

Giacinta.

IN TWO INSTALLMENTS.

CONCLUSION.

It was nearly a week later when he climbed the hill again and made his way through the pines to the little chapel.

It was afternoon, and so deep was the stillness in that world forgotten little spot, that he was struck with disappointment, thinking that Giacinta was not there.

But, walking round the building, he came upon her sitting on the old stone bench beside the porch, with a book—an old leather bound and gold-clasped volume—open on her knee.

It fell to the ground suddenly as she caught sight of Ted, and sprang up to greet him, with a glad light shining in her eyes.

'You were so long!' she said reproachfully, 'I was afraid you had forgotten, and I have waited you. It has been worse than ever since you were here. I mean the marchese has been more harsh and ill-tempered than before. He forbade me to leave the house at all, even to come here, but I grew angry and defied him. I will not give up my little bit of freedom, since he is so unreasonable, though I would have done anything for him in the old days.'

'I am very sorry,' said Ted, 'and I certainly would have come sooner if I could have suspected that you wanted me; but I was afraid of offending the marchese beyond forgiveness if I disturbed him again too soon, and it is not pleasant to feel that my coming makes things harder for you.'

'Oh, you mustn't think that! I don't mind the marchese's anger now, since it is no longer possible to love him. Will you come up to the villa?'

'Yes, if you think I dare. I have armed myself with the excuse of a wish to look at the frescoes, if he will be good enough to let me.'

'He must,' said Giacinta, with a little air of imperiousness that made Ted smile.

Rather to his surprise, the marchese did not refuse to see him, receiving him, however, with not the slightest cordiality, and responding very curtly to his attempts at conversation.

Presently Ted, with a little diffidence, made his request to see the paintings, which, Giacinta had told him, covered the walls of a large hall, now unused, but which, in the old days of the villa, had been the banquetting-hall.

The marchese agreed with a readiness which Ted attributed to his hope that, once his tiresome guest's request was complied with, he would leave him in peace.

The old banquetting-hall contained, besides the mural paintings, groups of sculpture and exquisite busts in bronze and marble, which the eccentric old man passed by with an indifference that filled Ted's artistic soul with disgust.

'What a beautiful Diana!' he exclaimed, stopping suddenly before a bronze figure that stood a little apart; 'this is surely the original of that copy you admired so much in Doctor Grant's study in Portman Square?'

'Yes—er—yes, this is the original,' said the marchese, taken rather by surprise. And Ted was conscious of a feeling between triumph and contempt.

'The man is a liar, if nothing worse,' he reflected. 'Doctor Grant has no such figure in his possession, and has never lived in Portman Square.'

The incident only served to confirm in him the suspicion that for the last week he had been haunted by a determined not to leave the neighbourhood without proving it to be true or false.

He prolonged his visit as much as polite ness would allow, and when he took his leave of the old man, Giacinta went out with him to the porch.

'You will come again, will you not?' she asked. 'You will not take offense at my discourtesy?'

Ted smiled a little doubtfully. 'It seems rather bad taste to persist in coming where one is so obviously not wanted,' he said; 'but your welcome more than makes up for all the rest, and if you really wish it, signorina, certainly I will come again before I go away.'

'Go away!' Giacinta echoed in blank surprise, 'I beg your pardon—it was silly of me—but I had not thought of it. It has been so different since you came; and I cannot bear to think of going back to the horrible monotony of the old life.'

Her scarlet lips were trembling and tears filled her eyes.

A sudden impulse seized on Ted to take the little childish white figure in his arms and carry her away from the dreary unnatural life she led.

'You shall not go back to it,' he said suddenly; 'I will not let you. I don't know yet what can be done, but you shall not be sacrificed much longer; it you will trust me, I promise you that things shall be made to alter very soon. Can you trust me, Giacinta?'

It seemed to her quite natural that he should say her name, and she answered, without a shade of hesitation—

'I trust you perfectly, and whatever you do for me, whether you succeed or not, I shall thank you all my life; you are the only one in all these years who has brought me a little happiness.'

Her simple candour touched Ted more deeply than anything had ever done before.

'You are much too good and too grateful,' he said, 'but I shall be glad to remember your words in the future, and find comfort in them, for I

foresee that you will, some day, have many friends besides myself, and I shall be horribly jealous of them.'

'Oh, no, you won't!' said Giacinta, 'or you will always be the first.'

'Don't be rash, little lady,' he laughed. 'It is not difficult to say so now, but I may ask you to repeat it later when it might not be so easy.'

'I will repeat it whenever you like,' she answered, and Ted saw that she meant it.

'I shall hold you to your word,' he said. 'But, in the meantime, I am going to ask you a question. Will you tell me just where it was that the marchese's servant died?'

'Yes,' said Giacinta readily. 'It was at a little place called Rocagna, in Tuscany. He was taken ill suddenly, and died at an inn kept by the sister of Luca Panunzi and her husband.'

'Ah! our friend Luca again,' reflected Ted, 'I think I begin to see light. Thank you,' he said aloud, and having made a note in his pocket-book of the address she had given him, he took his leave and went thoughtfully down to the village.

The visitor had scarcely left the marchese's room with Giacinta, when Filomena came into it by another door, with a haste that suggested her having been eaves dropping.

'Per carità! what is it?' she cried, throwing herself down heavily, and with an agitated want of ceremony, in the nearest chair. 'What does it mean, this Englishman coming here with his letter and his questions? Why did you not refuse yourself to him as to all the others? You were mad to entertain him, and harm will come of it. You must see he suspects. Do you hear, Signor Marchese—he suspects!'

The old man glared at her with a savage ill humour that he made no attempt to hide.

'Do you think I don't know that?' he snarled. 'Am I a fool? Of course, he suspects, and for that reason I can't afford to seem to be afraid of him.'

'But at first,' insisted Filomena, 'it would have been easy to deny him the first time.'

'I could not,' said the marchese savagely. 'The girl taunted me with fearing to show myself. She is getting unmanageable, and beginning to defy me.'

'Poverina!' the woman exclaimed, 'wonder is that she has not done so before, with her youth and spirit, to be imprisoned like a wild bird in a cage. It is unnatural and cruel. I could have forgiven the rest, perhaps, but the injustice to the child is too much.'

'Hold your tongue!' cried the old man roughly. 'What would you have me do? I have told you often enough that as soon as the old count dies, I will realize all the property, and we will go away. In a new country we shall be safe, and we can live like princes.'

Filomena cast up her eyes, and shrugged her shoulders with an air of hopelessness.

'The life had need be a bright one,' she said, 'to make up for the misery of this. It is weary waiting for the death of a hale old man, and meantime the child is growing up. It is time that we thought about her marriage.'

'It is impossible to think of that now,' he said. 'Once safely away from here she shall have her chance, and I will not interfere in her choice; but I cannot stir in the matter here—it would not be safe.'

Filomena shrugged her shoulders again.

'Ah! well,' she said, 'if you cannot think of it, there are others who will, and if I am not mistaken, the English signor—'

'What do you mean?' the marchese asked sharply, and Filomena answered him impatiently.

'Are you so blind that you have not seen? Or do you think it is for nothing that he comes here, in spite of your rudeness, and will continue to come prying until he has discovered the whole thing and ruined us?'

'Be quiet, fool! How often have I warned you to lower your voice, if you must make those stupid speeches. As for what you hint at, the thing must go no further. I will put a stop to it at once.'

'What can you do? It is too late now to stop his coming without increasing his suspicions.'

'Leave it to me. I will find out a way; but go now, and let me think it over alone, your chatter maddens me!'

The next morning, Ted rather astonished Luca Panunzi by the announcement that he was going a journey, but as he would probably be absent only a day or two, he would take no luggage but a small valise, and his rooms were to be kept vacant for him.

Luca was good-naturedly interested in the movements of his guest, for whom he had conceived a great liking, but Ted gave him no information, and started about midday on his eight-mile drive to Monteferrata, the nearest railway station.

The next day was dawning grey and chill when he awoke from a light sleep in the faded, first-class compartment which he had possessed in solitary grandeur all through the long night hours.

Stretching himself drowsily, he found

that he had arrived at Scagliata, which, inquiries had told him, was the nearest station to his destination.

He got out and asked the single official who stood shivering and yawning on the little platform, where he could get a conveyance to take him to Rocagna.

The man directed Ted to a small hotel in the neighbourhood, where, after a bath and breakfast, he hired a fly, in which he drove quickly over the few Tuscan hills in the ruddy morning light.

A few hours later, he was set down before the door of the single osteria in the quaint old village of Rocagna.

In the stout, handsome woman who came forward to receive him, he saw at once a resemblance to his host of Passello, but he said nothing about it, and contented himself with observing silently that her husband was a host of a very different type from Luca—the man's lean, hollow face and searching eyes were not trust-inspiring, and made a singular contrast to his wife's frank smile and ever-flowing good humour.

After a simple luncheon, he went out into the golden afternoon, and strolled down the one long street of the village to the grey old church at the end.

The presbytery was close beside it, and in the little garden a white-haired priest sat on a stone bench nodding in the sunshine.

He awoke at the sound of footsteps, and got up with a grave salute to Ted, who apologized for disturbing him.

'I hear that your church is an old and interesting one, and I thought I should like to see it,' the young fellow began, feeling that the priest would be more easily led to talk in this way than in any other.

He was right, for the padre was delighted to show him all the beauties of his beloved church, and Ted's artistic appreciation of them pleased him so much that, when the inspection was over, he begged the young stranger to stay a little and drink a glass of white wine in his cool, shadowy parlour.

Ted agreed gladly, and in a few minutes managed to lead the talk to the subject that interested him most.

'You have been here so many years, padre,' he began, 'you will, no doubt, remember the death of a man in whose end I am interested—I mean the servant of the Marchese di Castagna, who died here at the inn a few years ago.'

The old priest nodded gravely.

'I remember the circumstance perfectly,' he said. 'Ah! it was a terrible visitation—a death so sudden, a few hours only of illness that no one guessed was serious, that did not even serve to warn the poor man of his danger. Yes; a terrible visitation. May we be preserved from the like!'

'Where you with him at the time?' Ted queried.

The priest shook his head.

'No; that is the worst part of all,' he said; 'he was not thought to be in danger, so that no one came to call me, and the unfortunate man died without the last sacraments.'

'And did you not see him at all?' asked Ted, disappointed.

'No; for, the day after the death, I was engaged at the other end of the parish, and when I at last went down to the inn, it had been found necessary to close the coffin. I buried the poor man here in the cemetery the day after.'

'And the marchese?' asked Ted; 'you saw him probably? What kind of man was he?'

'I never saw him either,' the priest answered; 'he had been greatly shocked by his old servant's death, and kept his own room, giving orders that no one should disturb him.'

Ted felt baffled, but would not let himself be discouraged.

'I suppose a doctor attended the man?' he said. 'Can you tell me if he is in the village now?'

'Yes; he is still here, but he can hardly be said to have attended the sick man, for the latter was already dead when the doctor arrived at the inn, so that all that could be done was to give a certificate of death.'

There was evidently no more to be learnt here, and, with many thanks to the old priest for his courtesy, Ted took his leave, having first asked the address of the only medical man in Rocagna.

The house he was directed to lay at the opposite end of the village; there it was early, and he made his way there at once.

His inquiries were destined to be postponed, however, for, on arriving at the house, he was told that the doctor was in attendance on a patient in the next village, and would not return before the night.

The delay was especially irksome, because Ted was possessed of a feverish impatience to get back to Passello.

It was very early the next morning when he called at the doctor's house again to enquire seeing him before he went out.

The doctor received him cordially, and invited him to drink a cup of coffee while they talked.

'Yes,' he said, in answer to Ted's question, 'I remember the visit of the Marchese di Castagna quite well, although it is quite five years ago. He arrived in the evening, I believe, and the next morning, soon after dawn, I was summoned by a messenger from the inn to go and attend the marchese's servant. I went at once, but the message had been sent too late; the unlucky man was already dead.'

'Did you see the man on his arrival, doctor, or at any time before his death?'

'No; I saw neither of the travellers until I was called to the inn.'

'Forgive my troubling you,' went on Ted; 'but I am anxious to know if this man who died was really the person in whom I am interested. Will you tell me just what he was like?'

'Well, as far as I could see,' replied the doctor thoughtfully, 'he must have been a handsome and well built old man, with clear, regular features, and a decided air of superiority to his position.'

'Can you recollect if he was clean shaven or not?'

Ted asked, with a sudden eagerness that he could not quite conceal.



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'No, he was not,' said the doctor; 'he wore a moustache and small beard, both almost white.'

Ted's pulses gave a sudden throb of joy, and he sprang up with a flush of excitement on his face that set the doctor wondering.

But he sat down again, and managed to appear cool.

'Did you see the marchese himself?' he asked.

'No, the poor gentleman was said to be terribly upset at the sudden death, though not so as to require my services, and only desired to be left alone.'

'A thousand thanks,' said Ted gratefully and with a pleasant sense of triumph and conviction. 'Only one more question, and I will trouble you no longer. The people at the inn here seem to be pretty flourishing just now. Can you tell me if they have been always in equally good circumstances?'

The doctor shook his head.

'No; they had a hard, struggling life for many years after their marriage, and their affairs were at a very low ebb at the time of the marchese's visit, I remember; but the man was a friend of the unfortunate servant, and it is thought that the marchese befriended them in consequence.'

It is certain that after his visit things went much more smoothly with them, and they have lived in comfort ever since.'

'I suppose the marchese left Rocagna directly after the funeral,' suggested Ted; but the doctor understood him.

'No; he remained on at the inn for quite a month, spending the whole of that time in his own rooms, and seeing no one but the landlord and his wife. He even refused himself to Padre Marchetti and me, though we called several times to see him, and I had offered him the accommodation of my own house, which, I think you will agree, is preferable to that of the inn, at that time a very poor place indeed.'

The doctor was plainly hurt at the remembrance, but Ted could only murmur a sympathetic remark on the bad taste of such a refusal, combined with hearty thanks for the information he had received, and took his leave.

Now that his errand was done, every moment seemed wasted that was not employed in the journey back to Passello.

'Not bad success, after all, for my first attempt in the line of private detective,' he told himself. 'It is almost incredible that such a piece of clumsy trickery as that should have succeeded even in this out-of-the-way place, and have gone on all these years, without, so far as I can make out, a single person suspecting it! And I suppose it would have gone on till the end of the chapter if it had not been for my accidental coming on the scene, and Doctor Grant's letter; in that case I wonder what sort of fate was reserved for little Giacinta!'

The thought made him hot and red with anger.

'Poor little girl! how this revelation will startle her! he thought. 'It is hard on Luca and his sister, too; they were, most likely, only tools of the other man, but if their fate is left to Giacinta to decide, she is not likely to err on the side of over severity. And now for mine host's little bill and the first train to Passello!'

'When did they go?' asked the young fellow.

'Yesterday, signor, about three o'clock in the afternoon. His excellency had sent for me the night before, and given me the order that, with Assunta, my wife, I should come and stay in the villa until he returned or sent fresh orders.'

'And is it true that you know nothing at his intentions?' Ted asked suspiciously.

'It is the very truth, signor; Assunta will tell you the same.'

The old man made way at the door for the stout figure of his wife who came up at that moment.

'I have most important business with the marchese,' Ted said to her. 'Can you not even guess where he may have gone?'

'How should we guess, signor?' the woman said. 'The marchese is not one to ask questions of, but the signor might perhaps, learn something from Pietro Moro. His excellency hired Pietro's big old carriage to take him to the railway.'

'To Monteferrata?' asked Ted quickly.

'No, signor, to some station further (CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)'

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