

# INITIATION

BY

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## CHAPTER I

### I

SIR NEVILL FANNING was doing at least three things at once, in the private dining-room of the Hotel Emanuele in the Via Veneto in the City of Rome. He was eating an excellent luncheon, he was observing his fellow-guests, and he was giving as much attention to Mrs. Bessington's conversation as that lady required.

It cannot be said that Mrs. Bessington was easy to talk to; in fact, that was an impossible feat. He had tried it in the first days of his acquaintance with her, and even now, when he forgot, tried it still. But he had found that she neither needed his remarks, nor even wished for them; all she required was silence, noddings of the head, and very occasional assents or monosyllabic questions. She did all the rest. It was a little stupefying at first to be pelted with such an interminable torrent of words; he had at first resisted a little, seriously believing that she might possibly wish to hear what he had to say; then he had grown a little impatient; and then the divine gift of humour had saved him; and henceforth—(except, as has been said, when he forgot)—he sat still, now marvelling at the spate of talk that flowed forth so sedately, now deliberately thinking about other things, now, occasionally, playing a sort of intellectual solitaire which consisted in counting her full-stops—(there had only been five during the whole of the curried-egg course, from the moment she took up her fork to the moment she laid it down again)—and once, with an exquisite joy, switching her on to the Marchioness Daly, his hostess, who sat on his left,

and whose horse-power, so to speak, very nearly, but not quite, rivalled Mrs. Bessington's.

He believed that she was talking now about a cousin of hers who lived in Corfu; but he was not sure. If it was not she, it was Selva, the actress, who was in Rome just now. Certainly a female cousin had been mentioned a while ago, and so had Corfu; but an aunt had shot up from the horizon once or twice, and he was not certain therefore as to which occupied the place of honour at present. A Scotch maid of hers too—called MacPherson—(not the Scotch maid she had now, but another one)—had certainly been spoken of; but it surely could not be she who was now curtsying to the late King of Greece and tripping over her train as she did so.

"Most interesting," said Sir Nevill, bringing his eyes back from their excursion. "How very——"

"Ah! but that's not the end," pursued Mrs. Bessington, undismayed. "It was a fortnight after that; no, it couldn't have been that fortnight, because I know she caught influenza from having to wait about for the carriage, and was laid up for three weeks; it must have been . . ."

She was off again; and once more the young man began to look gingerly about him.

He could not quite make out his hostess. He had a lamentable habit of pigeon-holing his new acquaintances; and each pigeon-hole had a little label over it, with a sort of inscription. Into these, then, he was accustomed to place people. At first he had been inclined, in view of their common possession of an almost infinite store of words and opinions on every subject, to place the Papal Marchioness and Mrs. Bessington together. They both talked unceasingly: they both wore a glassy expression of inattention when anyone compelled them to listen in

return. The encounter between the two had been a glorious experience; he had been stung by the splendour of the prospect; and had wondered which would win. It was the ancient dilemma of striking impenetrable armour with a sword that could pierce everything. He had blinked a little as the two ladies discharged their conversational hoses across him; but he had enjoyed it. Mrs. Bessington had won; the impenetrability of her inattention had prevailed over the shrill and ceaseless arrows of the Marchioness' high voice; and she had been left discoursing on her favourite clergyman at the American Episcopal church, while the Marchioness sulked.

But he was beginning to discern a difference between them. Mrs. Bessington was always amiable; she never, gravely, attacked people's characters; she was harmless and bland, though quite shrewd in her opinions; while the Marchioness had an undercurrent of acidity, and seemed to take a kind of peevish delight in discerning, and thrusting a pin through, little cracks and holes in reputations. He saw that, plainly now. It was evident that they could not be put into the same pigeon-hole. Superficially they might have been twins; fundamentally, they were not even sisters.

He scarcely knew how he happened to be here to-day. He had come out all alone to Rome, three weeks ago, without realising the potency of his name in the Visitors' List. Then the cards had begun. He had rashly returned some of these calls; and had even accepted an invitation to tea at which two Cardinals were to be present; and there he had found himself a lion in a den of Daniels. The Cardinals had been magnificent, of course, grave princely men, extremely gracious to this young Catholic baronet, and seeming to understand that he, no more than themselves, really liked this screaming parrot-house.

One of them had even bidden him use his name with Monsignor Bisletti, if he should wish for a private audience with the Holy Father.

"But, of course, Sir Nevill," he had added, with scarcely a trace of an Italian accent, "you will find no difficulty in any case."

But the rest of the company he did not like so much. It was not that it was different from any other similar company elsewhere; people screamed and gossiped and smelt of furs and eau-de-Cologne, there were meek and trim young men with shining hair, there were tiresome old men who bellowed, there were shy girls, fully as much in London as in Rome. Only he had not expected it in Rome, somehow. He had had a faint idea that things would be primitive and quiet here, that he could moon about and look at Basilicas now and then, that he could poke round in curiosity-shops—in a word, that he could be free here, as he could not in London. And he had found the same old parrot-house.

It was at this tea-party that the Marquis Daly had captured him, and introduced him to his wife; and it was here that she had asked him to choose any day in the following week to come to lunch, so soon as she had first caught him saying that he was going to Frascati, but hadn't settled which day.

"Then you shall lunch with us first, if you will, Sir Nevill; choose your own day. And we will all go out to Frascati together."

Well, here he was. He did not in the least wish to go out to Frascati with all these people; but there was no escape. Here he was; and Mrs. Bessington was telling him about her cousin in Corfu: he was sure now that it could not have been Miss MacPherson. Meanwhile he was observing the company.

## II

It had better be said at once that there was a single star in all this gloom of well-disguised boredom; and the name of the star was Enid, who sat opposite him. The Bessingtons, mother and daughter, had been present when the Marchioness had cornered him four days ago; and the fact that Mrs. Bessington had added that Enid also wished to see Frascati again, had been the one consideration that had prevented him from being rather rude to the Marchioness, and saying, untruthfully, that, after all, it wasn't Frascati, but Tivoli, and that he had promised to go with someone else.

He had brought her an ice a few minutes before, and had sat by her, himself eating another; and she had been to him for five minutes like a breath of air in a stuffy room.

First she was extremely pretty, but this, honestly, was not the point. The point was that she had been cool and refreshing and quiet—entirely at her ease, though she could not be more than nineteen—and had said one or two odd little things that had been intimate without being familiar. He had forgotten what they were; they were of no importance; but he had perceived that she knew what he was feeling, and that she felt like it too. Then a Princess had wished him to be presented to her, and the thing had ended, until the invitation; and he had accepted that invitation, aware that he would have prevaricated himself out of it if he had not talked to Enid first.

She was nearly opposite him now. She seemed even prettier than he had thought her. She had heavy brown hair, an extremely clear, pale complexion, big grey eyes and quiet well-cut lips. She had a large black hat with

primroses in it, and a black lace dress; as she was still in mourning for her father. He watched her hands once or twice; he had a theory about hands, and they satisfied him. They were sufficiently large, quite white and quite strong. Certainly it would be pleasant to go with her to Frascati.

His eyes wandered along the other faces. Next to Enid, on the Marchioness' left, was an Italian priest, the Lenten preacher at a church in the Corso. Nevill did not make much of him; he was a new type to the young man—of a very recollected and very well-bred air, as of a Guardsman who has become a seminarian. Incidentally, he was a Count in his own right; but Nevill, with truly British superiority, did not think much of Italian counts. The priest had been quite polished, quite detached and rather superior, in the few words he had with him before they sat down. On the other side of Enid sat Mr. Hecker, an extremely wealthy American and the husband of Mrs. Hecker. These were his two discernible points; for Mrs. Hecker, who sat on Nevill's side of the table, at the further end, was one blaze of intelligence, so bright as to obscure all in her immediate circle. She was really astonishing, thought the boy—as brilliant, and as hard too, as electric light. He had talked to her a few minutes before lunch and she had summed up her impressions of Rome simply admirably, touching exactly the right points—the small ancient dignity of the less known Basilicas, the flamboyant triumph of St. Peter's, and the "domino-houses," as she called them, of the modern municipality. (Certainly these large white flat-faced buildings set with rows of even windows were extraordinarily like dominoes set on end; only it had not struck him before.)

Next to him, beyond Mrs. Bessington, was a sleek-haired young man of about his own age, Mr. Clough, who

presented precisely the right front to all calls upon him, and who appeared to have nothing whatever behind his front. Nevill had put him away, all right, after three minutes, in a pigeon-hole already full to bursting. Last but one opposite Mrs. Hecker was the Princess Mareschi, a small faded lady, rather like a pale Queen Victoria, quite plainly and even shabbily dressed, with an unmistakable dignity, who lived with her imbecile daughter in an enormous palace, the friend of Cardinals, blackest of the black, pious, zealous and resolute—a replica in an Italian disguise of unmarried Evangelical daughters and sisters of ancient English dukes, only she was a Catholic, and talked four languages with equal ease, and they but one. And last came the Marquis Daly himself, the host, whom Nevill had put straight into the pigeon-hole that contained persons "not of his sort" (as he would have said), a brisk, anxious man, intensely absorbed in social ambitions and never quite at his ease anywhere—a Papal chamberlain, a Papal marquis, without children or estates, pathetically eager to entertain personages so long as they had any kind of claim to distinction and were not militantly anti-Catholic.

Such was the company. Nevill ran round them mentally once more, wondering when this interminable festivity would be over.

"—How very nice of her!" he said suddenly, perceiving a pause in Mrs. Bessington's conversation, and remembering again the word Corfu.

### III

What Enid saw, as she made opportunity now and again between the remarks of her Italian priest and the quiet repressed sentences of her American, was a very

bright fresh young man, black-haired and black-eyed, with an indefinable look of slight ill-health. She had liked him instantly, as soon as he had sat down beside her with his ice the other day, in the window-seat, and had remarked how very odd it was that some ices were so much hotter than others.

"If you will consider it carefully," she had said, "with illustrations, I think you will find that it is entirely a matter of texture. It's the hard ones that are cold."

He had paused to reflect, with excellent gravity.

"That's perfectly true," he had said. "It never occurred to me before—the ones that are like frozen sandstone, aren't they? Now, about colours. Why is Cardinal's scarlet so extraordinarily like flame? Yet it's not the colour of any flame I've ever seen."

(That was the kind of thing they said at first.)

He didn't seem at all bored to-day, either, in spite of his situation between the Marchioness and Enid's own mother. Enid had no illusions at all about her mother's conversation. For herself, she did not find it boring, because she had long ago established an understanding (as she would have called it) that she was to go her own way and not to be talked to like that; but she had watched others under it. This young man, however, seemed to preserve his elasticity well enough. Certainly his eyes roved a good deal, but always came back to attention in time. Twice their eyes had met; and she thought she had read a humorous good-temper into their glance, yet not enough to be offensive to her mother's daughter.

So much for his outward appearance. He seemed natural, breezy, and fresh, in spite of his rather delicate look: he was dressed properly in grey, with a little bunch of violets. She thought he looked *simpatico*.

What she knew about him was very nearly as important.

She had learned it from overhearing her mother talking to other people.

First, he was a baronet, the fourth of the line, without brothers or sisters, and unmarried. He was aged twenty-three; he was an hereditary Catholic, and had been educated at Stonyhurst. His father had died four years ago; and his father's sister-in-law, a widow, had kept house ever since at Hartley, and was still doing so. This lady had one boy, called Jim, aged seven. Hartley was a fine place in Sussex; and there went with it another big house in Elizabeth Street. That was about the sum of it. Obviously he was a tolerably wealthy man. There were innumerable other details too, which her mother had spread abroad; but these were unimportant. For instance, it was said that he was rather delicate and suffered from headaches; that though a Catholic, he was not at all bigoted; that his father had been no better than he should be, though he too had died in the Faith; that he was just five feet and eleven and a half inches tall in his stocking feet; that he had broken the Public-school record for the quarter-mile, and that he was one of the six or seven possessors of a tennis-court—the real thing, not the Pretender—in England; that he had not distinguished himself at present in any other way whatever, but that it was presumed he would stand for Parliament when he had had time to look about him a bit.

Well, these things were not essential. The point was himself, his personality and his general bearing. These, as has been said, Enid found sympathetic. She was quite glad he was going with them to Frascati this afternoon.

She, too, was finding Rome a little trying. It was her third visit; and the least satisfactory. She, too, liked the old better—so far as three years ago could be