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THE HEART OF ROME

A TALE OF THE "LOST WATER"
THE HEART OF ROME

A Tale of the "Lost Water"

BY

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CHAPTER I

The Baroness Volterra drove to the Palazzo Conti in the heart of Rome at nine o'clock in the morning, to be sure of finding Donna Clementina at home. She had tried twice to telephone, on the previous afternoon, but the central office had answered that "the communication was interrupted." She was very anxious to see Clementina at once, in order to get her support for a new and complicated charity. She only wanted the name, and expected nothing else, for the Conti had very little ready money, though they still lived as if they were rich. This did not matter to their friends, but was a source of constant anxiety to their creditors, and to the good Pompeo Sassi, the steward of the ruined estate. He alone knew what the Conti owed, for none of them knew much about it themselves, though he had done his best to make the state of things clear to them.

The big porter of the palace was sweeping the pavement of the great entrance, as the cab drove in. He wore his working clothes of grey linen with silver buttons bearing the ancient arms of his masters, and his third best gold-laced cap. There was nothing surpris-
ing in this, at such an early hour, and as he was a grave man with a long grey beard that made him look very important, the lady who drove up in the open cab did not notice that he was even more solemn than usual. When she appeared, he gave one more glance at the spot he had been sweeping, and then grounded his broom like a musket, folded his hands on the end of the broomstick and looked at her as if he wondered what on earth had brought her to the palace at that moment, and wished that she would take herself off again as soon as possible.

He did not even lift his cap to her, yet there was nothing rude in his manner. He behaved like a man upon whom some one intrudes when he is in great trouble.

The Baroness was rather more exigent in requiring respect from servants than most princesses of the Holy Roman Empire, for her position in the aristocratic scale was not very well defined.

She was not pleased, and spoke with excessive coldness when she asked if Donna Clementina was at home. The porter stood motionless beside the cab, leaning on his broom. After a pause he said in a rather strange voice that Donna Clementina was certainly in, but that he could not tell whether she were awake or not.

"Please find out," answered the Baroness, with impatience. "I am waiting," she added with an indescribable accent of annoyance and surprise, as if she had never been kept waiting before, in all the fifty years of her more or less fashionable life.
There were speaking-tubes in the porter’s lodge, communicating with each floor of the great Conti palace, but the porter did not move.

"I cannot go upstairs and leave the door," he said. "You can speak to the servant through the tube, I suppose!"

The porter slowly shook his massive head, and his long grey beard wagged from side to side.

"There are no servants upstairs," he said. "There is only the family."

"No servants? Are you crazy?"

"Oh, no!" answered the man meditatively. "I do not think I am mad. The servants all went away last night after dinner, with their belongings. There were only sixteen left, men and women, for I counted them."

"Do you mean to say —" The Baroness stopped in the middle of her question, staring in amazement.

The porter now nodded, as solemnly as he had before shaken his head.

"Yes. This is the end of the house of Conti."

Then he looked at her as if he wished to be questioned, for he knew that she was not really a great lady, and guessed that in spite of her magnificent superiority and coldness she was not above talking to a servant about her friends.

"But they must have somebody," she said. "They must eat, I suppose! Somebody must cook for them. They cannot starve!"

"Who knows? Who knows? Perhaps they will starve."
The porter evidently took a gloomy view of the case.

"But why did the servants go away in a body?" asked the Baroness, descending from her social perch by the inviting ladder of curiosity.

"They never were paid. None of us ever got our wages. For some time the family has paid nobody. The day before yesterday, the telephone company sent a man to take away the instrument. Then the electric light was cut off. When that happens, it is all over."

The man had heard of the phenomenon from a colleague.

"And there is nobody? They have nobody at all?"

The Baroness had always been rich, and was really trying to guess what would happen to people who had no servants.

"There is my wife," said the porter. "But she is old," he added apologetically, "and the palace is big. Can she sweep out three hundred rooms, cook for two families of masters and dress the Princess's hair? She cannot do it."

This was stated with glumly gravity. The Baroness also shook her head in sympathy.

"There were sixteen servants in the house yesterday," continued the porter. "I remember when there were thirty, in the times of the old Prince."

"There would be still, if the family had been wise," said the Baroness severely. "Is your wife upstairs?"

"Who knows where she is?" enquired the porter by way of answer, and with the air of a man who fears