

Valentine West - Secret Agent



by Percy
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THE MISSING SIGNORINA

THE minister motioned Valentine West to a seat, looked at his watch, and from a drawer took a small bundle of papers.

"I was particular about the time, Mr. West, because in half an hour I have to introduce you to a man who will assist you in this business, and I wanted to give you the facts first."

Valentine West was not fond of having assistants thrust upon him, but he did not say so.

"Some months ago a young lady was brought to England and placed at a ladies' college at Cheltenham," the minister went on, consulting the papers in his hand. "Her name was Signorina Contini. She was about eighteen years old, was sent here nominally to learn English—really to get her out of the way. I have not seen her, but I am told she is beautiful, which is possibly true since she appears to be a most disturbing influence in the minds of several people. A week ago she disappeared, and she has got to be found."

West looked surprised.

"More a case for the police than for you, eh?"

"I was thinking so, sir."

"Unfortunately this young woman, although of small importance in herself, the daughter of quite a bourgeois family, I am told, has attracted the attention of a very highly placed person—Count Pietro, of Tuscany. If you are well posted in court knowledge, Mr. West, you will understand that such a marriage for such a person would endanger a dynasty. The young woman was quietly exiled and the affair considered at an end. Now it is ascertained that Count Pietro is not to be found. It is supposed he has come to England, found the lady, and has abducted her from her guardians at Cheltenham. The affair becomes a diplomatic one."

"And she disappeared a week ago," said West.

"Over a week ago."

"Then they are probably out of the country."

"The ports have been watched," said the minister. "There is every reason to think they are in England, waiting probably until our vigilance has slackened. The necessity for keeping the matter as quiet as possible to

prevent diplomatic complications, of course, increases our difficulty. Yesterday I had a visit from an Italian detective who has been instructed to act with us. He is one of two sent over, and knows both the count and the lady. He is coming here to be introduced to you this morning. You see the affair is considered serious. Anything in the nature of a morganatic marriage is abhorrent to the count, I understand, and rather than be separated from this girl he would renounce his rights."

"Will catching them prevent his doing so?" asked West.

"That is hardly our affair. We have to catch them since they are in this country. Afterward their own people must deal with them. Are there any points you wish to raise before I have this man in? I expect he is waiting."

"Is it known when the count disappeared?" West asked.

"I believe not. He was supposed to be at some shooting-box but was not there. He may have set out on this scheme a month ago."

"Is there any proof that he is in England?"

"Nothing definite, as far as I know." answered the minister.

"The conclusion is jumped to, I take it, merely because the girl is here?" said West.

"I imagine that is the case."

"One more question, sir: Have you any reason to suppose that the Italian Government is using this affair to make a catspaw of us in some other direction?"

"Such a possibility has not occurred to me," said the minister.

"You have no knowledge of any state affair which might lead you to think such an idea possible?"

"No," the minister answered after a pause. "What exactly is in your mind, Mr. West?"

"Nothing definite, sir. I am merely trying to look at the problem from different angles."

"I do not wish to influence you in any way," the minister said, "but, remember, you

have a woman to deal with. Clever enough to entangle the count, she may be clever enough to slip out of this difficulty. I should remember the woman rather than the count, West."

West smiled as the minister rang his bell. It was well known that he distrusted women, and had once publicly declared that in every diplomatic difficulty the rustle of a petticoat was to be heard. The comic papers had not allowed him to forget the statement.

The Italian detective was ushered into the room, a vigorous man, quick in movement, mobile in face.

"Signor Lucchesi, this is Mr. Valentine West," said the minister. "Mr. West is in possession of the main facts of this delicate problem, and is aware that publicity in the matter is most undesirable. Between you, I trust, a speedy solution will be found."

"I cannot doubt it," said Lucchesi, bowing to West. "I rejoice at the association. I have heard of Signor West."

They left the minister's room together, and at West's suggestion went to a nearby restaurant to lunch. The sooner they became acquainted and understood each other the better.

"It is an affair of state," said the Italian; "most important and secret. You are aware I have a colleague helping me?"

"The minister told me so."

"Ricci—that is his name—Ricci is a young man of promise. He has not my experience, but he knows your London better than I do. He is at this moment searching in your Italian quarter. I hold—and Ricci is of like opinion—that one man has not carried this scheme through by himself. He has had helpers who have been well paid, probably. It is as well to see if there are any in the Italian quarter who are making the money fly. You agree, Signor West?"

"A clue might be found that way—certainly."

"We labor under great disadvantage," the Italian went on. "We may not be public. If we might, the thing would be easy. Count Pietro is a striking man, not easily passed by unnoticed, and the girl—you shall see. I have not a portrait of the count, but of the *signorina*—yes. Look! It is a face to stand out from the crowd, is it not?"

He took a photograph from his pocket and passed it to West—the picture of a girl, very dark, with large eyes, appealing and seductive. From the photograph West would not have pronounced her a beautiful woman, but her coloring might be brilliant; and, besides, an Italian's idea of beauty would probably not coincide with an Englishman's.

"She looks more than eighteen," he said.

"In the south we mature earlier than you do here," was the answer. "She is tall, has a bearing above her station, and has a reputation for beauty. If we could publish that portrait in your papers it might be easy to find her. People would have seen her and would give information. Only we must not make a public case of it. That is forbidden."

West studied the photograph for a few moments, then handed it back.

"There are one or two possibilities which you do not seem to have considered," said West; "at least they occur to me. Of course you may have information which makes them impossible. First, your government may be responsible for the disappearance of the *signorina* with the idea of making it impossible for the count to find her. The government may have become aware there was a chance of his doing so and taken prompt action."

"That is not possible," was the answer.

"It is marvelous what things are possible to a government—any government," said West with a smile.

"It is not so in this case. Should I be here with Ricci? We are here for the government secretly. Our instructions were most precise. I

do not know how it may be here, but with us it is impossible."

"We'll rule out that idea, then," said West. "My other idea is that the disappearance has nothing to do with the count at all, and is the result of some other intrigue altogether. The count, I take it, is pretty much like other men, and is young enough to love easily and forget, and the lady may also have grown tired."

"Ah, you do not know us, *signore!* Love is a grand passion with us. You do not know Count Pietro. He is not at all the man you imagine. He is determined, unreasoning, will allow nothing to stand in his way, sees obstacles only to overcome them. There is no doubt this affair is the count's." And then the Italian swore and roundly abused Pietro of Tuscany.

"You do not like him, evidently," said West.

"No."

"He has done you some injury, perhaps?"

"Perhaps."

"Surely, surely, he did not rob you of the *signorina*?" said West, wondering if he had touched the key-note of the mystery.

"Ah, no!" said the Italian. "There is a lady at Pisa. He has not robbed me of love, this count. I say no more, only this: I am glad to be employed on this business—glad that I shall help to bring his plan to ruin."

"We have not begun to succeed yet," said West.

"But to-night we begin," was the answer. "I expect Ricci to have information. Shall we meet to-night, *signore?* We are in rooms, Ricci and I, in Shaftesbury Avenue, a poor place, but we did not wish to attract attention. I am known to the count. I have no wish that he should know I am in London. Will you visit us to-night? It is better than meeting publicly, and you are not likely to be watched, as we might be. We can listen to what Ricci has to say and then we can act. I have my theory already. We shall see whether it fits

with what Ricci will tell us.”

“Certainly I will be with you. At present I confess I am without any conviction.”

For a man so hopelessly at fault, as he confessed to be, Valentine West spent a thoughtful afternoon, smoked innumerable cigarettes, and was annoyed that Cheltenham was too far off to visit before keeping his appointment. There were one or two leading questions he would like to have asked at the school from which the *signorina* had fled. He would go down and ask them to-morrow, perhaps. Some one must have connived at her escape or she had been badly guarded.

The minister’s warning to remember he had a woman to deal with recurred to him. The *signorina* might be exceptionally clever, but, if so, her photograph did not do her justice. Arguing along this line, he was inclined to credit the count with the cleverness. Lucchesi seemed to be of his opinion and had evidently formed a theory. He had scouted the idea of the count having nothing to do with the affair. Why? It was surely an idea worth consideration since there was not a shred of evidence that Pietro of Tuscany was in this country. For some reason the Italian detective had a down on the count, and, although he had denied that love had anything to do with it, West preserved an open mind on the point. He thought the lady of Pisa might be compared to a red herring drawn across the trail.

“How should you go to work if you wanted to steal a young lady from school?” he asked Amos when he brought him his tea.

“See a doctor, sir.”

“What for?”

“To find out what was the matter with me.”

“Haven’t you any imagination, Amos?”

“Can’t imagine myself wanting to do a thing like that, sir.”

“It has been done, Amos, and I have to find the lady. I may want your assistance.

Dinner at seven sharp to-night.”

At eight o’clock Valentine West presented himself at the lodgings in Shaftesbury Avenue, rooms over a small shop where foreign newspapers were sold. Lucchesi greeted him warmly.

“My theory fits,” he said. “Come in. You shall hear what Ricci has to tell.”

Ricci was a youth, evidently artistic in temperament. He looked more like a violinist in a cheap orchestra than a sleuth after crime until he began to talk, and then his shrewdness was manifest. He was a little theatrical in his manner, from an Englishman’s point of view, at any rate, but he was undoubtedly clever. He was enthusiastic about his work.

“I give you details, Signor West,” he said, breaking off in the middle of his narrative, “because, well, because I am Italian. You are English, and I like you to know what an Italian can do. It is pride. Is it wrong?”

“I am astonished at your insight,” West answered. “It makes me feel rather old-fashioned.”

“Ah, no, it is only that we have different methods, that is all; sometimes yours are best, sometimes ours. In this case we are dealing with Italians, so perhaps ours are the best. We understand more the working of the count’s mind.”

“You are convinced he is at the bottom of this affair?”

“Assuredly.”

“You feel certain you have not been deceived by your countrymen in the Italian quarter?”

“I can always tell a lie. I can see it coming.”

Ricci’s information gleaned from compatriots in the Italian quarter was complete and conclusive. Exactly how the escape from the school had been managed they did not know, but it was certain that Count Pietro had planned it. Ricci had discovered two Italians, Neapolitans,

entertaining friends very free with their money. Only a few months ago they had fled from Italy to escape the police. They would do anything for pay, and the count had employed them, chiefly to act as spies for him. Through them he had discovered that he was watched, that to come out of his hiding-place was dangerous, that to attempt to leave the country in the ordinary way was doomed to failure. He had the *signorina*, but they were virtual prisoners.

"But not now," said West. "These men were spending their money. They had been paid, therefore the count has moved. Is that so?"

"It is," said Lucchesi excitedly. "It was my theory. I told you to-day I had a theory. He would hide in London with the *signorina* until the watchfulness had slackened, or until he could arrange some other way of escape. He has arranged another way. A friend—I am not sure but I think he is a naturalized German, though his name is English—has put a yacht at his disposal. It is an English yacht, you see. There will be no difficulty on that score. It is lying off Bognor. The count goes tonight. We must reach Bognor before he does."

"He is quite likely to be stopped at the station," said West. "I believe a sharp lookout is being kept for him by the local authorities."

"*Signore*, no one knows that better than the count. His spies have done their work quite well. He is not to start from any of your London stations. He will go a roundabout way. We can easily be before him."

"I should think so," said West. "A late train should get us there in time."

"He will not arrive until to-morrow, so Ricci learned. Is it not so?"

Ricci nodded.

"We shall be first," Lucchesi said. "We go and wait for him on board. I shall be able to laugh at Pietro of Tuscany."

"I think I hear hatred in your voice," said West, and, turning to Ricci, he asked: "Am I

not right? Does he not hate the count?"

"Just as I do," was the answer, with a little hiss which surprised West considerably. It was indicative of hate far deeper than Lucchesi's. West was puzzled. Were these two engaged in a quest—a vendetta? He looked from one to the other.

Lucchesi laughed.

"We are good haters and good lovers, too, in the south," he said. "It is our temperament—a little difficult for you to comprehend. You are so cold in England."

"I was wondering whether I should find myself obliged to protect the count against you two."

"Ah, you have imagination, you English. Ours is not hatred of that sort—only the kind that will make us laugh at him."

"I'm glad of that. Have you a timetable?"

"Your Bradshaw which I cannot understand."

"I am not quite sure we are wise," said Ricci. "Because I threatened them, and paid them, these Neapolitans told me the truth, but for more pay they will serve others against us. It is possible they may warn the count if they watch us and see us leave for Bognor. I hate Pietro of Tuscany, but I do not deny his cleverness. He might have arranged something with them. No, I do not like leaving openly in this way."

"There is something in what Ricci says," Lucchesi remarked thoughtfully.

"Much," said West. "We will motor to Bognor. Where is the nearest telephone, I wonder?"

"In the shop down-stairs."

Lucchesi and West went down together, and West phoned to a garage after looking up the number in the directory.

"A good car and a reliable chauffeur for a long distance run. That ought to bring us what we want," West said, replacing the receiver. "I did not say where we were going. It is as well to be careful."

"You think of everything, *signore*."

"No, no, only of some things. Our success, if we are successful, will be due to your colleague, Ricci."

"How can we fail?"

"When I am most confident I am most careful," said West. "We have a proverb about not cooking your hare before you have caught him."

"Ah, we cannot fail now!"

"I hope not."

"While we wait for the car we will drink to our success. We have Chianti. Our wines do not travel well. They are not here as they are in Italy, but something of the native perfume remains in the bottle I shall open. Ah, I know a wine you may drink on the hills overlooking Vallombrosa. Sunshine, *signore* liquid sunshine."

The night was fine. The motor was longer in coming than they expected, the chauffeur explaining that a car fitted for the journey was not in the garage when the message arrived. This car would do the distance well in the time, he said, and he knew the road. As it happened the car did not behave as well as he prophesied. Halfway through the journey the engine began to work badly, and there was considerable delay while the chauffeur, with West's assistance, attended to it. So long as they arrived early in the morning the Italian detectives were not anxious. They were confident the count would not reach the yacht until later in the day. West, on the other hand, showed considerable annoyance. He cursed the car and the chauffeur and the garage which had supplied them, and was not to be appeased by Lucchesi when the car had been persuaded to run decently again.

They reached the outskirts of Bognor after daybreak. It promised to be a fine, breezy day. They had decided not to drive on to the front; they did not want to attract attention.

"You better get some breakfast and come back for us here," West said to the chauffeur.

"Yes, sir. At what time?"

"Midday," Lucchesi suggested. "We ought to be through with the business by then."

They walked through the still-sleeping town to the sea.

"We have not been deceived," said Ricci, pointing to the yacht lying out some little distance from the shore, a pleasure schooner built for cruising her graceful lines suggesting a speedy craft.

They chartered an early boatman to row them out; and early as it was the yacht was evidently awake, for, as the boat approached, two or three men came to the bulwarks to watch their coming—rather astonished at the appearance of the very early visitor.

"The count is not on board," said Lucchesi. "They look surprised; they do not expect him so early."

"I am not so sure of that," said West. "They look as if they were all ready to sail."

"But that is natural, isn't it? They are ready to go directly he comes. You are pessimistic, my friend."

The boatman remarked that it looked as if she were going out with this tide.

"When did she arrive?" West eagerly asked.

"The day before yesterday."

As they came alongside the skipper appeared.

"Hello! What is it? Who are you?"

"Detectives," said Lucchesi. "We want Count Lucchesi, of Tuscany."

"There's no person of that name about here."

"There will be," said West. "We have authority to search."

"I'm not going to stop you," said the skipper. "We're not nervous of the law on this craft. If you're going to wait for this count you talk about, you can send your boat back. I'll send you ashore when you get tired of waiting."

"We may have to wait some time,"

Lucchesi whispered to West.

Ricci was more prompt with a decision.

"Thanks!" he said, tossing the boatman a coin. "We shall not want your services any more."

The skipper smiled as they came on deck, looked at them critically, and suggested going to the saloon cabin.

"I do not doubt your authority," he said, "but it is as well I should see it."

Valentine glanced quickly round him and nodded his approval. He followed Lucchesi and Ricci into the cabin, and the instant he was inside was seized from behind so effectually that any successful struggle was impossible. A hand was slipped into his pocket and his revolver neatly taken from him. Then he was released. He looked sharply at his companions who stood by the table. No one had touched them. At that moment there was the sound of movement on deck, the strain of cordage and the rattle of the anchor-chain. They were evidently getting underway.

"What does this mean?" he demanded.

Lucchesi laughed.

"A little trickery, *Signor* West, a little successful trickery. I am Pietro, of Tuscany, and my colleague, Ricci, is the *Signorina* Contini. It is a pity she should have been obliged to sacrifice her beautiful hair for this enterprise, but it was necessary, and the hair will grow again."

Ricci smiled and put his hand into the count's.

"It is an outrage," said West quietly.

"Sit down, *signore*, and let us talk of this," Lucchesi said. "Be frank and admit there was to begin with an outrage against us—the separation of lovers.

"Scheming must be met by scheming. I stole the *signorina* from her prison at Cheltenham, but we were still prisoners. Your government was warned. We could not get away. The ports were closed against us—keen eyes were probably on the lookout for us

everywhere. Any Italian man and woman traveling together would be suspected. So we planned that the government itself should help our escape. I applied to your foreign minister, as an Italian detective, for help in our search. You joined us. With you we could go anywhere. You knew we were detectives. I showed you a photograph to mislead you. It was not of the *signorina*, as you can see. Naturally Ricci did not go to the Italian quarter. She remained in our rooms, hiding, but you must confess she played her part well. Yet, even with you, we were afraid of the trains. Again the *signorina* persuaded you cleverly and you decided a car was best. Perhaps, as we are, as two men, we might have come alone to join the yacht, but I was afraid. The risk was too great. Questions might be asked, and we could not afford to be questioned. *Signore*, I shall presently have the pleasure of presenting you to the *signorina* in her true character. We have started for Spain, and it is necessary you go with us."

"It should not be a great hardship." The girl laughed.

"*Signorina*, I congratulate you on your cleverness," said West.

"We have beaten you, that makes us very proud. You see, I do not hate the count as much as I pretended. That deceived you, is it not so?"

"It did."

"And confess, *signore*, you rather sympathize with us."

"Upon my word, I believe I do," said West, "but you must remember that a man in my position must not let his sympathy prevent him doing his duty."

"Ah, but you cannot always win. You have done your best."

Later in the morning, under a fresh breeze, the schooner was dancing forth upon her journey when a smudge on the horizon quickly resolved itself into a gunboat coming at a tremendous pace. The skipper looked at

her through his glasses, then handed them to the count, and glanced at Valentine West.

"A gunboat," said the count; and then in a different tone, he exclaimed: "A gunboat! It means that you—you—"

"Don't be reckless, count," West said quietly. "You may have the will and the power to settle with me, but that boat knows I am on board this yacht, and if I were not found here you would find explanations exceedingly awkward."

"You have betrayed us!" said the girl.

"Unfortunately it was my duty. I am rather sorry."

"Sorry!" Had it not been for the intervention of the skipper the count might have had awkward explanations to give. There was a knife in his hand, and he had meant to use it.

There were a few moments of tense silence, during which the skipper had taken the knife and the gunboat had come nearer.

"But when did you know?" the girl asked.

"I was suspicious from the moment I saw the photograph. She was not beautiful, and she was much more than eighteen. I was not sure, of course, but I made arrangements with my chauffeur. He drove us to Bognor in my car. By my instructions he was waiting at that garage, but I was careful not to know the telephone number, count. I looked it up in case you might suspect me. I was a little surprised when Ricci showed such hatred for

the count and wondered whether I was making a mistake. It was excellent acting, *signorina*. I had an understanding with my man. He was late in coming on purpose, the car broke down on purpose, so that we should not be here too soon, and when I told him to have breakfast and wait for us, it meant that he was to get into communication with the authorities. You see he has done so."

"But why—why not stop us before this?" the count burst out. "Why let us think we had succeeded and then—then this?"

"For two reasons, count. I wanted to do my job thoroughly and see who was helping you, and had I shown my hand sooner there might have been no one at hand to stop you using your knife. I could not tell what kind of man I had to deal with, nor how many from the Italian quarter he might not have in his pay."

The skipper was shouting orders, the sails flapped. The gunboat had ordered them to stop.

It was late when Valentine West got back to Bruton Street that night.

"Did you find the lady, sir?" Amos asked.

"Yes."

"That's good."

"I almost wish I had failed," said West. "Love is a wonderful thing, Amos!"

"So I've heard, sir." And Amos Free went out of the room, closing the door softly behind him.