

# THE DESPERATE LOVER

By E. Phillips Oppenheim

ILLUSTRATED BY FRANK B. DRUEN

come near the house at all; but, indeed, I meant only to watch from a safe distance; only, as I crouched behind a shrub upon the lawn, I saw her face, and the sight drew me nearer against my better judgment. I met your eyes, and I knew that you were overcome with fright; but I feared to linger lest they might ask what it was that alarmed you, and seek for me. And although I fancy that I am altered past recognition, yet I would run no risks.

"I, too, had a great surprise, Margarita. You will not wonder what I mean by that when I tell you that in the light which streamed from the uncurtained window everything in the room was distinctly visible to me. Was I dreaming, child, or were you indeed assenting to the embrace of the man whose arms were surely around you? Him, I could not see, for his back was turned to the window; but will you laugh at me, I wonder, if I tell you that I felt

"You must surely have sustained a shock at my sudden and rash appearance. Doubtless you wonder at seeing me here at all. I could not keep away; I must have news day by day, almost hour by hour. It is all that keeps me alive. I must be near to feel that I am breathing the same air as the woman on whom a long-delayed vengeance is about to fall.

"I have taken a furnished cottage on the outskirts of this village, and a little more than a mile from Mallory Grange. But do not come to me nearly as I would love to have you talk to me, and hear from your own lips that all goes well, yet at present it were better not. I will devise some means of communication, and let you know of it shortly. I am living here as Mr. Angus. — Yours ever,

"L. M."

"My dear Uncle,—I am a culprit—a miserable, pleading culprit. It is true that I love an Englishman—the

despise me, uncle? Sometimes I feel that I deserve it; but I have suffered, I am suffering now. I am punished. Do not add your anger to my load!

"Immediately you get this, sit down and write to me. Write to me just what is in your heart. Your words I shall set before me as my law. Do not delay, and, if you blame, do not fail to pity me. — Yours ever unchanged,

"Margarita."

"Margarita,—I have received your letter, and I have pondered over it. You are young to have such a sorrow, yet I do not doubt but that you will act as becomes your race. You can never think of marriage with this man; you a Marioni, he a St. Maurice! — Yet I grieve that you have let such a feeling steal into your heart. Pluck it out, Margarita, I charge you; pluck it out by the roots! Think not of the wrong done to me, or, if you do, think of me not as a man and your uncle, but as Count Leonardi di Marioni, the head of my family, the head of your family. We have been the victims, but the day of our vengeance is at hand. There is no life without its sorrows, child! In the days to come, happiness will teach you to forget this one.

"Farewell, my child. I shall send you no more notes. Write or come to me the moment the deed is done! Come to me, if you can; I would hear your own lips tell me the news. Yet do as seems best to you. In sympathy and love,

L. di M.

"One word more, child. Do not for a moment imagine that I blame you for what has happened. Old man though I am, I too know something of the marvels and the vagaries of this same love. Will can have little to do with its course. I, who have suffered so deeply, Margarita, can and do sympathize and feel for you."

## PART IV

"Margarita! You have come at last. It is done, then. Say that it is done!"

She stood quite still in the humble red-tiled sitting-room, and looked at him with a great compassion shining out of her dark, clear eyes. He was worn almost to a shadow, and his limbs were shaking with weakness, as he half rose to greet her. Only his eyes were still alight and burning. Save for them he might have been a corpse.

Something of the old passionate pity swept through her as she stood there, but its fierceness had died away. Her heart leaped no longer in quick response to the fire in those still undimmed eyes. She had been a girl then, a girl with all the fierce untrained nature of her mother's race; she was a woman now, a sad-faced, sorrowful woman. He was quick to see the change.

Still she did not answer. Silently she knelt down by the side of his

strangely jealous of him. I am a foolish old man, Margarita, but all the love of my heart is your, and I had begun almost to look upon you—in my thoughts—as my own child. I cannot bear the thought of giving you up to any one. You will not think me very, very selfish. I have only a few more months to live, and I know that you will not grudge that much out of your future, that you will stay by me to the end. Afterwards, I have no wish save for your happiness; and although I must confess that I had hoped you might have married one of the sons of our own country, still it is you who must choose, and I owe you, or shall owe you soon, too great a debt to press upon you any desire of mine which is not at one with your wishes. But of that I feel already assured, if he be indeed the man to whom your love is given.

man who was standing by my side last night; and it is true that he has asked me to marry him. But I have not told him so, and I have not promised to marry him. That is not all of my confession. Not only is he an Englishman, but his name is Lord Lumley St. Maurice, and he is—her son.

"Now you know the terrible trouble I am in. Last night he was telling me of his love, and assuring me of his mother's sanction and approval, when your face appeared at the window. Can you wonder at my start, and that I fainted? Can you wonder that I sit here, after a sleepless night, with eyes that are dim and a heart that has become a stone? I dread to stir from the room. My position is horrible. I have tried my utmost to avoid him, to treat him with disdain, to send him away from me. I have steeled my heart and clothed my face with frowns—in vain! The bald fact remains that I love him. Do you



armchair and took his withered, delicate hand in hers. A great bowl of white hyacinths stood on a table by the window, and the air was faint with their perfume.

"I am not ill," she said gently. "I was frightened on my way here, and had to run. There was fire last night at the lunatic asylum at Fritton, and some of the mad people have escaped. I saw one of them in the distance, and the keepers after him. They wanted me to go back, but I would come."

He stooped down and kissed her forehead, with cold, dry lips.

"I knew that you would be here soon," he said. "My letters reached you safely?"

"Yes."

She shuddered at the gathering strength in his tone, and the fierce light which had swept into his face.

"It is done, child. Say that it is done!"

"No."

Something in her sad tone and subdued manner seemed to strike a note of fear in his heart. He leaned for-

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