

A RUN WITH ROSALIE

William Le Queux

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SEVERAL months had elapsed since my adventure with "Valentine of the Beautiful Eyes."

From Germany Count Bindo di Ferraris had sent me with the car right across Europe to Florence, where, at Nenci's the builders of motor-bodies, I, in obedience to orders, had it repainted a bright yellow — almost the colour of mustard.

When, a fortnight later, it came out of the Nenci works, I hardly recognised it. At Bindo's orders I had had a second body built, one made of wicker, and lined inside with glazed white leather, which, when fixed upon the chassis, completely transformed it. This second body I sent by rail down to Leghorn, and then drove the car along the Arno valley, down to the sea-shore.

My orders were to go to the Palace Hotel at Leghorn, and there await my master. The hotel in question was, I found, one of the best in Italy, filled by the smartest crowd of men and women mostly of the Italian aristocracy, who went there for the magnificent sea-bathing. It was a huge white building, with many balconies, and striped awnings, facing the blue Mediterranean.

Valentine had travelled with me as far as Milan, while he had taken train, I believe, to Berlin. At Milan, my pretty companion had wished me adieu, and a month later I had taken up my residence in Leghorn, and there led an idle life, wondering when I was to hear next from Bindo. Before we parted he gave me a fairly large sum of money, and told me to remain at Leghorn until he joined me.

Weeks passed. Leghorn in summer is the Brighton of Italy, and everything there was delightfully gay. In the garage of the hotel were many cars, but not one so good as our 40-h.p. "Napier." The Italians all admired it and on several occasions I took motoring enthusiasts of both sexes out for short runs along the old Maremma sea-road.

The life I led was one of idleness, punctuated by little flirtations, for by Bindo's order I was staying at the Palace as owner of the car, and not as a mere chauffeur. The daughters of Italian countesses and marchionesses, though brought up so strictly, are always eager for flirtation, and so as I sat alone at my table in the big *salle-à-manger* I caught many a glance from black eyes that danced with merry mischievousness.

Valentine, when she left me in Milan, had said, laughingly:

"I may rejoin you again ere long, M'sieur Ewart, but not as your pretended wife, as at Brussels."

"I hope not, Mademoiselle," I had answered quite frankly. "That game is a little too dangerous. I might really fall in love with you."

"With me?" she cried, holding up her small hands in a quick gesture. "What an idea! Oh! la la! Jamais."

I smiled. Mademoiselle was extremely beautiful. No woman I had ever met possessed such wonderful eyes as hers.

"Au revoir, mon cher," she said. "And a pleasant time to you till we meet again." Then as I mounted on the car and traversed the big Piazza del Duomo, before the Cathedral, she waved her hand to me in farewell.

It was, therefore, without surprise that, sitting in the hall of the hotel about five o'clock one afternoon I watched her in an elegant white gown descending the stairs followed by a neat French maid in black.

Quickly I sprang up, bowed, and greeted her in French before a dozen or so of the idling guests.

As we walked across to Pancaldi's baths she told her new maid to go on in front, and in a few quick words explained.

"I arrived direct from Paris this morning. Here, I am the Princess Helen of Dornbach-Laxenburg of the Ringstrasse, in Vienna, the Schloss Kirchbüchl, on the Drave, and Avenue des Champs Elysées, Paris, a Frenchwoman married to an Austrian. My husband, a man much older than myself, will arrive here in a few days."

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"And the maid?"

"She knows nothing to the contrary. She has been with me only a fortnight. Now you must speak of me in the hotel. Say that you knew me well at Monte Carlo, Rome, Carlsbad, and Aix; that you have stayed at Kirchbüchl, and have dined at our house in Paris. Talk of our enormous wealth and all that, and to-morrow invite me for a run on the car."

"Very well — Princess," I laughed. "But what's the new scheme — eh?"

"At present nothing has been definitely settled. I expect Bindo in a few days, but he will appear to us as a stranger — a complete stranger. At present all I wish to do is to create a sensation you understand. A foreign princess is always popular at once, and I believe my arrival is already known all over the hotel. But it is you who will help me, M'sieur Ewart. You are the wealthy Englishman who is here with his motor-car and who is one of my intimate friends — you understand?"

"Well," I said with some hesitation. "Don't you think that all this kind of thing is very risky? Candidly, I expect before very long we shall all find ourselves under arrest."

She laughed heartily at my fears.

"But, in any case, you would not suffer. You are simply Ewart, the Count's chauffeur."

"I know. But at this moment I'm posing here as the owner of the car, and living upon part of the proceeds of that little transaction in the train between Brussels and the German frontier."

"Ah, mon cher! Never recall the past. It is such a very bad habit. Live for the future; and let the past take care of itself. Just remain perfectly confident that you run no risk in this present affair."

"What's your maid's name?"

"Rosalie Barlet."

"And she knows nothing?"

"Absolutely nothing."

I watched the neat-waisted figure in black walking a little distance ahead of us. She was typically Parisienne, with Louis XV. shoes, and a glimpse of smart lingerie as she lifted her skirt daintily. Rather good-looking she was, too, but with a face as bony as most of the women of Paris, and a complexion slightly sallow.

By this time we had arrived at the entrance to the baths, where, on the asphalt promenade, built out into the clear crystal Mediterranean, all smart Leghorn was sitting in chairs, and gossiping beneath the awnings, as Italians love to do.

Pancaldi's is essentially Italian. English, French, or German visitors are rarely if ever seen, therefore the advent of the Princess, news of whose arrival had spread from mouth to mouth but an hour ago, caused a perceptible flutter among the lounging idlers of both sexes.

My companion was, I saw, admired on every hand, while surprise was being expressed that I should turn out to be a friend of so very distinguished a person.

In the brilliant sundown, with just a refreshing breath of air coming across the glassy sea, we sat watching the antics of the swimmers and the general merriment in the water. I lit a cigarette and gossiped with her in French, ostentatiously emphasising the words "your Highness" when I addressed her, for the benefit of those passing and re-passing behind us.

For an hour she remained, and then returning to the hotel, dressed, and dined. As she sat with me at table that night in the handsome restaurant, she looked superb, in pale turquoise chiffon, with a single row of diamonds around her throat. Paste they were, of course, but none of the women who sat with their eyes upon her even dreamed that they were anything but the family jewels of the princely house of Dornbach-Laxenburg. Her manner and bearing were distinctly that of a patrician, and I saw that all in the hotel were dying to know her.

Yes. Her Highness was already a great success.

About ten o'clock she put on a wrap and, as is usual with the guests at the Palace at Leghorn, we went for a brief stroll along the promenade.

As soon as we were entirely alone she said:

"To-morrow you will take me for a run on the car, and the next day you will introduce me to one or two of the best people. I will discover who are the proper persons for me to know. I shall say that you are George Ewart, eldest son of a member of the English Parliament, and well known in London — eh?"

As we were walking in the shadow through the small leafy public garden lying between the roadway and the

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sea we suddenly encountered the figure of a young woman who, in passing, saluted my companion with deep respect. It was Rosalie.

"She's wandering here alone, and watching for me to re-enter the hotel," remarked Valentine. "But she need not follow me like this, I think."

"No," I said. "Somehow, I don't like that girl."

"Why not? She's all right. What more natural than she should be on the spot to receive me when I come in?"

"But you don't want to be spied upon like this, surely!" I said resentfully. "Have you done anything to arouse her suspicions that you are not — well, not exactly what you pretend yourself to be?"

"Nothing whatever; I have been a model of discretion. She never even went to the Avenue Kléber. I was staying for two nights at the Grand — under my present title — and after engaging her I told her that the house in the Avenue des Champs Elysées was in the hands of decorators."

"Well, I don't half like her following us. She may have overheard something of what we've just been saying — who knows?"

"Rubbish! Ah! mon cher ami, you are always scenting danger where there is none."

I merely shrugged my shoulders, but my opinion remained. There was something mysterious about Rosalie — what it was I could not make out.

At ten o'clock next morning her Highness met me in the big marble hall of the hotel, dressed in the smartest motor-clothes, with a silk dust-coat and the latest invention in veils — pale blue with long ends twisted several times around her throat. Even in that costume she looked dainty and extremely charming.

I, too, was altered in a manner that certainly disguised my true calling; and when I brought the car round to the front steps, quite a crowd of visitors gathered to see her climb to the seat beside me, wrap the lug around her skirts, and start away.

With a deep blast on the horn I swept out of the hotel grounds to the left, and a few moments later we were heading away along the broad sea-road through the pretty villages of Ardenza and Antignano, out into that wild open country that lies between Leghorn and the wide deadly marshes of the fever-stricken Maremma. The road we were travelling was the old road to Rome, for two hundred miles along it — a desolate, dreary and uninhabited way — lay the Eternal City. Over that self-same road on the top of the brown rocks the conquering Roman legions marched to Gaul, and war-chariots once ran where now sped motor-cars. Out there in those great solitudes through which we were passing nothing has changed since the days of Nero and of the Cæsars.

Twenty-five miles into the country we ran, and then pulled up to smoke and chat. She was fond of a cigarette, and joined me, laughing merrily at the manner in which we were so completely deceiving the gay world of Leghorn. The local papers that morning had announced that her Highness the Princess Helen of Dornbach-Laxenburg, one of the most beautiful women in Europe, had "descended" at the Palace Hotel, and had been seen at Pancaldi's later in the afternoon.

"As soon as I came down this morning I was pounced upon for information," I explained. "A young Italian Marquis, who has hitherto snubbed me, begged that I would tell him something concerning her Highness. He is deeply smitten with your beauty, that's very evident," I laughed.

"My beauty! You are really incorrigible, M'sieur Ewart," she answered reprovingly, as she blew the tobacco-smoke from her lips. "And what, pray, is the name of this admirer?"

"The Marquis of Rapallo — the usual hard-up but well-dressed elegant, you know. He wears two fresh suits of white linen a day, with socks to match his ties. Last night he sat at the table next to us, and couldn't keep his eyes off you — a rather short fellow with a little black moustache turned upwards."

"Ah, yes, I recollect," she replied, and then I thought that her countenance changed. "And so he's been inquiring about me? Well, let's run back to déjeuner — or collazione, as they call it here in Italy, I believe."

An hour later we drew up again at the hotel, and her Highness disappeared within. Then, after I had taken the car to the garage in the rear, and entered the hotel myself, I quickly became surrounded by people who wanted introductions to my charming acquaintance, and to whom I romanced about her wealth, her position, and her home surroundings.

On the following day Valentine allowed me to introduce her to four persons — an Italian marchioness who moved in the most exclusive Roman set, the wife of a Sicilian Duke, the wife of Jacobi, the wealthy Jew banker of Turin, and a Captain of Bersaglieri.

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One night a lonely but well-dressed stranger entered the restaurant and seated himself in a corner almost unnoticed, save by Valentine and myself. The newcomer was the audacious Bindo, passing as Mr. Bellingham, an Englishman, but he gave us no sign of recognition. Indeed, the days went on, but he never approached either of us. He simply idled about the hotel, or across at Pancaldi's, having picked up one or two acquaintances, kindred spirits in the art of graceful idling. He never even wrote me a note.

Some deep game was in progress, but its nature I was entirely unable to gather.

Now, truth to tell, I experienced a growing uneasiness concerning Rosalie. To me, she was always the modest maid devoted to her Highness, and yet I thought I once detected a glance of mischief in her dark eyes. Determined to discover all I could, I at once commenced a violent flirtation with her, unknown, of course, to Valentine.

Mademoiselle seemed flattered by the attentions of one whom she believed to be an English gentleman. Therefore I met her out one evening and took her for a long walk, pretending to be deeply smitten by her charms. From the first moment I began to talk with her I saw that she was not the shallow giddy girl I had believed her to be. She, no doubt appreciated my attentions, for I took her to a café on the opposite side of the town where we should not be recognised, and there we sat a long time chatting. She seemed extremely curious to know who I really was, yet the queries she put to me were just a trifle blundering. They betrayed an earnest desire to know more than I intended that she should know.

"I wish her Highness would go back to Aix-les-Bains, or to Vichy, or to Luchon. I'm tired of this wretched hole where I know nobody," she complained presently. "I had quite sufficient of Italy when I was with the Duchess of Pandolfini. I did not know we were coming here, otherwise I should not have accepted the engagement, and yet — well, the Princess is very kind and considerate."

"She certainly is to her friends, and I hope the same to her servants," I said; and then we rose to walk back, for it was nearly eleven, and her Highness, who had gone to the Opera with two of the ladies to whom I had introduced her, would soon be due back, and the dainty Rosalie must be there to receive her.

On our walk across the town I flattered her, pretending to be her devoted admirer, but when I left her I felt more convinced than ever upon three points — namely, that she was much older than twenty-two, as she had declared, that she was unduly inquisitive; and that she certainly was no fool.

That night I sent my master a note to his room warning him to be wary of her, and on the following morning I told her Highness my suspicions.

From that moment I made it my object in life to keep a watchful eye upon the new French maid. Each evening after her services were no longer required she went forth alone and wandered idly up and down the esplanade. Sometimes she walked out to Ardenza, a village a mile and a half distant, halted always at the same stone seat in the little public garden and then strolled back again, in blissful ignorance of being so closely watched.

If Rosalie had any suspicion that Valentine was not the Princess Helen, then there was, I foresaw, a grave and constant danger. And I, for one, did not intend to run any further risk.

Her Highness had been in Leghorn just over three weeks, and had become intensely popular everywhere, being invited to the houses of many of the principal residents, when one night an incident occurred which afforded me grave food for reflection.

Just after ten o'clock at night I had followed Rosalie along by the sea to Ardenza, where she was sitting alone upon her usual seat in a secluded spot, at the edge of the public garden on a kind of small promontory that ran in a semi-circle out to the sea. Behind her was a dark thicket of azaleas, and in front the calm moonlit Mediterranean.

I was standing back in the shadow at a spot where I had often stood before when, after about five minutes, I saw the tall dark figure of a man in a grey deer-stalker hat join her, and sit down unceremoniously at her side.

As soon as they met she began to tell him some long story, to which the stranger listened without comment. Then he seemed to question her closely, and they remained together fully a quarter of an hour, until at last they rose and parted, she walking calmly back to the hotel.

Was it possible that the dainty Rosalie was a spy?

When I got half way back to the Palace I regretted deeply that I had not followed the stranger and ascertained whom he might be. Next day I told Valentine, but she merely smiled, saying that Rosalie could know nothing, and the fellow was probably some secret lover. The next night, and the next, I watched, until, on the third evening, they met again at the same time and place, and on that occasion I followed the mysterious stranger. He was a thin, cadaverous-looking Frenchman, hollow-cheeked, rather shabbily dressed, and wore pince-nez. I watched him

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back into the town and lingered near him in a café until nearly one o'clock, when he entered his quarters at an uninviting, unfashionable and animating hotel, the "Falcon," in the Via Vittorio. From the manner he had treated her I judged him to be a relation, probably her uncle. Yet why she should meet him clandestinely was an utter mystery.

In order still to keep watch upon the maid I made a fervent protest of affection, and frequently met her between the dinner hour and midnight. Through all this time, however, Bindo never gave a sign, even in secret, that he was acquainted with Valentine or myself, and this very fact in itself aroused my suspicions that he knew our movements were being closely watched.

Meanwhile, Princess Helen, who had become the most popular figure in Leghorn, and had given her patronage to several functions in the cause of charity, went out a great deal, and I accompanied her very frequently to the best houses.

"Poor Bindo is having a pretty quiet time, I fear," she laughed to me one day in her easy irresponsible way. "He is lying low."

"Waiting for the coup — eh?"

She smiled, but would, even then, tell me nothing.

Among the most devoted of her admirers was the Jew banker of Turin, named Jacobi, and his wife, a stout, vulgar, over-dressed person, who was constantly dancing attendance upon her "dear Princess," as she called her. Valentine rather liked her, or pretended to, for on several occasions she lent her Rosalie to dress her hair. Jacobi himself was, it seemed on friendly terms with Bindo. Sometimes I saw the pair strolling together at Pancaldi's, and once the young Marquis of Rapallo was with them.

One hot, stifling night, a brilliant ball was held, arranged at the Princess's instigation, in the cause of charity. All the smart world attended, and dancing was almost at an end when Bindo met me alone out upon one of the balconies.

"Go and change at once," he whispered. "Take the car out of the town beyond the railway-station, a little way on the Pisa road. There wait, but attract no attention." And the next instant he had re-entered the ball-room, and was making his most elegant bow over a lady's hand.

Wondering what was the nature of the coup, I presently slipped away to my room, but as I walked along the corridor I felt almost certain that I saw Rosalie's black skirts flouncing round the corner. It was as though I had discovered her on the wrong floor, and that she had tried to escape me. The movements of that girl were so constantly suspicious.

I threw off my evening-clothes, and putting on a rough suit, an overcoat, and motor cap, went down the back staircase and along to the garage, where, amid the coming and going of the cars, of departing guests, I was able to run out without being noticed.

Ten minutes later I was outside the town, and drawing up in the dark lonely road that leads across the plain for fifteen miles to quaint old Pisa, I got down and examined my tyres, pretending I had a puncture should anyone become too inquisitive. Glancing at my watch I found it was already twenty minutes to two. The moon was overcast, and the atmosphere stifling and oppressive, precursory of a thunderstorm.

Each minute seemed an hour. Indeed I grew so nervous that I felt half-inclined to escape upon the car. Yet if I left that spot I might leave my audacious friend in the lurch, and in peril of arrest most likely.

It was close upon half-past two, as nearly as I could judge, when I heard a quick footstep in the road. I took off one of the acetylene head-lamps of the car and turned it in that direction in order to ascertain who was coming along.

A woman in a dark stiff dress and wearing a veil approached quickly. A moment later, to my mingled surprise and dismay, I saw it was none other than the dainty Rosalie herself, in a very admirable disguise, which gave her an appearance of being double her age.

"Ah! Monsieur!" she gasped, quite out of breath from walking so rapidly. "Drive me at once to Pisa. Don't lose a single instant. The Paris express passes at four minutes past three, and I must catch it. The last train left here three hours ago."

"You — alone?"

"Yes. I go alone."

"But — well, let us speak quite frankly. Is no one else coming?" I inquired.

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"Non, M'sieur. You will take me to Pisa at once, please," she said impatiently.

So perforce I had to mount into the car, and when she had settled herself beside me, I drew off upon the dark and execrable road to the city she had indicated in order to catch the Rome–Paris express.

Was it all a trap, I wondered? What had occurred? I dared not ask her anything, while, she, on her part, preserved an absolute silence. Her only fear seemed lest she lost her train. That something had occurred was very evident, but of its nature I still remained in entire ignorance, even when, a short distance from the great echoing station, I dropped the chic little maid with whom I had for the past three weeks pretended to be so violently in love. On getting down she told me to await her. She would be only a few minutes. This surprised me, as I thought she was leaving for Paris.

She hurried away, and as I watched her going down the road towards the station I saw the dark figure of a man emerge from the shadow and join her. For a moment he became silhouetted against the station lights, and I recognised that it was her mysterious friend.

Five minutes later she rejoined me. Then, on turning back, I was forced to remain at the level–crossing until the Paris express, with its long wagon–lit, had roared past, and afterwards I put on a move, and we were soon back in Leghorn. She did not return to the hotel with me, but at her request I dropped her just before we entered the town.

Morning revealed the startling truth. Three women, occupying adjacent rooms, had lost the greater part of their valuable jewels which they had had sent from home on purpose to wear at the ball. The police were ferreting about the hotel questioning everybody. There was commotion everywhere, and loud among those expressing amazement at the audaciousness of the thief were both Bindo and her Highness, the latter declaring herself lucky that no attempt had been made to secure any of her own valuable jewels.

At noon I took her for a run on the car in order to have an opportunity to chat. When we were alone on the road she said —

"You entertained a foolish but quite reasonable suspicion of Rosalie. She and Kampf, the man you saw her with, always work together. They indeed suggested this present little affair, for they knew that Italian women bring lots of jewellery here, in order to show it off. Besides, hotels are their speciality. So there seemed to Bindo no reason why we should not have a little of the best of it. The diamond necklace of the Signora Jacobi is well known to be one of the finest in all Italy; therefore, on several occasions, I lent her Rosalie for hair–dressing, and she, clever girl, very soon discovered where all the best of the stuff was kept. Bindo, in the meantime, was keeping his keen eye open in other quarters. Last night, when the Jewess went up to her room, she found her own maid had gone to bed very unwell, and the faithful Rosalie had, at my orders, taken her place. 'How kind it was of the dear Princess,' she said! When Rosalie left the room she carried with her the necklace, together with several other trifles which she had pretended to lock in the jewel–case. Ten minutes later Bindo also slipped into her hands all that he had obtained in a swift raid in two other rooms during the dance, and she left the hotel carrying away gems worth roughly, we believe, about sixteen thousand pounds sterling. Kampf was awaiting her in Pisa, and by this time is already well on his way to the frontier at Modane, with the precious packet in his pocket."

"And there is really no suspicion upon us?" I asked apprehensively.

"Certainly not. Not a soul knows that Rosalie left the hotel last night. She re–entered by a window Bindo left open."

"But the garage people know that I was out," I said.

"Well, and what of that? You have had no hand in it, have you, mon cher? No. We shall remain here another week. It is quite pleasant here — and quite safe. To leave might arouse suspicion."

"Have not the police questioned Rosalie?"

"Certainly. But they have no suspicion of the maid of Princess Helen of Dornbach–Laxenburg. How could they? Especially as the Prefect and his wife were my guests at dinner last night!"

"Well," I declared, "the way the whole affair has been managed is perfectly artistic."

"Of course," she said. "We do not blunder. Only poor people and fools do that."