

**THE BALLET
DANCER
AND ON GUARD**

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The ballet dancer and On guard by Matilde Serao

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MATILDE SERAO

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By

MATILDE SERAO

AUTHOR OF

"THE LAND OF COCKAYNE"
"THE CONQUEST OF ROME" ETC.



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THE BALLET DANCER

I

CARMELA MININO stood beside her chest of drawers and counted over and over again the money that she kept in a small worn purse, and she found always the same sum, the same eighteen francs—three bills of five and three of one franc—which she had found the day before and also the previous week. She pulled out of her pocket the tiny old *portemonnaie* she always carried about with her, and in which she kept a little change—a few pence—with which to pay omnibus fares, a chair at Mass, and now and then a glass of mineral water. In this receptacle she found sevenpence, and, with a gesture at once puerile and sad, she turned and looked anxiously and despairingly round her room, as if from the bare walls and the poor furniture, which consisted of only a few absolutely indispensable objects, she could, like a fairy, evoke an imaginary sum of money with which to swell her insufficient capital. She had had a dream of being able to carry this year a wreath of fresh flowers to the tomb of her god-mother and benefactress—a large wreath, all made of the most beautiful flowers, with an inscription also in flowers—an inscription composed of two or

three words of remembrance, gratitude and affection. For this purpose she had laid up some money in the summer, putting by a penny at a time, and, by depriving herself of many things, had managed to scrape together forty-two francs, while, in her mind's eye, the wreath assumed ever fairer proportions and more vivid colours, and the thought of laying it with her own hands on the tomb where Amina Boschetti slept was sweet to her.

In order to facilitate this darling project, Carmela Minino had signed an engagement to dance at Castellamare, in August and September, in the dreary barn called Stabia Hall, with its ceiling open to the sky, and under the direction of Civillo Patalano, an impresario who paid little, and that little irregularly, and who often paid nothing at all. Carmela had accepted the engagement, in spite of her doubts of Patalano, because she did not wish to trench upon the sum set apart for the wreath, and also because she wished to increase it, if it were possible; and she had danced in the wooden theatre, in the open air, perspiring in the hot August evenings until her silk tights were glued to her skin, and she caught one cold after another in the draughts which swept over the stage. In vain did she wrap herself in her black woollen shawl when she left it. And all this pain and trouble for nothing!

September had been cold and rainy, and all the summer visitors had left Castellamare; Stabia Hall

was deserted, and, notwithstanding the real curses and feigned tears of the ballet-dancers, Civillo Patalano had not paid them for the month of September. Only here and there a girl who was lucky enough to have an energetic father, and one capable of swearing louder than Civillo Patalano, or a brother whom she supported, and whose interest was therefore involved in her being paid, or a girl who had a lover who showed his fist to the impresario—only persons so protected succeeded in wrenching a few francs from him.

Carmela Minino had screamed and wept, but all to no purpose. She was alone, she had no defenders, and Patalano did not pay her the forty-five francs owing to her for the month of September, although he had signed her contract at a franc and a half an evening. It was a financial disaster for the poor girl; she had to pay half the rent of the miserable room where she slept with Maria Civita, another dancer, and an equally unfortunate one, except that she had a lover in Naples who sent her a postal-order for twenty francs. Then, Carmela had to pay her board until the end of the month at a small restaurant, and, finally, she had to return to Naples, paying her third-class ticket herself, and carrying with her the unpleasant consciousness that her best silk tights were so stained by perspiration as to be unwearable, and her two best pairs of satin slippers utterly worn out by dancing on the rough

floor of Stabia Hall. Between this catastrophe and a dull month of October, when she could get no engagement, a large part of the savings which she had set apart for the wreath of fresh flowers gradually melted away, and Carmela Minino felt her heart sink every time she took a franc out of her purse. And thus it happened that on the morning of the first of November she only had eighteen francs and thirty-five centimes with which to honour her godmother's tomb, and from this sum she was forced to deduct a few pence for her supper, and for the journey to and from Paggioreale on a day when all Naples goes there, and cabs are enormously expensive.

'Flowers are so dear at this season!' she thought within herself as she put on her hat to go out; and a secret bitterness swelled within her as she felt her beautiful dream to be almost completely destroyed. Out of doors the weather was cloudy, and when Carmela had descended the four flights of steps which led from her room in the Vicolo Paradiso to the Pignasecca, she decided to go back again and take her umbrella. She was dressed in black, although her mourning for her mother had been long laid aside; she had wanted to go in a black gown to pray for her benefactress, but in any case she could not have afforded a new winter gown. The weather was so uncertain. If it rained, the black feather in her hat would be spoiled. It was an ancient plume which had once been splendid, and

which Carmela wore all the year round, on summer and winter hats, which were trimmed afresh according to the season, while the feather was carefully curled by her with the back of the scissors. Notwithstanding all her care, the long feather was a little worn—she had had it for five or six years! Rain spoils feathers.

Full of uneasy presentiments, she went upstairs, and felt more tranquil when she returned, carrying pressed to her bosom the faithful old umbrella which had for years protected her from summer and winter rains, as she went to, and returned from, San Carlo. With the light step of her profession, she passed on, picking her way carefully, and saying a 'Hail Mary' as she passed the Madonna of the Pignasecca. Absorbed in her sad thoughts, Carmela Minino reached the street called Chiaia, where the best florists in Naples are to be found.

The walls of Toledo and Chiaia were covered with the advertisements peculiar to All Saints' Day. At one place wax candles were advertised at three francs a pound; at another wire wreaths, cheap and lasting; another advertisement bore the timetable of the small branch railroad Nola Baiano, which had a station at Paggioreale; there were, further on, numberless advertisements of tapers, wreaths, etc.; and even that of a restaurant which provided a hot dinner, with the white wine called asprinia, at a place not far from the cemetery and