindled in her face. She stamped her foot, and her eyes flashed angrily. The sight of him reminded her that, so far as he was concerned at least, their happiness could not be of very long duration. The finger of death had laid its mark upon that ashen grey face. It was written there.

"How I hate them!" she cried. "Those cruel, wicked people, who kept you in prison all these years. I should like to kill them all—to see them die here before us. I would not spare one—not one!"

He thrust her away, and started to his feet a changed man. The old fires had leaped up anew; the old hate, the old desire, was as strong as ever within him. She looked at him, startled and wondering. His very form seemed dilated with passion.

"Child!" he cried, "have you ever heard the story of my seizure and imprisonment? No, you have not. You shall hear it. You shall judge between me and them. Listen! When I was a young man, Italy seemed trembling on the verge of a revolution. The history of it all you know. You know that the country was honeycombed with secret societies, more or less dangerous. To one of these I belonged. We called our order the Order of the White Hyacinth. We were all young, ardent and impetuous, and we imagined ourselves the apostles of the coming liberation. Yet we never advocated bloodshed; we never really transgressed the law. We gave lectures, we published pamphlets. We were a set of boy dreamers with wild theories—communists, most of us. But there was not one who would not have died to save our country the misery of civil war—not one, not one! Even women wore our flower and were admitted associates of our order. We pledged ourselves that our aims were bloodless. No society that ever existed was more harmless than ours. I say it! I swear it! Bear me witness, oh, my God, if what I say be not true!"

He was a strong man again. The apathy was gone; his reason was saved. He stood before this dark, tall girl, who, with clasped hands, was drinking in every word, and he spoke with all the swelling dignity of one who has suffered unjustly.

"By some means or other our society fell under the suspicion of the government. The edict went forth that we should be broken up. We heard the mandate with indignation. We were young and hot-blooded, and we were conscious that we had done no harm—that we were innocent of the things ascribed to us. We swore that we would carry on our society, but in secret. Before then, everything had been open; we had had a recognized meeting place, the public had attended our lectures, ladies had worn the white hyacinth openly at receptions and balls. Now, all was changed. We met in secret and under a ban. Still our aim was harmless. One clause alone was added to our rules of a different character, and we all subscribed to—'Vengeance upon traitors!' We swore it solemnly one to the other—'Vengeance upon traitors!'"

"Ah! if I had lived in those days, I would have worn your flower at the court of the king," she cried, with glowing cheeks.

He pressed her hand in silence, and continued.

"As time went on, and things grew still more unsettled in the country, a species of inquisition was established. The eyes of the law were everywhere. They fell upon us. One night, 10 of us were arrested as we left our meeting-place. We were all noble, and the families of my companions were powerful. I was looked upon as the ringleader; and upon me fell the most severe sentence. I was banished from Italian soil for 10 years, with the solemn warning that death would be my lot if I ventured to return."

"It was atrocious!"

He held up his hand.

"Margharita, in those days I loved. Her name was Adrienne. She, too, was an orphan, and although she was of noble birth, she was poor, as we Marionis were poor also. She had a great gift, she was a singer; and, sooner than be dependent upon her relatives, she had sung at concerts and operas, until all Europe knew of her fame. When I was exiled, I was given seven days in which to make my adieu. I went to her and declared my love. She did not absolutely reject me, nor did she accept me. She asked for time for consideration. I could give her none: I begged her to leave the country with me. Alas! she would not! Perhaps I was too passionate, too precipitate! It may have been so; I cannot say. I went away alone and left her. I plunged into gay life at Paris; I dwelt amongst the loneliest mountains of Switzerland; I endured the dullness of this cold, grey London, and the dissipation of Vienna. It was all in vain! One by one they palled upon me. No manner of life, no change of scene could cure me of my love. I felt ill, and I knew that my heart was breaking. You and I, Margharita, come of a race whose love and hatred are eternal!"

She crept into his arms; and he went on, holding her there.

"Back I came at the peril of my life; content to die, if it were only at her feet. I found her cold and changed; blaming me even for my rashness, desiring even my absence. Not a word of pity to sweeten those weary days of exile; not a word of hope to repay me for all that I had risked to see her again. Soon I knew the reason—another love had stolen away her heart. There was an Englishman—one of those cursed Englishmen—visiting her daily at Palermo; and she told me calmly one day that she loved him and intended to become his wife. She forgot my long years of devoted service; she forgot her own unspoken, yet understood, promise; she forgot all that I had suffered for her; she forgot that her words must sound to me as the death warrant of all joy and happiness in this world. And she forgot, too, that I was a Marioni! Was I wrong, I wonder, Margharita, that I quarreled with him! You are a child, and yet my instinct tells me that you have a woman's judgment! Tell me, should I have stepped aside, and let him win her, without a blow?"

"You would have been a coward if you had!" she cried. "You fought him! Tell me that you fought him?"

"Margharita, you are a true daughter of your country!" the old man cried. "You are a Marioni! Listen! I insulted him! He declined to fight! I struck him across the face in a public restaurant, and forced him to accept my challenge. The thing was arranged. We stood face to face on the sand, sword in hand. The word had been given! His life was at my mercy, but mind, Margharita, I had no thought of taking it without giving him a fair chance. I intended to wait until my sword was at his throat, and then I would have said to him, 'Give up the woman whom I have loved all my life and go unhurt!' He himself should have chosen. Was not that fair?'

"Fair! It was generous! Go on! Go on!"

"The word had been given; our swords were crossed. And at that moment, she, Adrienne, the woman whom I loved, stood before us. With her were Italian police come to arrest me! There was one letter alone of mine, written in a hasty moment, which could have been used in evidence against me at my former triel, and which would have secured for me a harsher sentence. That letter had fallen into her hands; and she had given it over to my bitter enemy, the chief of the Italian police. I was betrayed, betrayed by the woman whom I had braved all dangers to see! It was she who had brought them; she who—without remorse or hesitation—calmly handed me over to 25 years' captivity in a prison cell!"

Margharita freed herself from his arms. She was very pale, and her limbs were shaking. But what a fire in those dark, cruel eyes.

"Go on! Go on!" she cried. "Let me hear the rest."

"Then, as I stood there, Margharita, love shrivelled up, and hate reigned in its place. The memory of the oath of our order flashed into my mind. A curtain seemed raised before my eyes. I saw the long narrow room of our meeting-place. I saw the dark, faithful faces of my comrades. I heard their firm voices—'Vengeance upon traitors, vengeance upon traitors!' She, too, this woman who betrayed me, had worn our flower upon her bosom and in her hair! She had come under the ban of that oath. Margharita, I threw my sword into the sea, and I raised my clasped hands to the sky, and I swore that, were it the last day of my life, the day of my release should see me avenged. Let them hide in the uttermost corners of the earth, I cried, that false woman and her English lover, still I would find them out, and they should taste of my vengeance! To my trial I went, with that oath written in my heart. I carried it with me into my prison cell, and day by day and year by year I repeated it to myself. It kept me alive; the desire of it grew into my being. Even now it burns in my heart!

"During my captivity I was allowed to see my lawyer, and I made over by deed so much to be paid every year to the funds of our order at the London branch, for our headquarters had been moved there after my first arrest. Day by day I dreamed of the time when I should stand, a martyr in their cause, before my old comrades, and demand of them the vengeance which was my due. I imagined them, one by one, grasping my hand, full of deep, silent sympathy with my long sufferings. I heard again the oath which we had sworn—'Vengeance upon traitors, vengeance upon traitors!' It was the music which kept me alive, the hope which nourished my life!"

The dark eyes glowed upon him like stars, and her voice trembled with eagerness.

"You have been to them? You will be avenged! Tell me that it is so?"

A little choking sob escaped from him. The numbness was passing away from his heart and senses. His sorrows were becoming human, and demanding human expression.

"Alas, Margharita, alas!" he cried, with drooping head, "the bittereset disappointment of my life came upon me all unawares. While I have lain rotting in prison, history has turned over many pages. The age for secret societies has gone by. The Order of the White Hyacinth is no more—worse than that, its very name has been dragged through the dust. One by one the old members fell away; its sacred aims were forgotten. The story of its downward path will never be written. A few coarse, ignorant men meet in a pothouse, night by night to spend the money I sent in beer and foul tobacco. That is the end of the Order of the White Hyacinth!"

To Be Continued Monday.

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