

AMERICA FIRST

Secrets of the Courts of Europe

An Old Ambassador's Revelations of the History of Famous Episodes Heretofore Cloaked in Mystery

THE TOMB IN THE VATICAN

IN AND ABOUT THE HIGH SOCIETY

The report cards for the week of practice...

Well, we are through with the course...

Romano Lacey fell for the other day...

The Downers students...

Messrs. Mosher and...

The Purple squad in practice...

The sign of the four-leaf clover...

If Barnum & Bailey or...

about this gentleman" was all he said. "Nothing except what he has told me, that is to say, that he formerly held a commission under the holy father."

"Thank you for your kind intentions," he said stiffly, "but all the same I do not propose to avail myself of Monsignor Perratti's permission. At least I will think it over."

"Ah, Excellency!" he exclaimed, as soon as he caught sight of me, "I have something to tell you which will give you the greatest delight. A new treasure has just arrived; it is a collection of ancient seals, some of them most exquisitely engraved, which Cardinal Salvaterra has presented to the pope. You must positively come and see them at once."

"Charmed by his intelligence, I hastened to place myself at his disposal. He led me a long way into a part of the building where I had never before penetrated. After going through innumerable rooms, all filled with valuable curiosities of different kinds, we arrived at last in a long deserted gallery with bare walls, to which light was admitted by means of a skylight overhead. The obscurity of the gallery was further relieved by the entire end wall being made a mirror, which reflected back the light from the roof. All down this gallery were ranged tables, supporting the cases with glass lids usually seen in museums, and in these cases were displayed sets of coins and other interesting objects.

"But my conductor would not let me pause to examine them. At the far end of the gallery—whose apparent length was increased by the mirror I had described—I perceived a man standing in front of one of the cases, the contents of which he appeared to be setting in order. "It is the cardinal himself!" exclaimed Monsignor Perratti. "We are fortunate. He is just arranging the seals."

"His Eminence, with whom I was already acquainted, turned around to greet me as I came up, and kindly offered to show me his famous collection. But how can I describe these things to you? They were indeed priceless. One in particular, an onyx engraved with the head of Vespasian, was one of those objects for the sake of which one commits murders!"

"I thought I should never have torn myself away from the gallery. But the cardinal, who was all goodness, promised to meet me there again, and to renew his lecture on these fascinating gems. At the same time Monsignor Perratti remarked: "You ought really to bring that poor count of yours to inspect these seals. Without doubt they would interest him as much as they do you."

scription of the cardinal's treasures. When I came to the onyx of Vespasian, I could see he was moved. All men have their fatal weakness; Vespasian's was the mania of a connoisseur of antiques. By this time I had learned something of his base character from his injured wife. He was unworthy of that noble woman, whom he would have sold for the worst of Salvaterra's seals."

"Where are you taking me?" he demanded in a tone of uneasiness, after we had crossed at least a dozen saloons and corridors. "To the gallery in which the seals have been placed, of course," I returned, irritated at so much caution. "Did you not wish to see them?"

"The count made no answer, except to mutter a curse on the gallery for being in such an inaccessible spot. "However, we reached it at length, and were fortunate enough to find Salvaterra there, with a Dominican friar, who held a delicate camel-hair brush in his hand, and appeared to be assisting the cardinal in dusting his gems."



"But, Your Eminence, This is a Forgery!"

"The next day I learnt that the matter was in the hands of the police, who no longer believed that Vespasian had disappeared of his own accord, but entertained the idea that he had been secretly murdered. A strict investigation was made. Cardinal Salvaterra and the Dominican volunteered their evidence as to the circumstances under which the missing man had left the Vatican, and I added my testimony to theirs."

"For some days the police pursued their inquiries with great zeal, but without throwing any fresh light upon Vespasian's fate. Then an extraordinary change took place in their attitude. They dropped the investigation as suddenly as they had taken it up, and seemed content to let the whole affair sink into oblivion."

"All this time you must not suppose that I suffered any real uneasiness. I was assured of my own integrity towards the missing count, and besides, as an ambassador, my person was of course inviolate. "When, therefore, I learnt of the strange behavior of the Italian authorities, I saw that it was necessary for me to take this matter into my own hands. This was by no means the first investigation of the kind which I had undertaken, as you know. Aided by my past experience, I resolved to set about it in a calm, methodical manner."

"The first step in my investigation was clear before me. It was necessary that I should dismiss for the moment all theories turning on the loss of the seal of Vespasian. All the other circumstances in the case pointed to the fact that Vespasian had some secret enemy in the Vatican, and that this enemy had seized the opportunity of the count's presence to inflict the vengeance which he had evidently dreaded beforehand."

glance at its contents made me turn pale. There, reposing in a place of honor in the center of the other gems, was the onyx engraved with the profile of Vespasian! "It was now for the first time that a light began to break upon my mind. You, who hear only the circumstances which I have been obliged to mention in making my story clear, it has, no doubt, been easy to guess the solution all along. I can only say that till I saw the seal there in its place, as if nothing had happened, not the faintest suspicion of the truth had entered my mind."

"The person who had restored that seal to its place must, of course, be in possession of the secret of Vespasian's fate. And that person could be equally only one man—Cardinal Salvaterra. "At last I began to perceive the manner in which I had been duped. The last I had seen of Vespasian was when he was walking towards the end of the gallery with the seal in his hand, followed by Salvaterra and the Dominican. I had only the cardinal's assurance—his suggestion rather—that the count had ever returned!"

"Stunned by this blow, I turned a glance towards the end wall, which I have already described as being covered with a mirror, which gave a deceptive appearance to the length of the gallery. I started, and gave vent to a stifled cry. This wall was close to, almost touching the case which contained the seals."

"I rubbed my eyes and stared. How, if this were so, could I have seen Vespasian and the two others walk off in that direction? I gazed round distractedly searching for something to enlighten me. I observed the Egyptian statue still in its place, though it, also, now appeared to be standing close up against the end wall. I looked further for the Buddhist idol on its bracket. It was nowhere to be seen! I became positive—yes, the bracket supporting the idol was farther along the wall which I now beheld was a false one, which could be withdrawn at will, leaving space beyond!"

"The trap once closed, no doubt there had been men waiting to rush out and secure the prisoner, while Salvaterra and the Dominican—perhaps a familiar of the holy office—had made their way back by some secret passage. "I made a brief examination of the walls of the gallery, and found what I expected. Immediately behind the Egyptian statue was a panel, which sounded hollow to my knock. It was no doubt opened by a secret spring, and the statue had been placed there to conceal the opening."

"There was no more for me to do in the gallery, and I came away. But I had not yet ascertained Vespasian's ultimate fate. "The evidence was supplied to me almost by accident. On quitting the museum I turned into the grounds of the Vatican, where I had special privileges as an ambassador to the court, and which I had never properly explored. The vast extent of these grounds is well known, and I wandered on idly till I came to what appeared to be a deserted cemetery, hidden in a remote corner. Guided, perhaps, by an intuition, I passed into this little burial ground, in which I had not walked far before I perceived in front of me what had the aspect of a newly-made grave. I stepped hastily forward, and on a small stone which had been placed at the head I read the inscription in Latin: "Pray for the Soul of G. V."

"There could be no longer any doubt. I beheld the tomb of Guilelmo Vespasari! "I went straight to the palace of Cardinal Salvaterra, and requested his Eminence to hear my confession. "At first he seemed to think that I had taken leave of my senses. "But, Signor Ambassador, the members of the Sacred college do not receive confessions," he said with haughtiness. "It is some pious Jesuit to whom you require to go."

"On this occasion it is not so," I responded firmly. "The sin which I have to confess is a very heinous one. I have been guilty of suspecting a prince of the church of a terrible crime. "I saw the cardinal change color. He hesitated for a moment, and then said: "The sin which you have committed is indeed heinous. In this case I agree to hear your confession. "Without waiting for more I commenced, and related the whole affair exactly as I have done to you. The cardinal listened to me in perfect silence. At the close he assigned me a nominal penance, pronounced the usual absolution, and dismissed me. "I came away, with the feeling that I had gained nothing by my bold step. My intention, of course, had been to give him the opportunity of making an explanation. However, I reproached myself without reason. "The next morning an officer of the Noble Guard arrived at the embassy, bearing the pope's command for me to wait upon his holiness forthwith. I was plunged into confusion by this message, which I did not know whether to regard as favorable or the reverse. I could only obey; and as soon as I had exchanged my ordinary dress for my court uniform, I got into the state carriage of the embassy, and drove to the Vatican."

"There I was received, to my astonishment, by Cardinal Salvaterra himself, who greeted me with distinguished cordiality, and conducted me straight into the presence of the pope. "Only those who have had the advantage of being received by the great pontiff, can realize the awe which it was in his power to inspire on such occasions. No other monarch whom I have ever met was capable of such extremes of dignity and urbanity. When it pleased him he could be the most fascinating of companions, at other moments his frown struck like death."

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