

**FLEMING
GEORGE**

VESTIGIA, VOL.

I.

George Fleming

Vestigia. Vol. I.

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CHAPTER I.

MOTHER AND SON

It was nearly five o'clock of a raw and windy afternoon in the month of March, 187-, when a young man, Bernardino de Rossi by name, came hastily out of an inner room of the Telegraph Office building at Leghorn, letting the heavy swinging door close sharply behind him with a disagreeable sound.

The room which he entered was one reserved for the use of the Government clerks. Its floor was bare; its high walls, painted the same dull uniform yellow as the rest of the building, were lighted from above by a row of small square windows, crossed with rusty bars of iron – an arrangement which involuntarily suggested a prison ward; and there was little to contradict this fancy in the appearance of the line of high desks ranged along three sides of the room, or in the expression of the figures bending over them. The names and dates and rude caricatures scrawled over every available space of plaster and woodwork seemed indeed an indication that such absorbed industry was not the invariable rule; but on that especial afternoon a dead silence prevailed. To one accustomed to the ways of the place it was a significant silence, broken only by the monotonous ticking of the telegraph wires heard through the half-open door of the adjoining room, and the rapid scratching of many pens.

At De Rossi's entrance one of the younger clerks, a mere lad, with pale watery eyes and a Jewish profile, looked up from his writing.

'Well, Dino?' he murmured anxiously.

De Rossi glanced at him and hesitated.

'It is all right. Only – I'm off.'

'Not – not dismissed, Dino?'

'Dismissed. Turned out. Turned off. Sent away without a character, like a bad cook. Put it any way you prefer it, it all comes to the same thing. But it really does not matter in the least. It was sure to come to that in the end. There is nothing for – for any one to be sorry about. So don't trouble – don't let any one trouble himself on my account,' the young man added rapidly, his face lighting up with a sudden very pleasant smile.

'But – Dino –'

'Who is making that noise? I ask you, who is making that noise there? By Heaven! you are enough to drive a man mad amongst you. Chatter! chatter! chatter! Nothing but gossip and chatter, like a parcel of idle women after mass. Government employees you call yourselves; my word, it is a useful kind of employment that,' interposed the large pale-faced man, who occupied a desk by himself, in the warmest corner, beside the stove, at the far end of the room. 'You were not speaking? Don't tell *me*, sir. I say you are always speaking – and to no purpose. Chatter, chatter, chatter! and slamming doors –'

'Come, come, Sor Checco. Come now; the lads mean no harm by it. I'll answer for them. They mean no harm,' observed another large, middle-aged individual, who was elaborately filling up an empty telegraph form, standing beside one of the desks provided for the use of the public. He spoke in a good-natured, husky voice. Despite the cold, the yellow fur collar of his enormous cloak was thrown wide open upon his shoulders, and from time to time he paused heavily in his writing, to rub his forehead with the blue and red checked handkerchief which he carried, rolled up in a ball, in his left hand. 'And as for their talking – as for their talking,' he went on soothingly, 'why, what

can you expect? Every donkey prefers his own bray. And our young friend's little accident with the door there –'

'Accident! accident! Who believes in accidents? Any fool can call a thing an accident,' retorted Sor Checco, with increasing irritation, standing up and giving an impatient push to his chair. The chair immediately slipped back against the nearest end of the fender, bringing the fire-irons to the ground with a loud rattle and crash.

There was a general laugh at the head clerk's expense, under cover of which Dino walked quietly over to his old place under the window, unlocked a drawer with a key which he took from his pocket, and began putting together some loose papers and a manuscript book.

One by one the clerks suspended their work, turning their heads to watch him, but no one ventured to speak again until worthy Sor Giovanni – having written out his despatch and read it over carefully, checking off each word on the thick square fingers of his right hand – turned about with a satisfied air, and catching sight of young De Rossi's occupation, 'Why, lad, lad,' he said, reprovably, 'you're never packing up your things to go on account of six cross words and a sour look? Come, come, my boy, leave that sort of thing to the women folk – God bless them! But a man can't afford to catch fire every time he strikes a match. Come now. Here is something different for you to do. Why, lad, if bad temper were a fever there wouldn't be hospitals enough to hold us all. Come now. Send off this despatch for me like a good fellow. And no nonsense about mistaking the address. Visconti, Guiseppe, No. 20, Via Tordinona, Rome. There it is all written out for you as plain as the blessed cross on the roof of the Duomo. And here is my franc waiting to pay for it. Fifteen words. You may count it over, you'll find no cheating. I'll answer for it you won't.'

He laughed a good-natured satisfied laugh, and dabbed at his forehead with his checked handkerchief. 'Come, my boy,' he said very good-humouredly, leaning confidentially across the top of the desk, and pushing over the paper and the money.

Dino looked up with a sharp gesture of impatience. 'Oh, go to some one else!' he began; and then seeing the other's beaming face so near his, and being always ready to be affected by a kind word or a kind look, 'I would serve you if I could, Sor Giovanni,' he added quickly; 'but the fact is – I'm no longer a clerk here. My name was taken off the books this morning. I'm dismissed.'

'Dismissed! Why, lad – why, God bless my soul! what have you been doing then?' cried Sor Giovanni huskily, bringing his hand down heavily upon the table.

Dino's face flushed; he gave a little laugh. 'Ah, that is the question!' he said, turning away with some slight embarrassment and beginning to fasten up his papers: they were letters chiefly.

'It *is* the question; there I quite agree with you. It is very much the question,' added the head clerk, Sor Checco, coming forward and resting both hands upon the back of the desk. He looked at the young man with a hard glance. 'Before you leave – and, as I had the honour of telling the Director this morning, it is a question of your leaving or of mine, – before you leave you will perhaps have the goodness to explain the nature of those documents which –'

'I shall have the goodness to explain precisely nothing at all,' retorted De Rossi promptly, standing up and thrusting the package of papers into the breast pocket of his coat. With the change of attitude every vestige of hesitation seemed to leave his bearing. 'To *you*, Sor Giovanni,' he said, looking at him very gratefully, 'I have to express my regret that circumstances prevent my doing you so trifling a service –'

'But – God bless my soul! But I don't understand. Come now, lad, what is the row all about? I don't understand in the least; upon my soul I don't. Why, look here. Here am I, so to speak,' – he unfolded one corner of the checked handkerchief, – 'here am I writing my despatches as quiet as a sleeping babe. And there is Sor Checco, poor man! busy in his own corner and thinking of nothing. And here are you –'

Dino smiled. 'Was Sor Checco thinking of nothing? It would be a pity to interrupt him. Besides, to him I have nothing to say. He knows my opinion of him,' the young man added sharply, with a sudden light of indignation flashing in his eyes. 'To the others here, – to my old companions –'

He looked down the long room, but at the sound of his words each head was bent lower over its work. De Rossi's face flushed and turned pale like a girl's. He bit his lip, where the smile seemed suddenly to have grown fixed and unnatural, and turned to a peg on the wall from which was hanging a long gray ulster coat. He took down this coat and put it on, buttoning it across his breast with a deliberation which could not entirely prevent his fingers from trembling. He took down his hat, and stood there for an instant facing the entire room. The light had almost faded away from the small high windows, but there was not a corner of those sordid yellow walls, not a face among those averted faces with which he had not felt familiar. Why, even the chief clerk's fault-finding had its associations with many an old foolish light-hearted joke – he had grown accustomed to the discontent, as a man grows accustomed to the rough handle of his daily tool. 'I wish you a very good afternoon. And – and I'm very much obliged to you for your kindness,' the young fellow said abruptly, turning to Sor Giovanni and putting out his hand. And then yielding to an impulse for which he never quite forgave himself, 'I have worked here every day for the last four years, and there is not a man in this room whom I would not have called my friend,' he said bitterly enough, and put his hat upon his head and walked out of the room before them all.

As he passed before the young clerk to whom he had spoken on first entering, the boy moved uneasily in his chair, muttering some indistinct word; but at the same moment Sor Checco's voice was heard giving a harsh command that the gas be lighted without further delay. 'And 'tis time surely for more light, when we lose so brilliant an example,' added a tall cadaverous-looking youth, who had hitherto sat silent, keeping a small but wary eye upon the stormy countenance of the patron. Dino could remember years after the pang of bitter and impotent resentment which made him start and clench his fist outside there in the long cold corridor at the echo of the sound of their laughter.

It was a cold clear night, with many stars and a piercing March wind, which set the gas lamps flickering in the deserted Via Grande; for it was a Saturday, and all the Jewish shops were closed; and even the few Christian vendors scattered here and there along the street seemed for once to have renounced both orthodoxy and profit, and were for the most part engaged in putting up their shutters with cold and hasty hands. As he turned, with the automatic accuracy of a man going homewards, out of the main thoroughfare into one of those many narrow streets which lie between the Via Grande and the port, it was indeed a wintry blast which struck the young man full in the face making him catch his breath with a gasp and thrust his hands deeper into the pockets of his long thin coat; but what was this violence of the outer air in comparison to that other fiercer storm, that tumult of hurt pride, of wounded disregarded sensibility, the passionate indignation, the hundred mad impulses and promptings which tore at each other and contradicted each other inside his breast? The recollection of his own last words came back to him, and every nerve quivered. He could have struck himself with anger and disgust at his own weakness in having spoken them. 'To have called them —*them*— my friends,' he muttered half aloud. 'If they were laughing at *that*!' he thought, and his face grew hot and cold again as he remembered their laughter.

It was not until he had actually quitted the street, and was rapidly running up the dark stair of a narrow building, that another thought seemed to strike him with a sudden power to slacken his impatient footstep and hold him, hesitating, outside a closed door. 'And the mother? what will she say to it all?' he asked himself, and looked at the latch-key in his hand. An expression of mingled weariness and defiance, the expression of a man who expects to find but short and scanty indulgence between the four walls of his home, crossed his face for an instant. He opened the door and went in.

First came a little hall, a mere passageway; beyond that again was a large low room, somewhat empty of furniture, with blackened rafters which divided the ceiling into squares. The walls were whitewashed, scrupulously clean, and quite devoid of character, but here and there a touch of faded

colour, – the blurred outline of a flying figure, some heavy tracery of fruit or flower, or line of tarnished gold, still spoke of the original painting of the roof. Facing the door a narrow window led out upon a rickety iron balcony, high hung beneath the eaves of the old house, and from thence in the daytime the view was superb, stretching across the Old Port and the New, over the sea, to the pale vision-like peaks of Carrara.

But to-night the curtain was close drawn. A single oil lamp, with a long wick, was burning on the mantelpiece; its light fell upon the bent gray head of an elderly woman, who was knitting busily, and only occasionally moving a little to cast an anxious glance at the contents of an earthen vessel which stood before the fire.

She looked up, with an air of almost painful suspense in eyes which had once been celebrated for their beauty, and which, even yet, shone clear and dark beneath the troubled brows; she looked up, still holding her knitting with both hands, as her son entered.

'Well, Dino?' she said breathlessly.

'Well, mother. You see I was not mistaken. I thought I should come home rather later to-night,' the young man answered, with an attempt at speaking easily. He came and stood before the fire, spreading out his chilled fingers to the warmth of the blaze. 'It is a cold night. I don't know when I can remember so cold a night,' he said absently. And then, rousing himself with an effort, 'Where is the little one? where is Palmira?' he asked, glancing around him.

'She has gone to spend the afternoon at Drea's. Italia came for her. It is Italia's birthday, and they said you had arranged to call for the child,' returned his mother slowly. She bent her head still lower over her knitting. 'You will want your supper before you go out again. It is spoilt now, with keeping. It has been ready for you this hour past. I knew nothing about it. I knew nothing of when you intended to come back. Perhaps that is one of the things which you had already settled – with Italia.'

'Dear mother, I am so sorry. But indeed it was unavoidable,' said Dino soothingly. He added in a lower voice, 'Even this morning I did not think there was much chance for me. And the moment I heard the Director's conditions I saw it was all up. They wanted to get rid of me, – my being at the demonstration was a mere pretext. Don't worry yourself about it, mother; pray don't. It must have come to this in the end. They wanted – they all wanted to get rid of me. And perhaps, all things considered, it is not so much to be wondered at.'

'Wonder? Do you think I have lived until now to wonder at any trouble overtaking us – at *any* misfortune?' interrupted Sora Catarina passionately. She took a few hasty impatient stitches, holding her work up close to her eyes, which burned painfully with hot tears of repressed disappointment. Then she rose abruptly, sweeping the balls of wool into some inner pocket; she took up the lamp, placing it upon a centre table. 'You are cold. You had better eat,' she said briefly.

'Thank you, mother. I am not hungry.'

'There were potatoes, too, cooked as you like them. But that was an hour ago,' she went on, taking a dish from the warm hearth and looking into it.

'Oh, it is sure to be good. It is my own fault that I am not hungry,' said Dino. He threw off his outer coat and drew his chair nearer to the table.

'Mother.'

'Well?'

She turned her head slowly towards him, and for the first time that evening their eyes met, – dark serious eyes, almost the only trace of resemblance between mother and son, the only feature they had in common. 'Well?' she repeated after an instant's pause. She was still standing; now she crossed the room to fetch another candle, which she lighted and placed before him. 'There is no reason you should eat your supper in the dark. It is little enough pleasure that comes here in the daytime, goodness knows. But you never did care about being made comfortable.'

'Mother, I think – I have been thinking of asking Drea if he does not want another hand at his work. I can manage a boat if I can do nothing else. And it will be something to go on with for the present. That is, if you have no objection,' said Dino, still looking at her rather anxiously.

'And if I had, what difference would it make? Will you not go your own way as your father did before you? What good has ever come of my objecting?' She had taken up her knitting again, and was turning it over and over between her trembling fingers. 'It is the same story – it began in the same way. It began so with your father. I have seen it all before,' she said in a hopeless sort of voice, and with a half sob.

Dino looked up quickly at the sound, and seemed about to speak, but her face was turned away from him. He remained silent, pushing away the untouched food before him, and leaning both arms upon the table.

'Are you going to that – to that place again to-night? I will never mention its name – to that club of yours? But of course you are. It is the same story over again. I tell you, like father like son. And sometimes – sometimes I ask myself what is the use of it all? Though I should work my hands off,' she said passionately, 'though I work my hands off trying to keep the place comfortable for you; trying to be respectable and keep up appearances, what is the good? As your dear Drea says, can one man lift both ends of a beam at the same time? And I'm tired of struggling against what I cannot help. Have your own way. I've tried hard enough, God knows, but there are no sails will keep a stone from sinking.' She got up restlessly from her place and walked over to the fire and came back again. 'Italia! 'tis my belief the girl has bewitched you all, with her baby face and those great eyes of hers. I spend my life, I make a slave of myself, for you and the child, and for what good? Why, even the child, even Palmira, it's little enough she troubles her head about me if she can get Italia to do so much as look at her. Italia! I don't say she is not a good girl –'

'Mother!'

'I tell you – Dino, I will not have you looking at me in that way. I will not have it. I am not saying anything against Italia, I tell you. I have not waited until now to have my own son teach me how to know a good girl when I see one, though, mind you, there's many a lass will sweep out the corners of the balcony while she's waiting to be married, and when she's got a husband – you'll not find her so much as wiping the dust off her own plate. Not that I am saying that Italia is of that sort. She is a good girl.'

'Yes,' said Dino lifting up his face. And then, as if there had indeed been some spell of comfort and of healing in the very sound of her name, he rose with a new look of light and gladness in his young eyes.

'Mother, dear.' He stood looking down upon her bowed gray head for a moment, and stooped and kissed it. 'I will go for Palmira first. But I will come back as soon as I can,' he said simply. 'Poor mother! it is hard for you I know. What you wanted to make you happy was a very different sort of son – the kind of fellow who never troubled his head about other people's doings, and who would have found out long ago how to get on with Sor Checco – confound him! Poor little mother. But we must even make the best of what we have. And you will see it will not turn out so badly as you fear. Come, mother, dear, look up before I go, and let me see that you are not angry;' he slipped his arm about her neck, forcing her to raise her head and look at him.

But although she yielded to the caress – 'I am not like you; I cannot change as the wind blows. When I mean a thing I mean it,' she said, sadly enough. And long after he had gone she sat still, as he had left her, gazing fixedly at the closed door. That door! how much of her life had she not seen pass through it, not to return, since the time when the years seemed long before her and she had found her chief pride, her chief plaything, in her handsome boy! Now, it was as if with every month that passed he were going more and more away from her, as the likeness to his dead father deepened. And the knowledge of this was like the painful pressure of a heavy hand upon her bruised mother's heart.

Disappointment, discouragement, and the rebellion against that discouragement, and all the weariness of a hard strenuous nature, for ever struggling, and for ever thrust back upon itself, were expressed in every line of her worn yet insistent face. She sat thus for what seemed to her a long space of time before she roused herself to take up her work. But before she did so she blew out both the candles. 'He likes plenty of light. They will do for him when he comes back. His eyes are young still, let him save 'em while he can,' she said half aloud, bending her own gray head still lower over her work as she knitted on and on in the darkened room. She let the fire go down to its lowest ember; what was the good of wasting warmth if Dino was not there to enjoy it? But, indeed, she was scarcely aware of the increasing cold, her mind was already so full of new plans for the future – projects in which she unconsciously disposed of the future action of her son as confidently as if he were still the little child she remembered, her docile bright-eyed boy, knowing no other law but the imperious rule of her anxious and exacting love.

CHAPTER II. FATHER AND DAUGHTER

As he reached the quay, and even before he was so near it, from the steps above, looking across from the bridge, Dino could see the light shining like a welcome behind the curtained window of old Drea's house. The wind had fallen a little, but not the sea. The flight of stone stairs leading down to the landing from the level of the street was wet and slippery with the salt spray; even here, in the shelter of the Old Port, the black water was tossing and heaving in the light of the rising moon. There was a continual movement, a backward and forward swaying, among the ships at anchor; a shifting of the level of the signal lights.

As he came nearer Dino could see that the friendly scarlet curtain had a great rent across the middle of it; he halted by the window, looking in with smiling eyes at the little group by the fireside. A young girl was sitting on a low stool beside the fire, with her back to the window; she was talking to a child who knelt beside her and was looking up intently in her face. The young man could not see that face, which was turned away from him, but only the outline of the dear round head, with its heavy dark twist of hair; he could not hear what she was saying; he could only watch the quick motion of her little brown hands. She appeared to be telling some story, which the child was listening to with bated breath. All about them were scattered books and pieces of paper; there was a guitar – an open inkstand – upon a neighbouring chair. 'Ah, the idle child! the idle little girl!' the young man said to himself with a half tender laugh, looking at those fallen papers upon the floor. And then he rapped once, twice, upon the window.

Italia sprang to her feet at the sound. 'Dino! it is Dino!' she cried joyfully, and flew to the door to meet him, with two little outstretched hands, and welcome beaming in her eyes. She led him in, away from the wind and cold and darkness. 'Father is coming, and we have been expecting you, oh, for hours. I know it has been such a hard day for you, you poor, poor Dino,' she said, in that sweet low voice of hers, which seemed made only to express the pity and goodness and loving-kindness of her gentle heart. She did not let go his hand: to the young man's fancy it was as if all the new light and warmth about him were radiating only from her look. As he gazed at her it seemed to him that he had never fairly seen her before: when she turned away again, blushing, he started as if he were awakening from a dream.

'We were speaking of interesting things. Italia was telling me a story. It was a fairy story – out of a book – but now you have come in and interrupted it,' observed little Palmira quietly, looking gravely up at both of them from where she still knelt upon the floor.

'But hush, you bad child. Why, Mira, surely you would not have our Dino think we are not glad to see him? And if we talk about fairies do you think our hard taskmaster will not begin to ask us about our lessons?' said Italia laughing, and still with that softest rosy flush upon her cheek. 'There! that is what we have done for you, signor Dino,' as she pointed to the scattered papers upon the floor. 'It was I who threw them down there, because – oh, because I had not done one of them. And I hate learning to write, it hurts my fingers; and then I can't hold my guitar. And this is my birthday, and Lucia is coming to supper with us – father has just gone over to fetch her – and see, I have put on the new dress she made for me; do you like it? But Lucia will scold me. I have not mended the hole in the curtain, and I tore it a week ago,' cried the girl with another laugh.

'Tis a pretty dress. Have I never seen you in it before? but you always look the same in my eyes, and whatever I see you wear is what I like the best,' Dino answered, looking at her fondly. He put out his hand and touched the sleeve of her cotton frock. 'You will wear this the day we go to Monte Nero –'

'For the pilgrimage? ah, yes. And this year we must take poor Lucia with us. And the Sora Catarina; – it would not be like Monte Nero if you and your mother were not with us. Do you remember the first time we went there together, Dino? I was twelve years old.'

'And you carried your doll into the church for the benediction; I remember –'

'Ah, but it was a very pretty doll. It was the old Marchesa gave it to me, one day your mother had taken me with her to the palazzo. I remember it so well: I had never been in such a big room before, and when Sora Catarina left me alone I was frightened, and I cried. And then the Marchesa herself came in and spoke to me. She had a long train to her gown that rustled, and it had gold things on it, like the dress of the Madonna. And when she dropped her handkerchief I picked it up for her. It was fine, oh, so fine! and white, like a cobweb, and it smelt of flowers.'

'Why did she not give you that instead of a doll? I would not have taken the doll. I despise dolls,' said Palmira, lifting up her little pale face again from her book.

'As if I had ever been as wise as you, you little monkey. Oh, Dino, I know I have been very idle all the week. And it seems so ungrateful to you after all your trouble. But I can't write, I really can't. I am like father, all my fingers are thumbs,' said Italia mournfully, shaking her head and looking down on her lap at her little sunburned hands. 'But you are not vexed with me? really not? I did not *mean* to disappoint you, Dino.'

'No, dear; I am sure of that. But now let us see these famous exercises. Perhaps they are not quite so bad.'

She gathered up all the books and brought them to him instantly, standing beside him with perfect docility as he turned over the blotted pages. 'Of course you write so beautifully yourself,' she said. And at that young De Rossi gave a sudden start. 'Indeed I had forgotten. When I am with you I can think of nothing else. But, Italia, there was something – I knew there was something I wanted to tell you – and, what will Sor Andrea say? For I have left the office.'

'Oh, Dino!'

'Not that I mind *that* so particularly; but what will your father say? I came down to consult with him about it. I –'

'There he is!' said Italia, quickly turning her head at the sound of a heavy step, and adding hastily: 'Do tell him, Dino – tell him everything; you know how good he is' – she sprang to open the door.

The first person to enter, blown into the room, as it seemed, by a stronger gust of wind, was a small, thin woman of about forty or forty-five. Her face and shoulders were closely muffled in a woollen shawl, which Italia promptly removed and threw into a corner.

'Dear Lucia, how good of you to come to us on such a horrible night –'

'If you would not mind – if you will give it to me I will fold it up properly; things get so easily worn,' the new-comer murmured, looking apologetically at them all. And then she put up both her hands – the thin, white hands of a sewing woman – and patted the bands of her shining black hair; her dress, too, was black, and scrupulously neat, with many shining beads and buttons upon it.

'I am so glad to see you,' Italia repeated, looking down at the little woman with an indescribable friendliness and compassion in her own kind eyes.

'Ay, it was rough work getting here for the poor little woman. I left her for half a minute while I stopped to look at the boat, and *per Bacco!* she came in ahead of me in the race. I could not find her out there in the dark; I thought she had been blown clean away, I did,' observed Sor Drea with a loud, good-natured laugh. He fastened the door and came up slowly to the fireside, – a short, strongly-built figure, with a decided lurch in his walk. He came up and laid his hand upon Italia's shoulder. 'Well, my little girl? Ah! this now is what I like,' the old man said, glancing over with a broad, cordial smile at Dino; 'this is the sort of thing that does a man's heart good, to come in and find supper ready, and a good fire, and all the old faces. Who wants to eat alone? Alone? Why, one isn't comfortable alone

even in Paradise; one needs an angel or two if it was only just for company. The blessed saints, they know better than to live separate, they do.'

'How do you know, father?' asked Italia, with a laugh.

'Perhaps I've met them. Perhaps I've had an angel or two to live with – there's no telling,' said her father, looking down at her fondly. 'Ask the youngster over there. Why, Lord bless you, my girl, when I was his age – But there, there, a sound man is a young man, and the only old men are the dead ones. What's the matter with the lad? What ails you, boy? Surely no one here can have been vexing you? You can't have been quarrelling with my little girl?' But at that —

'Quarrelling with Italia!' and 'Father!' they both protested in one breath.

Old Drea laughed good-humouredly. 'Well, well; 'tis a young sailor who does not keep ready for a change in the fairest wind. There's no such great harm in a friendly bit of a quarrel. And, bless you, lad! you and the girl there are too like brother and sister not to have found that out long before. There's no such great harm done, I tell you. Women, they are like caterpillars; they curl up if you do but touch them, but they go creeping on.'

Italia and De Rossi exchanged glances. 'Father,' the young girl began; she hesitated for a moment. 'Father!' She went up to him and took one of his hard and knotted hands into both of her own, looking up into his face with the sweetest look of entreaty. 'Indeed you are always right, dear, and our poor Dino *is* in trouble,' she said simply. 'He has left – he has been sent away from his office, and he has come to his oldest friends. You are not going to be angry with him, father?' Her sweet eyes were full of tears.

'The fact is, there has been a row about a demonstration. I don't know if you heard about it. It was last month, when they were enlisting the new recruits. And some of the republican clubs got up a counter procession and marched down the Via Grande with flags, and cheered Garibaldi. And then there had been a skirmish with the police – nothing very serious, but still – It was a foolish business altogether,' the young man confessed, hanging his head.

'Foolish? By – I call it by another name than foolish!' the other man broke out with sudden passion. 'Nonsense, Italia; let me speak. What does a woman know about such matters? I tell you it was a piece of rank mutiny aboard ship. You ought to have been clapped into irons, every man of you; and so you would have been if I'd had ought to do with you. So you would have been. What, sir; do you mean to tell me that you – you, a lad I've known, ay, and been fond of too, since you were a little chap as high as my knee, – do you mean to tell me, Dino, that *you've* been and joined a company of shouting fools with nothing better to do than insult the Government that pays and keeps 'em?'

'If the Government paid me the Government got my work in return,' says the young man, turning very red; 'and I was not the only one. I was only carrying out my club's orders.'

'Then I say, damn your club, sir!'

'Father!'

'Gesu Maria! Gesu Maria! ah, those men!' sighed Lucia under her breath, and grasped Palmira's shoulder convulsively. The child shook herself free with a contemptuous movement. 'Let me be. What are you afraid of? Look at Italia,' she said quietly, turning her small pale face and great eyes full upon the young girl. De Rossi, too, had turned towards her.

'Perhaps I'd better go now, sir. I am sorry I came in. I am sorry I troubled you,' he began in a formal voice. 'I ought, I suppose, to apologise –'

'Oh, damn your apologies!' said Sor Drea, starting up to his feet again, and taking a hasty turn across the room. 'Be a man, can't you? What is the use of apologising – of – of apologising, *per Bacco!* for what you are perfectly ready to do again – for what you mean to do again? Apologies! – yes – they're cheap enough in every market; – a good wind to torn sails. I believe in actions myself; in doing your duty by your masters and betters, and not hurting the people who love you, – not in fine gentlemen apologies – damn 'em,' said the old man, bringing his knotted hand down heavily upon

the table, and glaring from under his shaggy eyebrows at Dino with an unspoken world of troubled reproach in his keen old eyes.

There was a moment of silence, and then, 'Father, dear?' said Italia beseechingly, going up to him and slipping her arm about his neck.

'Ay, ay, my little girl. You're a good girl, I know it. A good girl, though I say it as shouldn't. But not even you – you can't think I am going to put up with this sort of nonsense from a youngster like that, a fellow who comes to talk to me of –'

'Who comes to ask advice of his oldest friends. And in your own house, father.'

'Oh, Lord help us!' said old Drea with a groan.

'And if you knew the whole of the story as I know it – I mean why it is that he has lost his place to-day. Stop, Dino. I know it is a secret, but I think it is a secret which I ought to tell my father. If you knew why he was sent away,' said Italia, in her sweet low voice, looking with beaming eyes full of affection from one man to the other. 'It is quite true what Dino told you about the procession, father, but there is more than that. There was another man in Dino's office who joined in the procession too. And they could not find out who it was, and they wanted Dino to tell them his name. And he would not. And that is why he had to leave.'

'There, there. Say no more, child, say no more. I spoke too soon and forgot to listen. My words were like so many kittens that are born in such a hurry they're born blind. No offence, lad. There, shake hands over it. Lord bless you; and so you wouldn't tell 'em that other chap's name – not to save your own place, eh? Ay, that was right, boy, that was right. But Lord, Lord, what a chap that one must be who let you do it.'

'He's a mere boy. He doesn't know any better. And it does not matter so much to me. I was not so anxious to stay – only on my mother's account,' said Dino slowly.

'Ay, she'll be fine and disappointed, she will. She takes things hard, does Sora Catarina. She always did from a girl. Have you told her yet, Dino?'

'Yes,' he said, glancing over at Italia.

'Ay, she'll be disappointed, she will,' the old man repeated slowly, wrinkling his brow, and looking at the fire, while he fumbled absently in the pocket of his pea-jacket for his pipe. 'So you came and told my little girl here all about it, eh, Dino?'

'I told Italia.'

'Yes, and he told me not to repeat it to any one,' added Italia quickly.

'Ay, ay. I'll warrant you he did. Ah, he's young yet is the lad; he's young,' said Drea with a quiet chuckle. 'When you find a woman who keeps a secret for you, my Dino, you may rest pretty certain she's got some of her own to look after. And even then you need not think yours will last her. Ah, they're a queer rigged craft are women, and a secret is the ballast they think first about throwing overboard if there's ever such a capful o' wind to make the sea a bit roughish. Your mother's the only she-thing in petticoats I've ever seen who can hold her tongue still between her teeth – and even she can only do it by not speaking. They're a queer rigged craft, and no mistake, eh, Sora Lucia? isn't that your experience? You'll have a deal to do with their tempers in the way of your business, I'll be bound.'

'Well, Sor Drea, it's rather like the pins and needles – there are all sorts. And it just makes the difference how much you can pay for them,' said the little woman primly, smoothing down the neat cuff of her sleeve.

'Lucia likes women better than men; they walk about the room without making a noise; and they understand about trimmings,' remarked Palmira, with a toss of her head.

'Eh, little one, and who asked *your* opinion? Little girls should be seen, you know, seen and not heard of – not heard of,' said the old man in a voice of affected rebuke. He put out his hand, and the child came up to him instantly, nestling against his shoulder, and rubbing her thin little cheek on the rough sleeve of his coat. 'I don't mind, I'm not afraid, if you *do* make a noise,' she said softly in his ear.

'Nay, nay, child. But you should mind. Little girls must mind what is going on about them, else how are they ever to learn their manners before they grow up?' said Sor Drea, still in an admonitory tone, but patting the little face near him as he spoke with a smile which the child understood better than his words. And then he looked about him, 'Well, Dino – Italia, my girl! – and how about our supper? are we not ready for that birthday supper yet?' he said aloud.

Italia had moved away, and was standing beside the window. She was perfectly aware that Dino had followed her there, but some sudden new shyness kept her silent and wondering at herself. She had pushed back the scanty curtain, and stood leaning her forehead against the coolness of the window-pane. Outside all was darkness, and one heard the sound of the breaking waves. It was a rough night, she thought to herself: and tried to say it, but somehow she could not speak: the words stuck in her throat, and would not frame themselves. In that singular moment she seemed to be leading a double life; – the old existence was there, the old safe habit of home and her father's voice heard beside the fire; and here – here was something different, an unknown feeling of oppression – an anguish of self-consciousness, pierced with sudden flashes of a new unfamiliar joy. And yet this was only Dino, whom she had known all her life; Dino, her old tyrant and protector and playfellow —

'You are not angry now? My father did not mean all that he said; he did not mean to be unkind – to you,' she said abruptly, turning her face still farther away and looking out into the blackness.

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