

# **THE DESIRE OF LIFE**

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The Desire of Life by Matilde Serao & William Collinge

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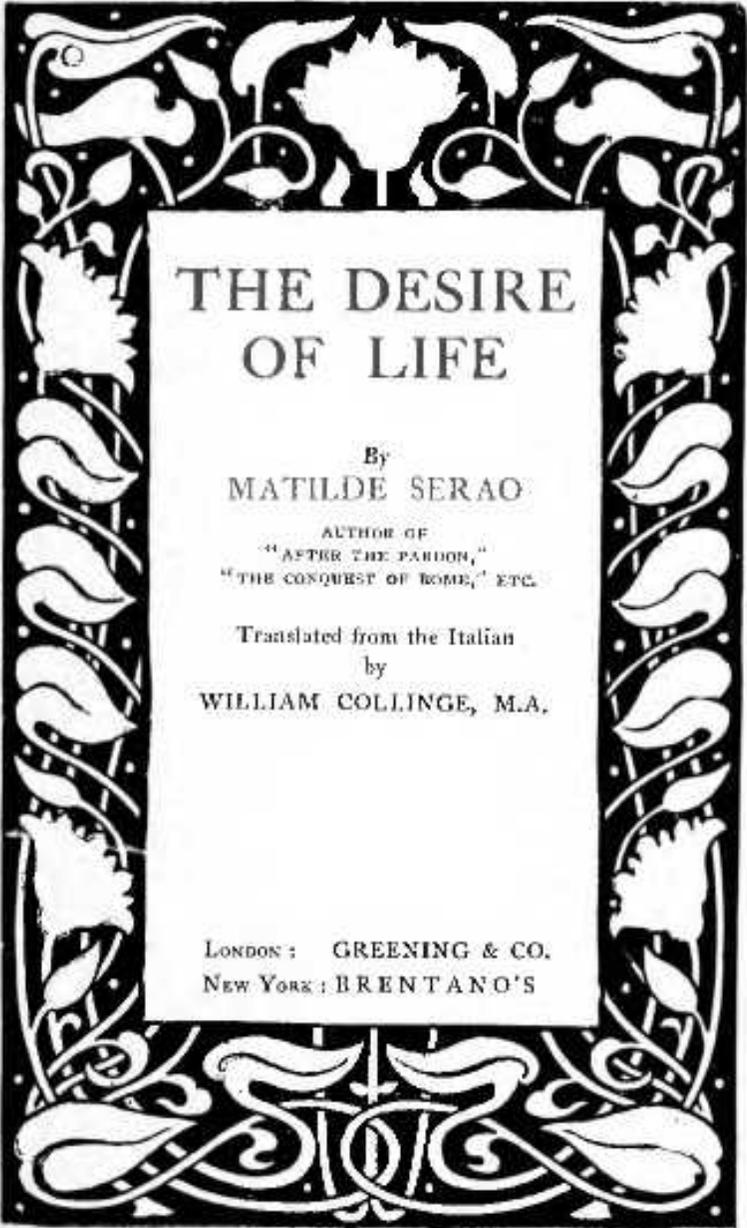
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**MATILDE SERAO & WILLIAM COLLINGE**

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DESIRE OF LIFE**





THE DESIRE  
OF LIFE

By  
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"AFTER THE PARDON,"  
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# THE DESIRE OF LIFE

## CHAPTER I

"How light it is still!" said Don Vittorio Lante, after a long silence.

"Evening falls much later among the high mountains," suggested Lucio Sabini.

The great vault of the sky was ascending, as they were ascending, from the level of the Val Bregaglia; it passed over their heads and kept rising, as their eyes contemplated it quietly, amongst the steep mountain peaks, now quite green with trees and bushes, now bare and rugged; rising so immensely towards the horizon, as if they should not perceive its descending curve. It was the sky of an uncertain summer day that during the afternoon had been softly blue, veiled by transparent clouds, but now had become a very light grey, of great purity and clearness.

"It is eight o'clock," exclaimed Don Vittorio Lante, pursuing his quiet thoughts.

"Eight o'clock," affirmed Lucio Sabini slowly.

The bells of their horses tinkled faintly in their tranquil ascent; the torrent on their right, at times violent and covered with the foam whitening on its rocks, at times clear and narrow like a brook amidst green meadows, rumbled noisily and softly as it descended from the white and cold summits whither they were ascending, on its way to the warm and monotonous plains whence they had come.

"We shall not arrive before half-past eleven," said Vittorio Lante, in a low voice.

"Not before," affirmed Lucio Sabini, in the same tone. Both were smoking cigarettes: fine smoke shadows, not clouds, scarcely floated round their faces, as their carriage continued to ascend, to the calm and regular paces of the horses, along the accustomed road, the long road that climbs, amidst a continual renewing of small and large valleys, of narrow gorges, and vast stretches, between the two mountain sides on right and left. At Chiavenna they found that the diligence had left, owing to a change in the time-table from the previous year, and for five hours a hired carriage had been conveying them towards the austere Grissons, whose outposts were not yet distinguishable.

"What does it matter?" said Vittorio Lante, still continuing his thought aloud. "It is better to arrive late at St. Moritz than lose a night at Chiavenna."

"Or at Vicosoprano," concluded Lucio Sabini, throwing away the end of his cigarette.

Both gentlemen settled themselves better in their places, and drew the large English travelling-rug over their limbs, with the quiet gestures of those who are used to long journeys. Just an hour ago they had halted at Vicosoprano to rest their horses, since they could not obtain a change: they arrived at six and left at seven. After giving a glance at the new, white, and melancholy Hôtel Helvetia, where, in a small meadow in front of the hotel, and around its peristyle, male and female figures moved about aimlessly, dressed indifferently, with the insignificant and bored faces of those who are used to sojourning at solitary pensions on seven francs a day, and while the annoying bell of the round table of the "Helvetia" was dinning in their ears, they descended at the old rustic inn, "The Crown." Round the arch of the low and broad Swiss doorway ran a motto

in Gothic characters, and the small central balcony had four or five little bright geranium plants and purple gentians: a resounding and black wooden staircase led to the first floor. The innkeeper's blond and florid daughter, with heightened colour, had served them rapidly and silently with a simple and characteristic dinner: to wit, a thick and steaming vegetable soup, trout in butter, roast fowl, and lastly, English sponge cake, with acid and fresh gooseberry jam. At the door, as they were getting into their carriage to set out again, a very blond Swiss maiden offered them little bunches of cyclamen, which they still wore, although they were already slightly faded.

"Are you going to stop long up there, Vittorio?" asked Lucio Sabini, in a discreet tone.

"Three or four weeks, no longer; and you, Lucio?"

"I don't know; the same I think; I don't know exactly." And a slight smile, mingled with doubt, annoyance, and bitterness, appeared and disappeared about his lips. Even the face of his travelling companion became thoughtful.

Don Vittorio Lante was fair with thick and shining chestnut hair, chestnut eyes, now soft and now proud, but always expressive, and fair, curled moustaches. His features were fine and he seemed much younger than his thirty years; the complexion was delicate but vivacious. On the other hand, Lucio Sabini at thirty-five was distinctly dark, with black eyes, calm and thoughtful, pale complexion, very black hair and moustaches, while he was tall and thin of figure. Vittorio Lante was of medium height, but well made and agile. Both were wrapped in thought, and they no longer smoked. Some time passed; suddenly something far on high gleamed whitely amidst the increasing shadows.

"It is the glacier," said Lucio Sabini; "the Forno Glacier." And as if that whiteness, already expanding

in the night at the edge of the Val Bregaglia, had sent them an icy blast, they wrapped the rug closer round them, and hid their gloved hands under its covering.

"Do you expect to amuse yourself in the Engadine, Lucio?" asked Vittorio.

"Of course, I am sure to amuse myself very much, as I do every year."

"Leading a fashionable life?"

"No, making love."

"Have you come to the Engadine to love and to be loved, Lucio?"

"Oh, no," exclaimed the other, with a gentle movement of impatience and an ironical little smile. "I never said that: I said that I go to St. Moritz, as I do every year, to make love."

"That is to say—to flirt."

"Exactly: you say the English word, I the Italian."

Suddenly the whiteness that crowned Monte Forno seemed as if it had been extended to the sky, rendering it more vast; it was a great white cloud, soft and clear, since it preceded the moon. All the country changed its aspect. Before them stood out the great, green wall of trees, with almost the appearance of a peak, which separates the Engadine from the Val Bregaglia. Beneath the appearing and disappearing lunar brightness, behind the white cloud, a sinuous spiral disclosed itself amidst the wood like a soft ribbon that came and went, but ever climbed—the road which leads to the hill of the Maloja. Meanwhile, the carriage, reducing its pace, entered the first bend of the winding way; the clouds continued to increase, and there was a continuous alternating of light and shade, according as they conquered the moon or were conquered by her.

"You like flirting, Lucio?"

"Very much," replied the other, with an intense smile; "and this is an ideal country for love-making, Vittorio."

"I know it is. And do you sometimes grow fond of each other?"

"Sometimes I grow fond of them."

"And, perhaps, sometimes you fall in love?"

"One is always a little in love with the person to whom one makes love," said Lucio Sabini, in a low voice.

"But do you fall in love?" insisted Vittorio.

"Yes, I fall in love, too," Lucio confessed.

"And then? What do you do to cure yourself?" asked Vittorio Lante, with affectionate curiosity; "because you do cure yourself, don't you?"

"I keep on curing myself," replied the other sadly, regarding the clouds that were heaping above, as they became less white, obscuring and hiding all the light of the moon. "I cure myself of myself. And if I do not there is somebody who sees to curing me."

Suddenly it seemed as if a boundless sadness was emanating from what Lucio Sabini was saying and thinking, from what he was not saying and thinking. His head was slightly bowed, and his lowered lashes hid his glance.

"Then you are allowed to come to St. Moritz?" Vittorio asked in a low voice, as if he were afraid of being indiscreet.

"I am allowed to come," Lucio replied rather bitterly. "We can't travel together in summer; some family *convenances* must be obeyed, certain canons have to be observed—there are so many things, Vittorio! Well, I have two months of liberty, two beautiful months you understand, two long months; sixty times twenty-four hours in which I am free, in which I delude myself and believe I am free—I am free!"

At first his words came sadly, then with increasing violence, while the last words sounded like a cry of revolt from a heart oppressed by its slavery.

"Still, she loves you," said Vittorio sweetly, in a subdued tone.

"Yes, she loves me," admitted Lucio quietly.

"For some time, I think."

"For an eternity, for ten years."

Lucio Sabini in the gloaming looked fixedly at his companion; then without bitterness, without joy, he added in an expressionless voice:

"I love her."

Very slowly, to the soft and gentle tinkling of the horses' bells, the carriage traversed the tortuous road, through the wood and past some majestic walls, and, like a vision, the small castle of Renesse appeared on high, now to the right and now to the left. The air continued to grow colder. The coachman on the box seemed to be asleep or dreaming, as he drove his horses, with bent shoulders and bowed head; even the two horses seemed to be asleep or dreaming of the ascent to the Maloja, as they tinkled their bells. And in a dream firmament the clouds galloped bizarrely, as they were scattered by the wind, which up above must be blowing strongly.

"There is nothing more delightful or pleasing than to make love to these foreigners," resumed Lucio, in a light tone, but with a slight shade of emotion; "there are some adorable little women, and girls especially. Some of them are very fashionable and complex, others are simple and frank; but some are very inquisitive and quite distrustful of all Italians."

"How's that?" asked Vittorio Lante, not without anxiety.

"We Italians have a very bad reputation," Lucio replied calmly, as he lit a cigarette. "They obstinately