

FLEMING GEORGE

VESTIGIA, VOL.

II.

George Fleming
Vestigia. Vol. II.

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George Fleming

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CHAPTER I.

INCIDENTAL

There was a letter waiting at home for Dino. 'It stands there on the dresser; give it to your brother, child. One of Lucia's little nephews brought it, maybe half an hour after you were gone,' Sora Catarina said.

'It was Beppi brought it, Dino. He came with it on his way to school. He likes going to school; I asked him, and he said, "Yes." Mother, why don't I go to school? I wish I went to school,' said Palmira, in a complaining tone.

'School indeed! and a nice place you would find it, *bambina mia*. Nay, you be content to stay where you are looked after and get plenty to eat. Gesu Maria! 'tis all very well for such as Lucia's *nipotini*, poor children – 'twill maybe take their minds off their hunger, learning to read. But learning's a poor sauce to empty plates in my opinion.'

'Doesn't Beppi have anything to eat but empty plates?' asked Palmira, opening wide her eyes. She added, after a moment's reflection, 'But you gave him some white bread to-day, mother. I saw you do it.'

'Nay, eat your dinner, child, and talk afterwards. Don't you see your brother is reading?' said Sora Catarina, in a lowered tone, passing her two hands over the little girl's hair under pretence of adjusting her pinafore.

The letter was from Valdez. All the time he had spent in walking home Dino had been thinking of Valdez, planning about him, rehearsing in his own mind the words of some wild appeal which was to free him once for all from the intolerable burden laid upon his life. Last night seemed so far away. He had passed through a whole world of emotion since then. He had put Italia between himself and his promises to those men; he had made himself responsible for her happiness, and it was impossible, even Valdez with all his fanaticism must see that – it was impossible she should be made to suffer for him. Out-of-doors there, looking at Maso's good-natured simple face, with old Drea's cheery voice in his ears, it had somehow seemed such an easy natural thing that matters should arrange themselves. But this note was like a death-warrant. Before he opened it he knew there was no hope: the shadow had closed around him.

There were but three lines:

'I have reason to fear we are watched. Do not try to see, or communicate with, me until you hear again. Be prudent and patient: you will hear in good time. The child who brings this lives in my house, and is a safe messenger.'

There was no signature.

Dino crushed the note up in his hand with an impulse of personal enmity. He turned away from the window and took his seat at the table without a word, but no effort of self-control could keep his lips from turning white, or alter the fixed look of pain about his eyes.

'The letter was from Pietro Valdez, surely? Was it bad news, *figliuolo*? What has happened, in the name of all the blessed saints!' said Sora Catarina, clasping her hands and looking at him.

He made an effort to smile as he said, 'Nothing, mother; it's nothing. Valdez only writes to say I shall not see him; he will be busy for a day or two.'

'And is it not seeing that man could make your face go the colour of a piece of linen bleaching in the sun? Nay, *figliuolo mio*, I am not one of those people who think they are seeing through a wall

when all the time they are looking at their own reflections in a looking-glass. 'Tis nothing an old man could write you would turn your face that colour.' She lowered her voice. 'Tell me the truth, Dino. You have been having a quarrel with Italia?'

'No, indeed, mother,' said Dino, pushing away his plate and standing up. He could not swallow the food before him. He could see that his mother was not convinced by his denial, but it was easier to leave her under any delusion rather than to submit longer to the worry of a cross-examination. He took refuge in saying, 'I am not well; my head aches. I don't want any dinner. I shall go and lie down.'

'Yes, my Dino, yes. Lie down. *Santissima Vergine*, that it may not be the fever!' said Sora Catarina, crossing herself devoutly.

She kept going to the door of his room to look at him at intervals all the afternoon. About six o'clock Maso called with a long message from old Drea. The Marchese Gasparo had hired the boat for a three days' trip to Viareggio. If Dino was coming, he was to be ready immediately: the wind was fair, and Drea proposed to start before seven. 'He said I was to tell you the boat would be back on Saturday night, in time for Monte Nero,' Maso concluded, looking carefully into the crown of his hat and shaking it, as though to assure himself that he had forgotten there no part of his commission.

He waited for Dino at the door, and they walked down to the pier together. Gasparo was standing smoking a cigar at the head of the steps under a gas-lamp. He nodded cheerfully to Dino. 'That's right, old fellow. Glad you are coming,' he said. The two men were with him whom Dino had seen at the door of the 'Giappone' that morning.

They seemed to have many friends at Viareggio. The *Bella Maria* was kept in constant readiness, for there was no telling at what hour a message might not come down from some neighbouring villa, to be followed shortly by a company of pleasure-seekers bound for a sail. On one occasion Dino saw a face he knew among the cloaked and furred figures whom Gasparo was handing so carefully on board.

There was an unsteady wind that afternoon, and the boat was heavily laden: it was some time before Dino could look away from his task of watching the uncertain half-filled sails, but when at last the breeze struck them fully and the *Bella Maria* ran out of harbour on a long smooth tack, he could not resist his wish to see if he too had been recognised.

The Contessa must have been watching him, for the moment he turned his head their eyes met. He took off his woollen cap hastily, without speaking. She kept her dark eyes fixed steadily upon him for a moment.

'You have taken my advice then? This is wiser than building barricades,' she said in a low voice.

She looked as if she might have added something more, but at that moment Gasparo, who was sitting beside her sheltering her from the sun by holding up her parasol, – Gasparo leaned forward and repeated some remark.

The Contessa laughed. 'You think so, *vraiment*? It is not my experience. I find it is not only the virtues which require a certain elbow-room in which comfortably to expand. Some people fight against their own selfishness in this world, but mostly they fight the selfishness of their neighbours.'

'And why not? After all, it's other people's selfishness that one objects to,' said Gasparo gaily.

'And that is only out of disinterestedness,' struck in another man, who had not yet spoken. 'You are too severe upon us, Contessa. One never tires of virtue.'

She lifted her delicate eyebrows inquiringly.

'Well – not of other people's virtue: one tires of one's own perhaps.'

'But it's so seldom one has the chance of *that*,' added Gasparo lightly, pulling with one hand at the fringe of the big parasol. He had distinctly heard what had been said to Dino; but now, as his eye rested upon him, he nodded in a half-careless, half-friendly manner. 'She's going better now. We shall get more wind beyond the breakwater, eh, lad?'

'Yes, sir,' said Dino, putting on his cap again and going forward to coil away a loose rope.

Everything he had noticed in the last day or two made him feel safer about Gasparo. The young Marchese was an excellent sailor; he was absorbed in his present amusement; the two young men had not exchanged a word unconnected with the management of the boat.

Those three last days had seemed to Dino to pass like a dream. After his sedentary habits of life between the four walls of an office, the mere fact of being always out-of-doors and always actively employed would have sufficed to change all his impressions. He was intoxicated with fresh air, with sunlight, and the exhilarating sense of energetic work. 'There's no life like it, lad; no life like it,' old Drea told him more than once. 'Other men may make a better living, I'm not denying it; but to be content with what one gets in this world is to be the master of it. When you're as old as I am you'll find that you can't put one foot in two shoes, boy; it's a good plan to know what you want and be contented with it when you've got it – a rare good plan.'

'If only wanting were enough to get it,' said Dino bitterly.

'Lad, lad! *Bisogna dar tempo al tempo*– give time time enough to work in. But you youngsters are all alike; you expect to smell fried fish before the nets are even cast into the water.'

'That 'ud be a poor look-out for supper,' observed silent Maso with a grin.

'What! were *you* listening to what I was saying? Then I'm bound you'll be whistling for a wind before long, my boy; – you know the old saying, when you see a donkey listening it's a sign the weather is changing,' retorted old Drea, shifting his pipe in his mouth and giving vent to a dry chuckle.

But presently, as Maso moved away, Dino looking up found the old man's keenly-inquiring glance fixed full upon him.

'We've known each other a good many years, and each of us knows pretty well what timber the other's boat is built of. Without wasting breath, boy, – is there anything troubling you?'

Dino doubled up his fist and struck one of the rowlocks tighter into its place. 'Oh! every one is more or less troubled,' he said evasively.

'Ay; but there's a difference, there's a difference, boy. Little worries, Lord bless you! they're everywhere. And they're like a grain o' sand in your eye, no use to any mortal man, out or in. But real trouble's a different thing. I'm not saying there's no use in it, or even that a man ought to hope to escape it; it's only a fool would expect the wind always to be blowing from the same point o' the compass. And a real sorrow – an old sorrow – I've known it to act like ballast. It's heavy; ay; but it trims the boat. There's many a man wouldn't sail so straight about his day's work if there wasn't some dead weight o' that sort at his heart to steady him.'

He was silent for a moment, and then once more he looked with a kindly affectionate glance at the young man's flushed and averted face. 'I'm not asking for more than you want to tell, lad. When a real friend has got two eyes to look at you with, sometimes the best service he can do you is to keep one o' them shut. There's nothing easier than to sail when the right wind's blowing; you'll tell me all about it fast enough when the time comes. *Andiamo! corraggio, ragazzo!* It's a poor business looking at the sun with a cloudy face.'

He gave a searching look at the horizon, 'We'll be in in half an hour more if the wind holds – we'll have her snug in harbour before sunset. And then, hey! for a clear sky to-morrow and a day at Monte Nero. To-morrow'll be the finest day we've had this week, and I'm glad o't, I'm glad o't. I don't like having my little girl disappointed.' He turned his head towards the sunny semicircle of houses of the distant city. 'She'll be waiting there now to see us come in, *che Dio la benedica!*'

Dino, too, was secretly preoccupied with the prospect of that approaching meeting. He was the first to see her as they ran the long oars out to pull the boat in across the smooth water of the inner port. He saw her scarlet handkerchief, a spot of colour a long way off beneath the shadow of the bridge. She was standing in the same place as when he had last seen her, and it was like a good omen that he should have been the first to discover her at that distance.

She spoke first of all to her father, but as she put her little hand into his Dino was exquisitely conscious of the quick tremor of joy which made her heart beat at his touch. There was irresistible

delight in the mere fact of being near her. And there was no lack of brightness now in the face which turned towards her, or in the voice which wished her 'Good-night!'

'Until to-morrow, Dino,' she said, following him to the foot of the stone steps.

'A domani, cara!'

There was a bright fire and a welcome waiting for him in the old room at home. He stood before the blaze talking for several moments before he crossed the room to look at the shelf above the dresser where the letters were put.

'Are you expecting anything? There are no letters for you, my Dino; no, not even one little letter. Are you sorry? Do you mind?' Palmira asked, rather anxiously.

He stooped to kiss her. 'No, little one. I was only looking. I don't really want it at all,' he said laughingly.

It seemed like another good omen that there should be no news from Valdez.

CHAPTER II. ON THE WAY UP

The small stone-paved piazza of Monte Nero was crowded with men, women, and children, gathered together for the yearly pilgrimage of the Madonna. On one side of the square a flight of stone steps led up to the door of the church: the heavy leather curtain was rolled up half its length and fastened back to be out of the way of the coming procession; and massive wreaths of flowers and fruit swung from cornice to cornice above the open door. It was too early in the year as yet for many bright-coloured flowers, but the wreaths were white with the bloom of the first almond trees that had blossomed, and long rows of ripe oranges and lemons, threaded like beads upon a cord, were fastened in festoons about the old gray stones. The gold and softest pinky white looked very pretty hanging high up in the afternoon sunlight above the heads of the people.

It wanted a good hour and a half yet to the time appointed for the procession, and the cafe which stood on the opposite side of the square, and the open-air booths which clustered about its lower end, were alike full of eager, laughing, pushing, hungry holiday-making folk. The most correct place to be recognised in by one's friends was, doubtless, at one of those small green tables in the shade in front of the *caffettiere's*; but for that matter there were people enough everywhere, people all over the place, not to mention the two constant streams, one ascending and one returning, up and down, the worn old steps of the church. These were composed for the most part of women, leading small dressed-up children by the hand. The men were content to wait outside until the church bell itself should put an indisputable end to the little friendly glasses of bitter vermouth and the gossip. They stood about in groups, a sunburned hardy lot of fishermen and sailors, for the Santissima Madonna of Monte Nero is known to be the especial friend and patron of seafaring men; the church is crowded with votive offerings, rude pictures of sinking barks and drowning men, and always, in the corner, the glorified vision of the Virgin descending upon the waters to bless and save. The ceilings of some of the side chapels are completely hidden from view by rows of these representations.

Monte Nero itself can hardly be said to deserve its name of a mountain, being nothing in fact but a high grass-grown hill, rising behind the city of Leghorn and commanding a superb view of the sea. Near the top the country presents the appearance of a succession of grassy downs, across which a narrow path takes a short cut from the winding carriage road to the summit, and at this particular moment Lucia and Italia were walking hand in hand along this pathway, while Dino followed on the grass at Italia's side. The old people had remained in the *carretella* with Palmira.

'I don't think much of your plan of chartering a ship to get out before the voyage is half over, children. But do as you like, *ragazzi*, do as you like. What, you too, Lucia? Nay, I gave you credit for more sense than that, my woman. You'll not find Sora Catarina here getting out of a comfortable carriage to walk up a devil of a hill.'

'But Lucia is perfectly right. Some one must go with Italia. It would not look well if she were to be met walking alone with a young man,' interposed Sora Catarina very decidedly.

'E – e – h, *buon anima mia*, the scandal would be bigger than the sin.'

Catarina looked at him a little scornfully. 'You were different once; long ago. I wonder if there is *anything* that you would really trouble yourself about now, Andrea?'

'Well, there's my little girl. There isn't much else, I suppose,' said Drea good-naturedly. 'You know the saying we have, we sailors, – a wide shoe and a full belly, and take the storms as they come. That's my way of thinking.'

'Ah,' murmured Catarina, drawing her shawl more closely about her.

They had been young together, these two. Catarina could remember a time when to be alone with her, as now, would have been the measure of happiness to the hopeful, ardent young lover whom

the slow years had changed into this weather-beaten old man. To a woman's eyes there is always an atmosphere of youth left about any man who has made love to her, no matter how the years have passed since then. And it made no difference to her secret feeling of reproachfulness that she herself had perhaps much to answer for in this general lowering of Andrea's estimate of life. A woman betrays and remembers where a man betrays and forgets. And at that particular moment faithfulness seemed to Catarina to sum up all the virtues.

In autumn the morning freshness of the wood lingers late: there is something of the coolness of the dawn in the pine shadows long after the fruitful warmth has fallen upon the fields. And in some natures, growing old, there is left somewhat of this same touch of virginal freshness and charm. I think it is oftenest the case with women who have been unhappy in their youth – who have missed the placid midsummer fruition of content. They bear in their hearts an eternal unsatisfied belief in the spring.

She looked at Italia and Dino walking away across the sunny grass slopes: it seemed not so many years since she too had been walking there, going on the same errand to the same old church. She watched them with eyes grown bitter with a dreary sense of loss: it was like watching the mocking phantom of her own youth.

But to them the day seemed lengthening out into uncounted hours of pleasure. The sky was cloudless. The spring wind blowing over their faces held a magic of its own. 'Come and walk on the grass, Sora Lucia. Never mind the path – there is no place in the world like these downs. The air changes as it blows over the grass; it is like some one breathing; like a breath that comes and goes,' said Dino, taking off his hat and turning to face the wind. 'Look at the sea now. How far it is below us,' said Italia, stopping too and looking back.

'What a sea-bird it is,' he said, meeting her eyes with a smile of happy confidence. 'What would you do if you had to live inland, Italia?'

'Oh, I could not do it. I should stifle. I am always thirsty where I cannot hear the sound of the waves.'

'How can you possibly tell where you may have to live, *figlia mia*? It is true one does not go away from one's own town if one can help it, but a girl before she is married is like a bit of thistle-down, who can tell which way the wind will blow her?' asked Lucia in her subdued voice. She, too, was dressed for the festa, and her neat black gown contrasted with the blue and scarlet of the girl's holiday dress, much in the same fashion as her thin face, with its unvarying look of decent disappointment, served as a background for the young radiance of the face by her side. 'How can you tell whom your father will wish you to marry? It might be some one who came from a long way off, – like Dino's friend, the Signor Valdez, who lodges in our house. He comes from a country where they do not speak Italian, for all he looks so like a Christian.'

'I have not seen old Valdez lately,' Dino began.

If he wished to ask any questions Lucia spared him the trouble.

'He is a kind man that, – the blessed saints reward him,' she said, with a sudden fervour. 'And to think how long it took us to find it out, – and the world is hard enough, God knows, without one shutting one's mouth the days it rains comforts. But, *via!* we knew he was a stranger from over sea. What would you? when he said "*buon giorno*" or "*felicissima notte*" as one passed him on the stairs it was like a bear growling; it did not sound like real Italian. Many and many a day have I gone away to my work with the old *nonna* locked in our room, and my heart in my mouth, not knowing if it were better to leave her there, with all the children, and not a soul to go near them in case of fire. And me never so much as dreaming of asking Signor Pietro to stop sometimes when he passed the door to give them a look. Ah, he is a good heart, he is. And, as for his never speaking, well, there's evil talking enough in the world, God knows! a man can do worse things with his tongue than keep it quiet. As for those children, they are fairly bewitched; there's that Beppi, he follows Signor Pietro about like his shadow. It's Signor Pietro who pays now for his schooling, and such a bright lad as it is! You should have seen him the other day when Signor Pietro told him first about his going off on

a journey. Nothing would content the boy but bringing back his geography book from the school to show the *nonna* all the places.'

'Does – does Pietro talk of going away, then?' asked Dino, his heart beating faster.

'See that, now! and you such friends. But I always knew that Signor Pietro could keep his own counsel. Perhaps it's a way they have over there in the countries he comes from. Yes, he is going away. To Pisa first, and then perhaps to Rome. He says he wants a holiday, and no wonder. *Cose lunghe diventan serpe*, – drag a thing out long enough and it becomes like a snake. And it's two years or more since he has had a day's outing from Leghorn.'

They had been sitting down to rest on the short dry turf as she talked, but now, as they rose to climb the last shoulder of the hill, her sharp black eyes were turned scrutinisingly upon Italia. She gave some slight ejaculation of surprise. '*Vergine Santissima!* Italia, you have lost your ring – your beautiful ring. What a misfortune! Madonna *mia*, what a misfortune!

Italia blushed scarlet. 'No, I have not lost it. I did not put it on,' she answered hurriedly. And then, after a moment's consideration, 'Old things are best,' she said in her sweet full voice; 'I did not want a new gift, – I told my father I did not want it. He will keep it for me, he will give it to me to wear when I am married.'

'And you will wear it that day, my Italia?' asked Dino, looking at her and speaking in a very low tone, yielding yet this once more to the perilous delight of saying what he would have said, what he would have had the right to say, if only he could have hoped to escape from all the consequences of his past actions. The instinctive conviction that this proposed journey of Valdez's was in some way connected with the disposal of his own future gave Dino a still more intense longing to grasp at present happiness. He knew that he was acting ungenerously; yet, as the girl turned her face shyly towards him, – her red silk handkerchief tied about her head in peasant fashion made a soft shade about her temples and her little ears, coming down in front in a bright silken fold across her low forehead, hiding all her hair, and giving an almost Oriental look to the dark straight eyebrows and the dark lustrous eyes. The wind and the sun had brought a soft pink colour into her pale oval-shaped cheeks.

She was really looking very beautiful as she said, 'Why make plans for the future, my Dino? Surely we are very happy; we do not want things to change. The old things *are* the best. Why, even this pilgrimage to-day, – one would always care to come, of course, just to show the Holy Mother that one is grateful, – but it would be so different, it would be so sad, if we were to forget the other years that went before. This is the happiest year of them all, I know, yet I should not like not to have the memory of the times we have been here as little children. I like the old gate there at the top because that is the spot where we have always waited; I could open it myself quite easily, but I like to remember the days when it seemed to me wonderful that you could unfasten the lock. It is like that picture of my father's shipwreck, – you know, Dino, – the *ex voto* up there in the chapel. When I was a child I believed it had all happened exactly like that. Now I know it was painted by a man who has never even seen my father, but it makes no difference. I could never care for a fine new picture as I do for the old one.'

'*Anima mia!*' said Dino passionately, bending a little towards her, as she stood, leaning with folded hands against the old wooden gate. When she ceased speaking there was something almost childlike in the serene unconcern of her face. But there was nothing hard, nothing self-engrossed, in this *insouciance* of Italia's. It was merely the expression of a nature accustomed to a large and frank acceptance of daily life – a genuine indifference to petty devices. This fisherman's daughter, in her little cotton frock, had something in her of the wide-eyed serenity of an elder world; she had inherited from her father something of his cordial simplicity – 'a princely disregard of little things.'

It was only a minute or so before the *carretella* overtook them by the gate: they all entered the crowded piazza together.

The three women hurried away to look after the room which had been promised them for their night's lodging, but only a very few minutes were past before they too were back in the piazza, for now

the bells, which had been silent all afternoon, were pealing together with a short and merry stroke. The procession was about to begin.

Inside the dusky church there was an unwonted shuffling of little feet; a wavering of lights clutched by uncertain little hands; an anxious movement to and fro of black-robed *frati*, marshalling and adjusting the unruly lines of brown and flaxen heads. It was the children's part of the procession; and more than one woman in the crowd felt her heart swell and her eyes grow moist as she watched them, *poveri angeli!* A long broken line of small human creatures, in brightest holiday dress, and each with its burning taper, following the great golden Cross as it passed solemnly, borne on men's shoulders, out of the gloomy aisles, out under the wreaths of spring blossom, and down the steps into the warm afternoon light. That was perhaps the prettiest sight of all, as the twinkling tapers grew dim in the sunshine. And then came rows of young white-robed choristers, and the impassive faces of the officiating priests; the low sunlight burned like a jewel upon the tinselled stoles, and the reds and purples of the vestments were vivid and deep like the colour of garden flowers. The blue cloud of incense rose straight up, with scarcely a waver above the bent heads of the kneeling crowd, as the Blessed Sacrament was slowly carried around the piazza. The afternoon was windless, and the people so hushed, that even from the farther side of the square the priests' solemn chanting was distinctly audible, and the warning tinkle of the bell.

The last to descend the steps were a white-robed company of Brethren of the Miserecordia, with masked faces and hands hidden away under the long folds of their garments. They passed like a little company of the sheeted and forgotten dead, between the gay ranks of the holiday-makers; and, as they emerged from the shadows, the bells rang joyously overhead, a peal which set them rocking from side to side, in a visible triumph, in the old open belfry.

This was a sign that the procession was ended. There was an instant rush for the now empty church; there was just time to visit the holy pictures before supper, and if one had any especial prayer to offer, why, it was but natural to expect a little prompter attention from the saints, who might easily be supposed to be still looking down approvingly upon what was going on in their honour.

Drea and his party were among the first to re-enter the shadowy portal. There was scarcely light enough now in the side chapels to distinguish any unfamiliar object, but the old fisherman walked straight to where his own *ex voto* offering had hung these many years.

'Ah! that was a night, if you like; that was a night to remember!'

'Were you frightened, father?' said Italia, speaking in a whisper, not to disturb the people kneeling all about them, and asking the same question she had asked in this same place, at every recurring festa of the Blessed Madonna, since the first time she had been brought there, a small wide-eyed creature clinging to her father's hand.

'Nay, child, nay. It 'ud be a poor business if one's courage did not hold fast in the right place. It 'ud be like fastening one's boat up with a rotten cable, there'd be no depending upon anything then. But it was a night, that. A man who doesn't live at sea doesn't know the meaning of a prayer. Not that we had much time for speaking; but it seemed to come natural to think of the Holy Virgin then, – just as I thought of you, sleeping in your little bed.'

He looked at the picture again. 'Ay. We brought off the men and a fine bit of salvage; I mind me how pleased the old master was when I went up to the Villa to tell him about it. He was in his bed, I remember, and he wore a thing with a frill round his face, like a woman's night-cap. He was finely pleased. Everybody used to say he was going to leave me something in his will – something over and above my wages – as a sort of thank you. Your mother used to count upon it, poor soul! and so did I for a bit – I should have taken it kindly of the old master, I should, if he had remembered it at the last. We knew each other many a year.'

Dino and Italia exchanged a meaning glance.

'And if it were to come now, father? that would be better still; you could get a new boat,' she said, with a smile of irrepressible pleasure.

'Nay, child, the will was proven long ago. If there was ever any money coming to me – and the old master used to say there was, he used to say so – it stuck in the lawyers' hands years ago, like a boat aground. It never made any difference in my way o' remembering the old master. It would be but a poor look-out if one could serve the same master faithfully for twenty years – and I so used to him, knowing just what he meant when he swore the loudest – it 'ud be but a poor look-out if it only meant losing one's liking at the end of it. 'Tis a weak friendship that's so ready to call for the blessed sacraments at the first little knock on the head; – that's my way o' thinking.'

It was growing dusk, outside as well as in when they left the dim church, with its smell of fresh crushed bay-leaves underfoot mingling with the stale incense smoke, in a way which always carried Dino's memory back to very early days, when his father was still a trifle undecided about the exact relations of Church and State, and not unwilling to give his little boy the treat of staring at the lighted candles of the festa. The remembrance of his dead father's face rose vividly before him, and he lingered for an instant behind the others at the door, looking back.

As he hurried on to rejoin Italia old Drea touched him on the shoulder. 'The women will go to bed early, but I want you to come out a bit with me after supper, lad. I want to have a talk with you,' he said.

CHAPTER III. BY THE LIGHT OF A TORCH

They came out of their lodging, an hour later, into the deserted square. Lights were flaring in nearly every window, and in every house was to be heard the rattling of bottles and plates, and men's voices calling for more wine. But it was quiet enough out here, under the stars, in the empty piazza, where the last booths were being closed for the night.

They strolled over to the lower part of the square, and sat down upon the parapet; Drea was lighting his pipe.

'Look here, lad,' he began abruptly. The match in his hand went out, he felt for another in all his pockets, swearing the while at the mischance.

'May the devil fly away with all fine clothes, say I. For why should a man change his coat any more than his skin? I've worn this jacket every festa for the last twelve years, and I never yet could learn the trick o' its inside.'

'I've got lights,' said Dino.

'Nay, lad, where there's a way out there's a way in. I'll not be beat by it, thanking you kindly.'

He puffed at his pipe thoughtfully before he spoke again.

'It's a good many years now since the first time I came up here. Lord, how the years go! I mind me – Your mother was a young woman then, Dino; no older than my little girl there, and I was a wild young fellow. Well, well; it seems more than one lifetime ago. I'm getting to be an old man now, my Dino. It gave me a start the other night to hear our young master speak of it, but it's true enough for all that.'

'Perhaps it is. But you never seem old to me, Sor Drea.'

'I've had my turn at it, lad; I can't complain. But maybe the Captain was right about my settling down; maybe he was right. I don't suppose I can be far off sixty. The old master lived to be seventy-two, he did; but then he lived like a wax image packed in cotton wool. And when a man's knocking about day and night, why, Death needs no lantern to find him.'

He took his pipe out of his mouth and looked at it.

'There isn't much to leave behind me, lad. Only the old boat, and Italia. She'll miss me, will my little girl. She's wonderful fond of her old father. But you'll look after her; you'll be good to her, Dino?'

There was no answer.

'You see, it isn't as if I were leaving her to strangers. But I've been fond o' you, boy, since you were that high; when you used to come to play with her in the old boat, and I used to sit and watch you and wish I had a little curly-headed chap like you, that 'ud grow up and help me about the nets. My girl's a good girl; but a boy 'ud have been different.'

He was silent for a moment; then he put his pipe back into his mouth and gave a slight chuckle. 'There's no basket without its handle; that's sure enough. I've got 'em both now, girl and boy too. I was an old fool not to have thought of it sooner; but it's difficult to see that the children have grown up, when you remember them so high. Well, lad, I give you joy, I do. She's very fond o' you. There's only one thing I want to speak to you about. It's all plain sailing before you then.'

'And what is that?' asked Dino, very quietly.

His face was in shadow, but there was that in his voice which startled the old man with a foreboding of coming trouble. He leaned forward, peering anxiously into the darkness. 'Eh? what's that, lad, what's that you're saying?'

'You say there is one thing you wish to speak to me about before – before I can be affianced to Italia. I ask you what it is.'

'Nay, my Dino, I said nought about being affianced, if that's what's troubling you. Not but what I could easily find another husband for her; there's Maso, now; as honest a lad as ever hauled at a rope, and a good bit o' money too, all in the bank. But what does that matter? I've never promised her to you; but it would be but a poor sort o' friendship that only depended upon words. I've done more than give you my promise, lad; I've trusted you, I have.'

'Good God!' said Dino, under his breath, looking up with blank eyes at the clear starlit sky above him.

'There's no need for many words to settle it.' He hesitated; and then went on with sudden fluency as if the long meditated speech were forcing its own way out. 'See here, lad. It's not so much more than a week since you lost your place because o' that infernal tomfoolery of a procession. I'm not casting it up at you, my boy; not I. But there 'tis; you made a mistake. It might have been a worse one, for you meant no harm, and as things go it's all turned out for the best. I wouldn't have cared to marry my little girl to a writing fellow, and you've got the make of a sailor in you, lad; I always said it. When God Almighty shuts one door in an honest man's face, if you look about you you'll see He's opened another. But it might ha' turned out different.'

He lowered his voice, and added: 'I don't blame you, but I've kept my ears open, and there are things said about you that I don't like; I don't like. When a man lets his net down to the bottom he's sure to catch mud. I saw your father do it. *He* called himself a republican too. You must give it up, my Dino.'

'I can't do that,' said Dino, in a very low voice.

The words implied so much to himself that he could scarcely believe in the reality of things – he felt involved in the fantastic irony of a dream – when Drea burst out laughing, good-naturedly.

'Why, lad, you don't understand me? Where are your wits? I am speaking Italian, *mi pare*. It isn't to oblige me I want you to give up that confounded club of yours, and all the nonsense that goes with it. It's so that you can marry Italia. Why, lad, one would think that I was torturing you instead of telling you how to marry your sweetheart. *You* one o' those damned radical rogues, my Dino, the little chap I taught how to handle an oar? Come, come, lad, drop the nonsense. It's being shut up between four walls that put it into you, I'll go bail. Politics! Lord bless you! a capful o' wind will soon blow 'em out of you. They're like weevils in a biscuit, they eat all the good; you can't get rid o' them too quickly.'

'Drea, it is you who will not understand. You are unjust; you have always been unjust to my father. But his ideas are mine. I will not –' he stopped, with a horrible sense of sinking at his heart. What were these ideas to which he professed himself so willing to sacrifice all the rest? But it was imperatively necessary to make Drea understand the situation. 'I cannot give up my – my convictions. For no reason in the world. Not even to marry Italia.'

There was an instant of terrible silence.

'Are you mad, boy?' demanded Drea, in a sort of subdued growl.

'I am not mad,' Dino answered.

It was a relief to look forward to an explosion of the old man's anger; anything – anything rather than that tone of affectionate trust.

'I am not mad. I don't know why I'm not. I'm unhappy enough for that, or for anything else,' he said, wearily.

'Unhappy – !'

The old man checked himself, breathing hard.

One of the last vendors of cakes and sweetmeats had gone, leaving his torch of tarred stick to flare itself away in the empty piazza. Drea sat rigid, his eyes fixed upon that spot of light. But he was too deeply moved to keep quiet: the old habit of affection was strong upon him; it was stronger than his pride. 'I would not have believed it of you, Dino. But you'll think better of it, lad; you'll think better of it. One thinks that one has only to pick and choose in life when one is young. When a boat is running straight before the wind any fool can steer her. Later on you begin to find out that things

have their own consequences; you might as well ask for a fish without its bones as for a life without trouble. I didn't expect this, though. If it were anybody but you, lad; you that I've knowed from a boy.'

'I – I can't stand this,' said Dino, huskily.

He got up to his feet and walked away a few paces. The old man followed him.

'Lad! –'

He laid his heavy hand upon Dino's shoulder. "Tis easier to make wounds than to heal 'em. I don't want to be hard on you, God knows. I'll give you another chance, lad. Perhaps you've gone too far with those scoundrels to break off short i' this way – without with your leave or by your leave. Perhaps I was unreasonable to expect it. For the devil shows a man plain enough how to get into a mess like that, but he leaves him to steer his own way out. You might feel it upon your honour not to break wi' them without a word o' warning; and honour's a delicate stuff, if you handle it you soil it in the touching. I've been an old fool; I ought to have thought of all that sooner. But I'll give you another chance, lad. Look here. We'll let things stay as they are for the present. I won't keep you from seeing her; and I'll give you three months' time to free yourself from all this black business. *Perdio!* 'tis a fair offer. Promise me that in three months you will come and ask me for Italia, and there's my hand on it. Why, lad, I couldn't have trusted my little girl to any man but you.' He spoke in the old cordial voice again, with a cheery ring in the brave words.

'Oh my God,' said Dino, turning away from him, 'what am I to do to make this man understand?'

Andrea's arm fell to his side. He groaned, and put up his other hand to his forehead as if he had received a blow. 'It can't be, lad – I tell you it *can't* be,' he said in a broken voice.

A party of holiday-makers came out of a house at some distance, crossing the piazza at its farther end. The women were laughing and chattering as they went by. A young man called loudly for silence, and began to play the refrain of a love-song upon his mandoline. The swift, audacious tripping of the music came back to them from a long distance through the stillness of the night, and then again all was quiet.

Andrea took a quick step forward. He seized the blazing remnant of the torch from its hole in the wall, and waved it suddenly before Dino's eyes. The young man gave an involuntary start backwards.

'Oh, don't be frightened,' said Drea, with an odd laugh, 'I am only looking at your face. I feel as if I had never seen it properly. I want to remember the look of a man who cares more for the good opinion of a pack o' lying scoundrels than he cares for his oldest friends; a man who could teach my girl to love him; who could steal her heart from her; who could bear to look on at all her pretty little ways, and she all the while not knowing. I'm an old man, and perhaps I don't understand,' he said, with bitter simplicity, 'But I have lived sixty years in this world, and I've been honest. I never betrayed a trust.'

He let the torch fall on the stones between them. The light shone full upon his white hair.

'I loved you like my son, Dino. I would not change places with you to-night.'

As he turned away Dino sprang forward with some passionate inarticulate ejaculation of despair. 'Andrea! – Drea – don't, don't leave me like this. Drea! you are the oldest, the best friend I've ever had; you can't believe. – You must be mad not to see how I love her –'

The old man half paused, then shook his hand with a gesture of unbelief.

'If it had been anybody but *you*, lad – you, that I've knowed from a boy –'

He entered the darkened house, shutting the door behind him.

It had only taken a few minutes; the voices of the women were still audible, and the sound of the mandoline.

CHAPTER IV. LA MORT DANS L'ÂME

The masses of the downs were gray and shadowy; there was only a faint streak of red in the eastern sky, and the whitened stones of the piazza had that peculiar look of stillness which transfigures familiar places seen at early dawn, when Dino came out of the house in which he had spent the night.

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