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ALL GROCERS

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CHAPTER XXXIX.
Margherita Returns Home.

When at length the vessel stopped before the little marina of Capri, and Keith was gently assisted into the boat which was to row them in, Margherita was too full of an anxiety and care for her invalid husband to dwell for the moment much upon the meeting with her family. She had often during these two years pictured to herself her return, and their mutual joy; but now that anticipation had become reality, she had scarcely time to recognize how fast her heart was beating at sight of the dear, familiar little quay, the white cottages, the great, rocky ramparts overhead before her whole thoughts and attention were concentrated upon Keith's white face and the evident exhaustion with which he rose and took her arm to cross the vessel.

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what silent and embarrassed salutation; and to Teresina hanging half out of sight behind some others, she held out for a moment a friendly hand, which the girl received shyly and with startled eyes.

But one glance sufficed to tell Margherita that none of her own family was upon the strand; and although half disappointed, she was also somewhat relieved by the circumstance. She thought little of any embarrassment in such a meeting—she was too simple-minded—but a good deal of the delay, which might cause inconvenience to her husband in his weak condition. To Spencer, however, who had anticipated a family reunion of southern warmth and volubility with secret terror, the conduct of Margherita's relations was matter of unlimited satisfaction. He had lived more than two years among these simple fisher-folk, yet he acknowledged to himself that he had not as yet gauged the refinement of their feelings. He had not given them, in truth, credit for the modesty implied by such behavior.

Even Geronimo—never, as a rule, absent from among those who put out their boats to meet the daily streamer—was this afternoon wanting from his place, and his care handled by another man; while, as for Stefano and the padre and the madre, not a sign of them was to be seen anywhere—they might, one and all, have been asleep within the house, to tightly shut was the door, so lifeless the little veranda.

But, at a turn in the road some way upriver, Keith suddenly checked the driver. "Look, Marghe!" he said, good humoredly, pointing to a tall, thin, girlish figure that stood shyly back, pressing herself against a niche in the wall, panting with eagerness to be seen, and yet terrified at recognition. And the next moment Margherita was out of the carriage and was pressing the black-haired blushing child in her arms, kissing the dark face fondly, and holding it in her hands to look at it more closely. Yet she would not keep her waiting, even while she embraced her sister and walked on beside the carriage up the hill, holding Raffaella by the hand and talking to her in her own tongue. But at the turn toward the village the girl paused; and, after a word of inquiry, Margherita let her escape, once more seating herself by her husband's side.

"Well," he said, "what of the maiden? Why has she run away?"

"She would not come any further," replied Margherita, smiling, but with tears in her soft dark eyes. "She said she had promised our mother to turn home before she reached the village. And my mother will come up to see me in an hour or two—if you," and she turned toward Spencer, "have no objection? She would not come before; she thought it might be inconvenient."

"Upon my word," muttered Spencer to himself, "if everybody had as much tact and delicacy of feeling as your mother, the world would turn much more smoothly than it does!"

But they were wearing his own dainties, and a difficulty had presented itself. The carriage could go no further down the narrow, stony way, and Keith, on attempting to get out and walk the rest of the way, suddenly staggered, and would have fallen had not Margherita caught and supported him in her strong, young arms.

"Ah," she said, in terror, gazing into his colorless face, as she helped to lay him down, "what is it? Is he dying?"

"Mr. Spencer? Oh, Keith! Keith mio!" "It is only a faint," said Spencer; "he will come to in a minute. The journey is a little too much for him."

But he was himself greatly relieved when the invalid at a moment's unconsciousness, opened his eyes and smiled reassuringly into Margherita's anxious face.

He stopped the young man, however, with an authoritative gesture when he attempted to rise.

"No more of that," he said, peremptorily. "You are going the rest of the way in a different fashion."

And disregarding Keith's protestations, he made a sign to the stalwart young driver; and together they raised him in their arms and carried him down the narrow path, and through the little paved courtyard, up the short flight of steps. At the top of them stood a pleasant-looking elderly lady in a black dress and widow's cap.

"Here we are, mother," he said, as he passed her; "don't stop us till we're safe upstairs. That's Mrs. Keith."

The proceedings were somewhat comic—the abrupt introduction, the peculiar procession—but Mrs. Spencer was too deeply interested to see the humorous side of things. She took Margherita's hand in hers with a motherly warmth that was sufficient welcome in itself without words, and then hurried up the wooden staircase after the other three, to place pillows beneath the head of the invalid. It was of no use for Keith to laugh and protest his convalescence; he was made to lie down, forbidden to stir, and plied with a succession of appetizing dainties, with the exception of his cheerfulness in no whit relaxed Mrs. Spencer's determination to treat him as an invalid; it only availed to render more attractive to her maternal eyes the pale-faced handsome, young fellow with the beautiful wife, whom her son had brought to her to nurse.

Keith was at all times of a lovable disposition, but never more so to women than when ill and helpless. His natural sweetness of temper and pleasant gratitude for trifling kindnesses deserved their reward, and never had a

convalescent two more devoted attendants than he in his friend's mother and his own wife. He complained openly, though laughing, that he was allowed none of his own way, that he was a mere chattel in the ladies' hands; but he did not attempt to deny that, in his weakness, he found the bondage by no means an unpleasant one. In deference, however, to his strongly expressed wish, he was permitted a couple of hours later to receive a short visit from his wife's father and mother, shaking hands with them without rising from his couch. The padre he found a pleasant, sensible man of middle age, scrupulously clean and full of the quiet dignity of manner that distinguished his son Stefano. The madre was nervous and silent, unable to get over her shyness in his presence.

"Where is my friend Stefano?" asked Keith; and the padre informed him that Stefano had lately shipped upon a foreign voyage—on a vessel going to the Pacific, being anxious to fulfill his long-cherished desire to see something of the world.

It was some time before Keith again encountered his wife's relations. Their visits to Margherita were extremely rare, and it seemed as if they purposely avoided their English connection. Before many days had passed he was able to make his languid way down the few yards of pathway that led to the cliff-side, where he would lie for hours on the grassy slope, reading or dozing in the pleasant sunshine, his head resting against his wife's knee, her large umbrella over him, and her hand strong enough to walk along the rocky shadowed road to Anacapri, or to descend to the marina in the cool of the evening, and be rowed out among the many-colored shadows that fringe the cave-reefs.

One month was over he was quite well—even Mrs. Spencer, with all her motherly tyranny, was bound to admit it—and was looking at a pretty little long-deserted house, not far from his friend's, with a view to a residence for himself and Margherita.

And during all this time Margherita had seen but little of her own people. At first she often went to visit them—whenever she could spare an hour from Keith—and would sit by the madre's side, holding her hand, and telling her of her English life, or asking questions as to the home events of the past two years; but of late her visits had grown less frequent. She could not help perceiving that no affection of manner on her own part could make her mother fully at ease in her presence; that no efforts of her own could place them on the old footing of a perfect sympathy. She was striving after the impossible. It was not so much the fine texture of her dress, or the stylish trimming of her hat, that repelled the mother-heart; it was the change, the inevitable change for which she was not accountable—the changed worked in her by higher education, increased culture, more refined society. This influence it was that lay between her and the simple-hearted fisherwoman as an inseparable barrier.

It was of no use for Margherita to be loving and sympathetic; Lucia Rucchi might still regard her daughter with a sort of awe-struck devotion, but she could never more chatter to her in unrestrained patois regarding the padre's savings or Raffaella's progress in knitting. It was the law of nature; and as such Margherita presented it to herself bound to accept it—not, however, without a secret pang, none the less acute for its secrecy. Her home-coming she realized with pain, could never be the unalloyed satisfaction to herself or to others that she had pictured it. To every happiness in this world is attached some drawback; she had won her husband, but she had lost her family.

To Geronimo she had actually never spoken as yet one word. The young fellow avoided her recognition and eluded her presence with a diligence and pertinacity that betokened some strong inner feeling. Was it anger, or merely nervousness? Margherita was half amused, half sorry that her cousin should so turn the cold shoulder to her. She had not forgotten amid the changes of her new life, how in old days she and Geronimo had been childish playmates together, and how even as a boy the young fisherman had always displayed toward his favorite little cousin a gentleness almost amounting to chivalry—how he had always protected her from rougher companions, had invariably brought his fruit or toys to share with her, and how she had loved with Geronimo—even before the advent of her English lover, the undisguised attachment of the former had annoyed rather than pleased her—but she always preserved for him a kindly affection, which even his threat of murdering Keith had only served to temporarily extinguish.

Now she would fain have given him her hand and spoken friendly words to him; and she was sorry to see the obstinate resolution with which he avoided her. More than once she had caught a sight of his dark eyes abruptly turned away as she passed near, and a shifty figure whisking suddenly out of her path, but face to face he had never allowed her to meet him. More than one talk she had had with Teresina—who was beginning to get over her first embarrassment though still somewhat reserved and wholly respectful toward her old companion—and one day she asked her the cause of Geronimo's behavior.

Teresina blushed crimson, but tossed her black head with a moment's sanctity. "I know not," she replied, shortly. "Who can answer for the foolishness of a young man? Not I! He is shy; he is afraid, perhaps, of the Signor Ronaldson—he was rude to him one day, he says. He is without sense, is Geronimo!"

Margherita smiled.

"He ought to learn wisdom from you, Teresina. I hope he will some day. Meanwhile, you may tell him that he ought to know better than to run away from an old friend like me."

A couple of days later Margherita was walking with her husband down the stony causeway leading from the village to the shore, when, at a turning face to face with another figure, which started on seeing them, but had no time to escape.

"Well, Geronimo," said Margherita, in Italian, holding out her hand, "so you cannot run away from me now. You are the only one of my friends who has never given me a word of welcome since I landed."

Geronimo's face was scarlet, and his

eyes cast down, and when Keith too held out his hand with a good-humored smile, his embarrassment was pitiable. "Well, Geronimo," he said, "don't you know me, or haven't you forgiven me yet? Do you swim as well as ever?"

But Margherita, distressed by her husband's levity, or touched by her cousin's mortification, interposed quickly.

"Ah, don't mock at him, Keith, mio!" she said, in English; "he is sorry now, poor fellow, for his wickedness."

"Nonsense!" remarked Keith; "I consider that we were fairly quits. Tell him so, Marghe, in the right words. He wanted to drown me, and I very nearly succeeded in drowning him. Ask him when he will take us out on the water again—tonight?"

"I think he would rather not tonight, dear Keith," she whispered; "he is so shy, so ashamed of himself. But it is very good of you to forgive him so kindly."

"Good? Rubbish! Bygones be bygones. When are you going to get married, Geronimo?"

The color deepened in the young man's face.

"I, signor?"

"True, you? Don't you see that the prettiest girl in Capri is still to be had for the asking? If you don't someone else will, pretty soon. Teresina is too handsome to wait long for anyone."

There was no reply, as Geronimo turned away abruptly.

"Poor fellow!" said Keith, with a whimsical pity, "it's rather hard upon him. He is fairly bundled into Teresina's arms. He can't help himself; everyone is against him!"

"Ah, how could he do better, speso mio? Teresina is a good girl, and she loves him very dearly."

"True, quite true. And yet, my dear Marghe, we men like to have our own way almost as much as you women—and especially in the matter of choosing our own wives."

He laughed as he drew her arm through his, and they walked on; yet a moment later he flung his mind toward the young fisherman who, in the days gone by, had dared to love his wife. Did the fellow really presume to admire her still—to fancy that, for the sake of her, he could not wed another girl, one of his own standing and calling? "Pshaw!" it said, too mockingly, too absurd! Margherita was so completely his own now, so entirely one with him that it seemed as impossible as it was unpleasant to reflect that, little more than two years ago, she had lived among these people as their equal—had been to them as a companion, a possible sweetheart!

He laughed again to himself, but it was half uncomfortably; and he made no further suggestion that Geronimo should be their oarsman. Indeed, the meeting seemed to have done little or nothing in the way of changing the young fisherman's unsofiable mood. He still avoided both as carefully as ever; and his eyes, which had a habit of scowling when they encountered Keith's, seemed to look more coldly than ever on Teresina's beauty.

To be continued.

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