

**ДЖИН
УЭБСТЕР**

JERRY

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Jerry

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Jerry:

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Jean Webster

Jerry

CHAPTER I

The courtyard of the Hotel du Lac, furnished with half a dozen tables and chairs, a red and green parrot chained to a perch, and a shady little arbour covered with vines, is a pleasant enough place for morning coffee, but decidedly too sunny for afternoon tea. It was close upon four of a July day, when Gustavo, his inseparable napkin floating from his arm, emerged from the cool dark doorway of the house and scanned the burning vista of tables and chairs. He would never, under ordinary circumstances, have interrupted his siesta for the mere delivery of a letter; but this particular letter was addressed to the young American man, and young American men, as every head waiter knows, are an unreasonably impatient lot. The courtyard was empty, as he might have foreseen, and he was turning with a patient sigh towards the long arbour that led to the lake, when the sound of a rustling paper in the summer-house deflected his course. He approached the doorway and looked inside.

The young American man, in white flannels with a red guide-book protruding from his pocket, was comfortably stretched in a lounging chair engaged with a cigarette and a copy of the

Paris *Herald*. He glanced up with a yawn—excusable under the circumstances—but as his eye fell upon the letter he sprang to his feet.

‘Hello, Gustavo! Is that for me?’

Gustavo bowed.

‘*Ecco!* She is at last arrive, ze lettair for which you haf so moch wesh.’ He bowed a second time and presented it. ‘Meestair Jayreen Ailyar!’

The young man laughed.

‘I don’t wish to hurt your feelings, Gustavo, but I’m not sure I should answer if my eyes were shut.’

He picked up the letter, glanced at the address to make sure—the name was Jerymn Hilliard, Jr.—and ripped it open with an exaggerated sigh of relief. Then he glanced up and caught Gustavo’s expression. Gustavo came of a romantic race; there was a gleam of sympathetic interest in his eye.

‘Oh, you needn’t look so knowing! I suppose you think this is a love-letter? Well it’s not. It is, since you appear to be interested, a letter from my sister informing me that they will arrive to-night, and that we will pull out for Riva by the first boat to-morrow morning. Not that I want to leave you, Gustavo, but—Oh thunder!’

He finished the reading in a frowning silence while the waiter stood at polite attention, a shade of anxiety in his eye—there was usually anxiety in his eye when it rested on Jerymn Hilliard, Jr. One could never foresee what the young man would call for

next. Yesterday he had rung the bell and demanded a partner to play lawn tennis, as if the hotel kept partners laid away in drawers like so many sheets.

He crumpled up the letter and stuffed it in his pocket.

‘I say, Gustavo, what do you think of this? They’re going to stay in Lucerne till the tenth—that’s next week—and they hope I won’t mind waiting; it will be nice for me to have a rest. A rest, man, and I’ve already spent three days in Valedolmo!’

‘*Si, signore, you will desire ze same room?*’ was as much as Gustavo thought.

‘Ze same room? Oh, I suppose so.’

He sank back into his chair and plunged his hands into his pockets with an air of sombre resignation. The waiter hovered over him, divided between a desire to return to his siesta, and a sympathetic interest in the young man’s troubles. Never before in the history of his connexion with the Hotel du Lac had Gustavo experienced such a munificent, companionable, expansive, entertaining, thoroughly unique and inexplicable guest. Even the fact that he was American scarcely accounted for everything.

The young man raised his head and eyed his companion gloomily.

‘Gustavo, have you a sister?’

‘A sister?’ Gustavo’s manner was uncomprehending but patient. ‘*Si, signore, I have eight sister.*’

‘Eight! Merciful saints. How do you manage to be so

cheerful?'

'Tree is married, signore, one uvver is betrofed, one is in a convent, one is dead, and two is babies.'

'I see—they're pretty well disposed of; but the babies will grow up, Gustavo, and as for that betrothed one, I should still be a little nervous if I were you; you can never be sure they are going to stay betrothed. I hope she doesn't spend her time chasing over the map of Europe making appointments with you to meet her in unheard of little mountain villages where the only approach to Christian reading matter is a *Paris Herald* four days old, and then doesn't turn up to keep her appointments?'

Gustavo blinked. His supple back achieved another bow.

'Sank you,' he murmured.

'And you don't happen to have an aunt?'

'An aunt, signore?' There was vagueness in his tone.

'Yes, Gustavo, an aunt. A female relative who reads you like an open book, who sees your faults and skips your virtues, who remembers how dear and good and obliging your father was at your age, who hoped great things of you when you were a baby, who had intended to make you her heir but has about decided to endow an orphan asylum—have you, Gustavo, by chance an aunt?'

'*Si*, signore.'

'I do not think you grasp my question. An *aunt*—the sister of your father, or perhaps your mother.'

A gleam of illumination swept over Gustavo's troubled

features.

‘*Ecco!* You would know if I haf a *zia*—a aunt—yes, zat is it. A aunt. *Sicuramente*, signore, I haf ten—leven aunt.’

‘Eleven aunts! Before such a tragedy I am speechless; you need say no more, Gustavo, from this moment we are friends.’

He held out his hand. Gustavo regarded it dazedly; then, since it seemed to be expected, he gingerly presented his own. The result was a shining newly-minted two-lire piece. He pocketed it with a fresh succession of bows.

‘*Grazie tanto!* Has ze signore need of anysing?’

‘Have I need of anysing?’ There was reproach, indignation, disgust in the young man’s tone. ‘How can you ask such a question, Gustavo? Here am I, three days in Valedolmo, with seven more stretching before me. I have plenty of towels and soap and soft-boiled eggs, if that is what you mean; but a man’s spirit cannot be nourished on soap and soft-boiled eggs. What I need is food for the mind—diversion, distraction, amusement—no, Gustavo, you needn’t offer me the *Paris Herald* again. I already know by heart the list of guests in every hotel in Switzerland.’

‘Ah, it is diversion zat you wish? Have you seen zat ver’ beautiful Luini in ze chapel of San Bartolomeo? It is four hundred years old.’

‘Yes, Gustavo, I have seen the Luini in the chapel of San Bartolomeo. I derived all the pleasure to be got out of it the first afternoon I came.’

‘Ze garden of Prince Sartonio-Crevelli? Has ze signore seen

ze cedar of Lebanon in ze garden of ze prince?’

‘Yes, Gustavo, the signore has seen the cedar of Lebanon in the garden of the prince, also the ilex tree two hundred years old and the india-rubber plant from South America. They are extremely beautiful, but they don’t last a week.’

‘Have you swimmied in ze lake?’

‘It is lukewarm, Gustavo.’

The waiter’s eyes roved anxiously. They lighted on the lunette of shimmering water and purple mountains visible at the farther end of the arbour.

‘Zere is ze view,’ he suggested humbly. ‘Ze view from ze water front is consider ver’ beautiful, ver’ nice. Many foreigners come entirely for him. You can see Lago di Garda, Monte Brione, Monte Baldo wif ze ruin castle of ze Scaliger, Monte Maggiore, ze Altissimo di Nago, ze snow cover peak of Monte—’

Mr. Jerymn Hilliard, Jr., stopped him with a gesture.

‘That will do; I read Baedeker myself, and I saw them all the first night I came. You must know at your age, Gustavo, that a man can’t enjoy a view by himself; it takes two for that sort of thing.—Yes, the truth is that I am lonely. You can see yourself to what straits I am pushed for conversation. If I had your command of language, now, I would talk to the German Alpine climbers.’

An idea flashed over Gustavo’s features.

‘Ah, zat is it! Why does not ze signore climb mountains? Ver’ helpful; ver’ diverting. I find guide.’

‘You needn’t bother. Your guide would be Italian, and it’s too

much of a strain to talk to a man all day in dumb show.' He folded his arms with a weary sigh. 'A week of Valedolmo! An eternity!'

Gustavo echoed the sigh. Though he did not entirely comprehend the trouble, still he was of a generously sympathetic nature.

'It is a pity,' he observed casually, 'zat you are not acquaint wif ze Signor Americano who lives in Villa Rosa. He also finds Valedolmo undiverting. He comes—but often—to talk wif me. He has fear of forgetting how to spik Angleesh, he says.'

The young man opened his eyes.

'What are you talking about—a Signor Americano here in Valedolmo?'

'*Scuramente*, in zat rose-colour villa wif ze cypress trees and ze *terrazzo* on ze lake. His daughter, la Signorina Costantina, she live wif him—ver' young, ver' beautiful'—Gustavo rolled his eyes and clasped his hands—'beautiful like ze angels in Paradise—and she spik Italia like I spik Angleesh.'

Jerymn Hilliard, Jr., unfolded his arms and sat up alertly.

'You mean to tell me that you had an American family up your sleeve all this time and never said a word about it?' His tone was stern.

'*Scusi*, signore, I have not known zat you have ze plaisir of zer acquaintance.'

'The pleasure of their acquaintance! Good heavens, Gustavo, when one shipwrecked man meets another shipwrecked man on a desert island must they be introduced before they can speak?'

‘*Si, signore.*’

‘And why, may I ask, should an intelligent American family be living in Valedolmo?’

‘I do not know, signore. I have heard ze Signor Papa’s healf was no good, and ze doctors in Americk’ zay say to heem, “You need change, to breave ze beautiful climate of Italia.” And he say, “All right, I go to Valedolmo.” It is small, signore, but ver’ *famosa*. Oh, yes, *molto famosa*. In ze autumn and ze spring foreigners come from all ze world—Angleesh, French, German—*tutti!* Ze Hotel du Lac is full. Every day we turn peoples away.’

‘So! I seem to have struck the wrong season.—But about this American family, what’s their name?’

‘La familia Veeldair from Nuovo York.’

‘Veeldair.’ He shook his head. ‘That’s not American, Gustavo, at least when you say it. But never mind, if they come from New York it’s all right. How many are there—just two?’

‘But no! Ze papa and ze signorina and ze—ze—’ he rolled his eyes in search of the word—‘ze aunt!’

‘Another aunt! The sky appears to be raining aunts to-day. What does she do for amusement—the signorina who is beautiful as the angels?’

Gustavo spread out his hands.

‘Valedolmo, signore, is on ze frontier. It is—what you say—garrison *città*. Many soldiers, many officers—captains, lieutenants, wif uniforms and swords. Zay take tea on ze *terrazzo* wif ze Signor Papa and ze Signora Aunt, and most *specialmente*

wif ze Signorina Costantina. Ze Signor Papa say he come for his healf, but if you ask me, I sink maybe he come to marry his daughter.'

'I see! And yet, Gustavo, American papas are generally not so keen as you might suppose about marrying their daughters to foreign captains and lieutenants even if they have got uniforms and swords. I shouldn't be surprised if the Signor Papa were just a little nervous over the situation. It seems to me there might be an opening for a likely young fellow speaking the English language, even if he hasn't a uniform and sword. How does he strike you?'

'*Si, signore.*'

'I'm glad you agree with me. It is now five minutes past four; do you think the American family would be taking a siesta?'

'I do not know, signore.' Gustavo's tone was still patient.

'And whereabouts is the rose-coloured villa with the terrace on the lake?'

'It is a quarter of a hour beyond ze Porta Sant' Antonio. If ze gate is shut you ring at ze bell and Giuseppe will open. But ze road is ver' hot and ver' dusty. It is more cooler to take ze paf by ze lake. Straight to ze left for ten minutes and step over ze wall; it is broken in zat place and quite easy.'

'Thank you, that is a wise suggestion; I shall step over the wall by all means.' He jumped to his feet and looked about for his hat. 'You turn to the left and straight ahead for ten minutes? Good-bye then till dinner. I go in search of the Signorina Costantina who is beautiful as the angels in Paradise, and who lives in a

rose-coloured villa set in a cypress grove on the shores of Lake Garda—not a bad setting for romance, is it, Gustavo?—Dinner, I believe, is at seven o'clock?

‘*Si, signore*, at seven; and would you like veal cooked Milanese fashion?’

‘Nothing would please me more. We have only had veal Milanese fashion five times since I came.’

He waved his hand jauntily and strolled whistling down the arbour that led to the lake. Gustavo looked after him and shook his head. Then he took out the two-lire piece and rang it on the table. The metal rang true. He shrugged his shoulders and turned back indoors to order the veal.

CHAPTER II

The terrace of Villa Rosa juts out into the lake, bordered on three sides by a stone parapet, and shaded above by a yellow-ochre awning. Masses of oleanders hang over the wall and drop pink petals into the blue waters below. As a study in colour the terrace is perfect, but, like the courtyard of the Hotel du Lac, decidedly too hot for mid-afternoon. To the right of the terrace, however, is a shady garden set in alleys of cypress trees, and separated from the lake by a strip of beach and a low balustrade. There could be no better resting-place for a warm afternoon.

It was close upon four—five minutes past to be accurate—and the usual afternoon quiet that enveloped the garden had fled before the garrulous advent of four girls. Three of them, with black eyes and blacker hair, were kneeling on the beach thumping and scrubbing a pile of linen. In spite of their chatter they were working busily, and the grass beyond the water-wall was already white with bleaching sheets, while a lace-trimmed petticoat fluttered from a near-by oleander, and rows of silk stockings stretched the length of the parapet. The most undeductive observer would have guessed by this time that the pink villa, visible through the trees, contained no such modern conveniences as stationary tubs.

The fourth girl, with grey eyes and yellow-brown hair, was sitting at ease on the balustrade, fanning herself with a wide-

brimmed hat and dangling her feet, clad in white tennis shoes, over the edge. She wore a suit of white linen cut sailor fashion, low at the throat and with sleeves rolled to the elbows. She looked very cool and comfortable and free as she talked, with the utmost friendliness, to the three girls below. Her Italian, to an unaccustomed ear, was exactly as glib as theirs.

The washer-girls were dressed in the gayest of peasant clothes—green and scarlet petticoats, flowered kerchiefs, coral beads and flashing earrings; you would have to go far into the hills in these degenerate days before meeting their match on an Italian highway. But the girl on the wall, who was actual if not titular ruler of the domain of Villa Rosa, possessed a keen eye for effect; and—she plausibly argued—since one must have washer-women about, why not, in the name of all that is beautiful, have them in harmony with tradition and the landscape? Accordingly, she designed and purchased their costumes herself.

There drifted presently into sight from around the little promontory that hid the village a blue and white boat with yellow lateen sails. She was propelled gondolier fashion, for the wind was a mere breath, by a picturesque youth in a suit of dark blue with white sash and flaring collar—the hand of the girl on the wall was here visible also.

The boat fluttering in toward shore, looked like a giant butterfly; and her name, emblazoned in gold on her prow, was, appropriately, the *Farfalla*. Earlier in the season, with a green hull and a dingy brown sail, she had been, prosaically enough, the

Maria. But since the advent of the girl all this had been changed. The *Farfalla* dropped her yellow wings with the air of a salute, and lighted at the foot of the water-steps under the terrace. The girl on the parapet leaned forward eagerly.

‘Did you get any mail, Giuseppe?’ she called.

‘*Si, signorina.*’ He scrambled up the steps and presented a copy of the London *Times*.

She received it with a shrug. Clearly, she felt little interest in the London *Times*. Giuseppe took himself back to his boat and commenced fussing about its fittings, dusting the seats, plumping up the cushions, with an air of absorption which deceived nobody. The signorina watched him a moment with amused comprehension, then she called peremptorily—

‘Giuseppe, you know you must spade the garden border.’

Poor Giuseppe, in spite of his nautical costume, was man of all work. He glanced dismally toward the garden border which lay basking in the sunshine under the wall that divided Villa Rosa from the rest of the world. It contained every known flower which blossoms in July in the kingdom of Italy, from camellias and hydrangeas to heliotrope and wall-flowers. Its spading was a complicated business and it lay too far off to permit of conversation. Giuseppe was not only a lazy, but also a social soul.

‘Signorina,’ he suggested, ‘would you not like a sail?’

She shook her head. ‘There is not wind enough and it is too hot and too sunny.’

‘But yes, there’s a wind, and cool—when you get out on the lake. I will put up the awning, signorina, the sun shall not touch you.’

She continued to shake her head and her eyes wandered suggestively to the hydrangeas, but Giuseppe still made a feint of preoccupation. Not being a cruel mistress, she dropped the subject, and turned back to her conversation with the washer-girls. They were discussing—a pleasant topic for a sultry summer afternoon—the probable content of Paradise. The three girls were of the opinion that it was made up of warm sunshine and cool shade, of flowers and singing birds and sparkling waters, of blue skies and cloud-capped mountains—not unlike, it will be observed, the very scene which at the moment stretched before them. In so much they were all agreed, but there were several debatable points. Whether the stones were made of gold, and whether the houses were not gold too, and, that being the case, whether it would not hurt your eyes to look at them. Marietta declared, blasphemously, as the others thought, that she preferred a simple grey stone villa or at most one of pink stucco, to all the golden edifices that Paradise contained.

It was by now fifteen minutes past four, and a spectator had arrived, though none of the five were aware of his presence. The spectator was standing on the wall above the garden border examining with appreciation the idyllic scene below him, and with most particular appreciation, the dainty white-clad person of the girl on the balustrade. He was wondering—anxiously—

how he might make his presence known. For no very tangible reason he had suddenly become conscious that the matter would be easier if he carried in his pocket a letter of introduction. The purlieu of Villa Rosa in no wise resembled a desert island; and in the face of that very fluent Italian, the suspicion was forcing itself upon him that, after all, the mere fact of a common country was not a sufficient bond of union. He had definitely decided to withdraw, when the matter was taken from his hands.

The wall—as Gustavo had pointed out—was broken; it was owing to this fact that he had been so easily able to climb it. Now, as he stealthily turned, preparing to re-descend in the direction whence he had come, the loose stone beneath his foot slipped and he slipped with it. Five startled pairs of eyes were turned in his direction. What they saw, was a young man in flannels suddenly throw up his arms, slide into an azalea bush, from this to the balustrade, and finally land on all fours on the narrow strip of beach, a shower of pink petals and crumbling masonry falling about him. A momentary silence followed; then the washer-girls, making sure that he was not injured, broke into a shrill chorus of laughter, while the *Farfalla* rocked under impact of Giuseppe's mirth. The girl on the wall alone remained grave.

The young man picked himself up, restored his guide-book to his pocket, and blushing stepped forward, hat in hand, to make an apology. One knee bore a splash of mud, and his tumbled hair was sprinkled with azalea blossoms.

'I beg your pardon,' he stammered, 'I didn't mean to come so

suddenly; I'm afraid I broke your wall.'

The girl dismissed the matter with a polite gesture.

'It was already broken,' and then she waited with an air of grave attention until he should state his errand.

'I—I came—' He paused and glanced about vaguely; he could not at the moment think of any adequate reason to account for his coming.

'Yes?' Her eyes studied him with what appeared at once a cool and an amused scrutiny. He felt himself growing red beneath it.

'Can I do anything for you?' she prompted with the kind of desire of putting him at his ease.

'Thank you—' He grasped at the first idea that presented itself. 'I'm stopping at the Hotel du Lac, and Gustavo, you know, told me there was a villa somewhere around here that belongs to Prince Someone or Other. If you ring at the gate and give the gardener two francs and a visiting card, he will let you walk around and look at the trees.'

'I see!' said the girl, 'and so now you are looking for the gate?' Her tone suggested that she suspected him of trying to avoid both it and the two francs. 'Prince Sartorio-Crevelli's villa is about half a mile farther on.'

'Ah, thank you,' he bowed a second time, and then added out of the desperate need of saying something, 'There's a cedar of Lebanon in it and an india-rubber plant from South America.'

'Indeed!'

She continued to observe him with polite interest, though she

made no move to carry on the conversation.

‘You—are an American?’ he asked at length.

‘Oh, yes,’ she agreed easily. ‘Gustavo knows that.’

He shifted his weight.

‘I am an American too,’ he observed.

‘Really?’ The girl leaned forward and examined him more closely, an innocent, candid, wholly detached look in her eyes. ‘From your appearance I should have said you were German—most of the foreigners who visit Valedolmo are German.’

‘Well, I’m not,’ he said shortly. ‘I’m American.’

‘It is a pity my father is not at home,’ she returned, ‘*he* enjoys meeting Americans.’

A gleam of anger replaced the embarrassment in the young man’s eyes. He glanced about for a dignified means of escape; they had him pretty well penned in. Unless he wished to reascend the wall—and he did not—he must go by the terrace, which retreat was cut off by the washer-women, or by the parapet, already occupied by the girl in white and the washing. He turned abruptly and his elbow brushed a stocking to the ground.

He stooped to pick it up and then he blushed still a shade deeper.

‘This is washing day,’ observed the girl with a note of apology. She rose to her feet and stood on the top of the parapet while she beckoned to Giuseppe, then she turned and looked down upon the young man with an expression of frank amusement. ‘I hope you will enjoy the cedar of Lebanon and the india-rubber tree.’

Good afternoon.'

She jumped to the ground and crossed to the water-steps, where Giuseppe, with a radiant smile, was steadying the boat against the landing. She settled herself comfortably among the cushions and then for a moment glanced back towards shore.

'You would better go out by the gate,' she called. 'The wall on the farther side is harder to climb than the one you came in by; and besides, it has broken glass on the top.'

Giuseppe raised the yellow sail and the *Farfalla*, with a graceful dip, glided out to sea. The young man stood eyeing its progress revengefully. Now that the girl was out of hearing, a number of pointed things occurred to him which he might have said. His thoughts were interrupted by a fresh giggle from behind, and he found that the three washer-girls were laughing at him.

'Your mistress's manners are not the best in the world,' said he severely, 'and I am obliged to add that yours are no better.'

They giggled again, though there was no malice behind their humour; it was merely that they found the lack of a language in common a mirth-provoking circumstance. Marietta, with a flash of black eyes, murmured something very kindly in Italian, as she shook out a linen sailor suit—the exact twin of the one that had gone to sea—and spread it on the wall to dry.

The young man did not linger for further words. Setting his hat firmly on his head, he vaulted the parapet and strode off down the cypress alley that stretched before him; he passed the pink villa without a glance. At the gate he stood aside to admit a

horse and rider. The horse was prancing in spite of the heat; the rider wore a uniform and a shining sword. There was a clank of accoutrements as he passed, and the wayfarer caught a gleam of piercing black eyes and a slight black moustache turned up at the ends. The rider saluted politely and indifferently, and jangled on. The young man scowled after him maliciously until the cypresses hid him from view; then he turned and took up the dusty road back towards the Hotel du Lac.

It was close upon five, and Gustavo was in the courtyard feeding the parrot, when his eye fell upon the American guest scuffling down the road in a cloud of white dust. Gustavo hastened to the gate to welcome him back, his very eyebrows expressive of his eagerness for news.

‘You are returned, signore?’

The young man paused and regarded him unemotionally.

‘Yes, Gustavo, I am returned—with thanks.’

‘You have seen ze Signorina Costantina?’

‘Yes, I saw her.’

‘And is it not as I have said, zat she is beautiful as ze holy angels?’

‘Yes, Gustavo, she is—and just about equally remote. You may make out my bill.’

The waiter’s face clouded.

‘You do not wish to remain longer, signore?’

‘Can’t stand it, Gustavo; it’s too infernally restful.’

Poor Gustavo saw a munificent shower of tips vanishing into

nothing. His face was rueful, but his manner was undiminishingly polite.

‘*Si*, signore, sank you. When shall you wish ze omnibus?’

‘To-morrow morning for the first boat.’

Gustavo bowed to the inevitable; and the young man passed on. He paused half-way across the courtyard.

‘What time does the first boat leave?’

‘At half-past five, signore.’

‘Er—no—I’ll take the second.’

‘*Si*, signore. At half-past ten.’

CHAPTER III

It was close upon ten when Jerymn Hilliard, Jr., equipped for travel in proper blue serge, appeared in the doorway of the Hotel du Lac. He looked at his watch and discovered that he still had twenty minutes before the omnibus meeting the second boat was due. He strolled across the courtyard, paused for a moment to tease the parrot, and sauntered on to his favourite seat in the summer-house. He had barely established himself with a cigarette when who should appear in the gateway but Miss Constance Wilder, of Villa Rosa, and a middle-aged man—at a glance the Signor Papa. Jerymn Hilliard's heart doubled its beat. Why, he asked himself excitedly, *why* had they come?

The Signor Papa closed his green umbrella, and having dropped into a chair—obligingly near the summer-house—took off his hat and fanned himself. He had a tendency toward being stout, and felt the heat. The girl, meanwhile, crossed the court and jangled the bell; she waited two—three—minutes, then she pulled the rope again.

'Gustavo! Oh, Gustavo!'

The bell might have been rung by any one—the fisherman, the omnibus-driver, Suor Celestina from the convent asking her everlasting alms—and Gustavo took his time. But the voice was unmistakable; he waited only to throw a clean napkin over his arm before hurrying to answer.

‘*Buon giorno*, signorina! Good morning, signore. It is beautiful wea-thir, but warm. *Già*, it is warm.’

He bowed and smiled and rubbed his hands together. His moustaches, fairly bristling with good will, turned up in a half-circle until they caressed his nose on either side. He bustled about placing table and chairs, and recklessly dusting them with the clean napkin. The signorina laid her fluffy white parasol on one chair and seated herself on another, her profile turned to the summer-house. Gustavo hovered over them, awaiting their pleasure, the genius itself of respectful devotion. It was Constance who gave the order—she, it might be noticed, gave most of the orders that were given in her vicinity. She framed it in English out of deference to Gustavo’s pride in his knowledge of the language.

‘A glass of *vino santo* for the signore and *limonata* for me. I wish to put the sugar in myself, the last time you mixed it, Gustavo, it was all sugar and no lemon. And bring a bowl of cracked ice—*fino—fino*—and some pine nut cakes if you are sure they are fresh.’

‘Sank you, signorina. *Subitissimo!*’

He was off across the court, his black coat-tails, his white napkin streaming behind, proclaiming to all the world that he was engaged on the Signorina Americana’s bidding; for persons of lesser note he still preserved a measure of dignity.

The young man in the summer-house had meanwhile dropped his cigarette upon the floor and noiselessly stepped on it. He

had also—with the utmost caution lest the chair creak—shifted his position so that he might command the profile of the girl. The entrance to the summer house was fortunately on the other side, and in all likelihood they would not have occasion to look within. It was eavesdropping of course, but he had already been convicted of that yesterday, and in any case it was not such very bad eavesdropping. The courtyard of the Hotel du Lac was public property; he had been there first, he was there by rights as a guest of the house; if anything, they were the interlopers. Besides, nobody talked secrets with a head waiter. His own long conversations with Gustavo were as open and innocent as the day; the signorina was perfectly welcome to listen to them as much as she chose.

She was sitting with her chin in her hand, eyeing the flying coat-tails of Gustavo, a touch of amusement in her face. Her father was eyeing her severely.

‘Constance, it is disgraceful!’

She laughed. Apparently she already knew or divined what it was that was disgraceful, but the accusation did not appear to bother her much. Mr. Wilder proceeded grumblingly.

‘It’s bad enough with those five deluded officers, but they walked into the trap with their eyes open and it’s their own affair. But look at Gustavo; he can scarcely carry a dish without breaking it when you are watching him. And Giuseppe—that confounded *Farfalla* with its yellow sails floats back and forth in front of the terrace till I am on the point of having it scuttled as

a public nuisance; and those three washer-women and the post-office clerk and the boy who brings milk, and Luigi and—every man, woman and child in the village of Valedolmo!

‘And my own dad as well?’

Mr. Wilder shook his head.

‘I came here at your instigation for rest and relaxation—to get rid of nervous worries, and here I find a big new worry waiting for me that I’d never thought of having before. What if my only daughter should take it in her head to marry one of these infernally good-looking Italian officers?’

Constance reached over and patted his arm.

‘Don’t let it bother you, Dad; I assure you I won’t do anything of the sort. I should think it my duty to learn the subjunctive mood, and that is impossible.’

Gustavo came hurrying back with a tray. He arranged the glasses, the ice, the sugar, the cakes, with hovering, elaborate obsequiousness. The signorina examined the ice doubtfully, then with approval.

‘It’s exactly right to-day, Gustavo! You got it too large the last time, you remember.’

She stirred in some sugar and tasted it tentatively, her head on one side. Gustavo hung upon her expression in an agony of apprehension; one would have thought it a matter for public mourning if the lemonade were not mixed exactly right. But apparently it was right—she nodded and smiled—and Gustavo’s expression assumed relief. Constance broke open a pine nut cake

and settled herself for conversation.

‘Haven’t you any guests, Gustavo?’ Her eyes glanced over the empty courtyard. ‘I am afraid the hotel is not having a very prosperous season.’

‘*Grazie*, signorina. Zer never are many in summer; it is ze dead time, but still zay come and zay go. Seven arrive last night.’

‘Seven! That’s nice. What are they like?’

‘German mountain-climbers wif nails in zer shoes. Zey have gone to Riva on ze first boat.’

‘That’s too bad—then the hotel is empty?’

‘But no! Zer is an Italian signora wif two babies and a governess, and two English ladies and an American gentleman—’

‘An American gentleman?’ Her tone was languidly interested. ‘How long has he been here?’

‘Tree—four days.’

‘Indeed—what is he like?’

‘Nice—ver’ nice.’ (Gustavo might well say that; his pockets were lined with the American gentleman’s silver lire.) ‘He talk to me always. “Gustavo,” he say, “I am all alone; I wish to be ’mused. Come and talk Angleesh.” Yes, it is true; I have no time to finish my work; I spend whole day talking wif dis yong American gentleman. He is just a little—’ He touched his head significantly.

‘Really?’ She raised her eyes with an air of awakened interest. ‘And how did he happen to come to Valedolmo?’

‘He come to meet his family, his sister and his—his aunt, who

are going wif him to ze Tyrollo. But zay have not arrive. Zey are in Lucerne, he says, where zer is a lion dying, and zey wish to wait until he is dead; zen zey come.—Yes, it is true; he tell me zat.’ Gustavo tapped his head a second time.

The signorina glanced about apprehensively.

‘Is he safe, Gustavo—to be about?’

‘*Si, signorina, sicuramente!* He is just a little simple.’

Mr. Wilder chuckled.

‘Where is he, Gustavo? I think I’d like to make that young man’s acquaintance.’

‘I sink, signore, he is packing his trunk. He go away to-day.’

‘To-day, Gustavo?’ There was audible regret in Constance’s tone. ‘Why is he going?’

‘It is not possible for him to stand it, signorina. Valedolmo too dam slow.’

‘Gustavo! You mustn’t say that; it is very, very bad. Nice men don’t say it.’

Gustavo held his ground.

‘*Si, signorina, zat yong American gentleman say it—dam slow, no divertimento.*’

‘He’s just about right, Gustavo,’ Mr. Wilder broke in. ‘The next time a young American gentleman blunders into the Hotel du Lac you send him around to me.’

‘*Si, signore.*’

Gustavo rolled his eyes toward the signorina; she continued to sip her lemonade.

‘I have told him yesterday an American family live at Villa Rosa; he say, “All right, I go call,” but—but I sink maybe you were not at home.’

‘Oh!’ The signorina raised her head in apparent enlightenment. ‘So that was the young man? Yes, to be sure, he came, but he said he was looking for Prince Sartorio’s villa. I am sorry you were away, father, you would have enjoyed him; his English was excellent.—Did he tell you he saw me, Gustavo?’

‘*Si*, signorina, he tell me.’

‘What did he say? Did he think I was nice?’

Gustavo looked embarrassed.

‘I—I no remember, signorina.’

She laughed and to his relief changed the subject.

‘Those English ladies who are staying here—what do they look like? Are they young?’

Gustavo delivered himself of an inimitable gesture which suggested that the English ladies had entered the bounds of that indefinite period when the subject of age must be politely waived.

‘They are tall, signorina, and of a thinness—you would not believe it possible.’

‘I see! And so the poor young man was bored?’

Gustavo bowed vaguely. He saw no connexion.

‘He was awfully good-looking,’ she added with a sigh. ‘I’m afraid I made a mistake. It would be rather fun, don’t you think, Dad, to have an entertaining young American gentleman about?’

‘Ump!’ he grunted. ‘I thought you were so immensely satisfied

with the officers.'

'Oh, I am,' she agreed with a shrug which dismissed for ever the young American gentleman.

'Well, Gustavo,' she added in a business-like tone, 'I will tell you why we called. The doctor says the Signor Papa is getting too fat. I don't think he's too fat, do you? He seems to me just comfortably chubby; but anyway, the doctor says he needs exercise, so we're going to begin climbing mountains with nails in our shoes like the Germans. And we're going to begin to-morrow because we've got two English people at the villa who adore mountains. Do you think you can find us a guide and some donkeys? We want a nice, gentle, lady-like donkey for my aunt, and another for the English lady, and a third to carry the things—and maybe me, if I get tired. Then we want a man who will twist their tails and make them go; and I am very particular about the man. I want him to be picturesque—there's no use being in Italy if you can't have things picturesque, is there, Gustavo?'

'*Si, signorina,*' he bowed and resumed his attitude of strained attention.

'He must have curly hair and black eyes and white teeth and a nice smile; I should like him to wear a red sash and earrings. He must be obliging and cheerful and deferential and speak good Italian—I won't have a man who speaks only dialect. He must play the mandolin and sing Santa Lucia—I believe that's all.'

'And I suppose since he is to act as guide he must know the region?' her father mildly suggested.

'Oh, no, that's immaterial; we can always ask our way.'

Mr. Wilder grunted, but offered no further suggestion.

'We pay four lire a day and furnish his meals,' she added munificently. 'And we shall begin with the castle on Monte Baldo; then when we get very proficient we'll climb Monte Maggiore. Do you understand?'

'Ze signorina desires tree donkeys and a driver at seven o'clock to-morrow morning to climb Monte Baldo?'

'In brief, yes, but *please* remember the earrings.'

Meanwhile a commotion was going on behind them. The hotel omnibus had rumbled into the courtyard. A *fachino* had dragged out a leather trunk, an English hat-box and a couple of valises and dumped them on the ground while he ran back for the paste pot and a pile of labels. The two under-waiters, the chambermaid and the boy who cleaned boots had drifted into the court. It was evident that the American gentleman's departure was imminent.

The luggage was labelled and hoisted to the roof of the omnibus; they all drew up in a line with their eyes on the door; but still the young man did not come. Gustavo, over his shoulder, dispatched a waiter to hunt him up. The waiter returned breathless. The gentleman was nowhere. He had searched the entire house; there was not a trace. Gustavo sent the boot-boy flying down the arbour to search the garden; he was beginning to feel anxious. What if the gentleman in a sudden fit of melancholia had thrown himself into the lake? That would indeed be an unfortunate affair!

Constance reassured him, and at the same time she arose. It occurred to her suddenly that, since the young man was going, there was nothing to be gained by waiting, and he might think— She picked up her parasol and started for the gate, but Mr. Wilder hung back; he wanted to see the matter out.

‘Father,’ said she reproachfully, ‘it’s embarrassing enough for him to see all those people without our staying and watching him do it.’

‘I suppose it is,’ he acknowledged regretfully, as he resumed his hat and umbrella and palm-leaf fan.

She paused for a second in the gateway.

‘*Addio, Gustavo,*’ she called over her shoulder. ‘*Don’t* forget the earrings.’

Gustavo bowed twice and turned back with a dazed air to direct the business in hand. The boot-boy, reappearing, shook his head. No, the gentleman was not to be found in the garden. The omnibus driver leaned from his seat and swore.

Corpo di Bacco! Did he think the boat would wait all day for the sake of one passenger? As it was, they were ten minutes late and would have to gallop every step of the way.

The turmoil of ejaculation and gesture was approaching a climax; when suddenly, who should come sauntering into the midst of it but the young American man himself! He paused to light a cigarette, then waved his hand aloft toward his leather belongings.

‘Take ’em down, Gustavo. Changed my mind; not going to-

day—it's too hot.'

Gustavo gasped.

'But, signore, you have paid for your ticket.'

'True, Gustavo, but there is no law compelling me to use it. To tell the truth I find that I am fonder of Valedolmo than I had supposed. There is something satisfying about the peace and tranquillity of the place—one doesn't realize it till the moment of parting comes. Do you think I can obtain a room for a—well, an indefinite period?'

Gustavo saw a dazzling vista of silver lire stretching into the future. With an all-inclusive gesture he placed the house, the lake, the surrounding mountains, at the disposal of the American.

'You shall have what you wish, signore. At dis season ze Hotel du Lac—'

'Is not crowded, and there are half a hundred rooms at my disposal? Very well, I will keep the one I have, which commands a very attractive view of a rose-coloured villa set in a grove of cypress trees.'

The others had waited in a state of suspension, dumbfounded at what was going on. But as soon as the young man dipped into his pocket and fished out a handful of silver, they broke into smiles; this at least was intelligible. The silver was distributed, the luggage was hoisted down, the omnibus was dismissed. The courtyard resumed its former quiet; just the American gentleman, Gustavo and the parrot were left.

Then suddenly a frightful suspicion dawned upon Gustavo

—it was more than a suspicion; it was an absolute certainty which in his excitement he had overlooked. From where had the American gentleman dropped? Not the sky, assuredly, and there was no place else possible, unless the door of the summer-house. Yes, he had been in the summer-house, and not sleeping either. An indefinable something about his manner informed Gustavo that he was privy to the entire conversation. Gustavo, a picture of guilty remorse, searched his memory for the words he had used. Why, oh why, had he not piled up adjectives? It was the opportunity of a lifetime, and he had wantonly thrown it away.

But—to his astonished relief—the young man appeared to be bearing no malice. He appeared, on the contrary, quite unusually cheerful as he sauntered, whistling, across the court and seated himself in the exact chair the signorina had occupied. He plunged his hand into his pocket suggestively—Gustavo had been the only one omitted in the distribution of silver—and drew forth a roll of bills. Having selected five crisp five-lire notes, he placed them under the sugar bowl, and watched his companion while he blew three meditative rings of smoke.

‘Gustavo,’ he inquired, ‘do you suppose you could find me some nice, gentle, lady-like donkeys, and a red sash and a pair of earrings?’

Gustavo’s fascinated gaze had been fixed upon the sugar bowl and he had only half caught the words.

‘*Scusi*, signore, I no understand.’

‘Just sit down, Gustavo, it makes me nervous to see you

standing all the time. I can't be comfortable, you know, unless everybody else is comfortable. Now pay strict attention and see if you can grasp my meaning.'

Gustavo dubiously accepted the edge of the indicated chair; he wished to humour the signore's mood, however incomprehensible that mood might be. For half an hour he listened with strained attention while the gentleman talked and toyed with the sugar bowl. Amazement, misgiving, amusement, daring, flashed in succession across his face; in the end he leaned forward with shining eyes.

'*Si, si,*' he whispered after a conspiratorial glance over his shoulder, 'I will do it all; you may trust to me.'

The young man rose, removed the sugar bowl, and sauntered on toward the road. Gustavo pocketed the notes and gazed after him.

'*Dio mio,*' he murmured as he set about gathering up the glasses, 'zese Americans!'

At the gate the young man paused to light another cigarette.

'*Addio, Gustavo,*' he called over his shoulder, '*don't* forget the earrings!'

CHAPTER IV

The table was set on the terrace; breakfast was served and the company was gathered. Breakfast consisted of the usual caffè-latte, rolls and strained honey, and—since a journey was to the fore and something sustaining needed—a soft-boiled egg apiece. There were four persons present, though there should have been five. The two guests were an Englishman and his wife, whom the chances of travel had brought over night to Valedolmo.

Between them, presiding over the coffee machine, was Mr. Wilder's sister, 'Miss Hazel'—never 'Miss Wilder' except to the butcher and baker. It was the cross of her life, she had always affirmed, that her name was not Mary or Jane or Rebecca. 'Hazel' does well enough when one is eighteen and beautiful, but when one is fifty and no longer beautiful, it is little short of absurd. But if any one at fifty could carry such a name gracefully, it was Miss Hazel Wilder; her fifty years sat as jauntily as Constance's twenty-two. This morning she was very business-like in her short skirt, belted jacket, and green felt Alpine hat with a feather in the side. No one would mistake her for a cyclist or a golfer or a motorist or anything in the world but an Alpine climber; whatever Miss Hazel was or was not, she was always *game*.

Across from Miss Hazel sat her brother in knickerbockers, his Alpine stock at his elbow and also his fan. Since his domicile in Italy, Mr. Wilder's fan had assumed the nature of a symbol;

he could no more be separated from it than St. Sebastian from his arrows or St. Laurence from his gridiron. At Mr. Wilder's elbow was the empty chair where Constance should have been—she who had insisted on six as a proper breakfast hour, and had grudgingly consented to postpone it till half-past out of deference to her sleepy-headed elders. Her father had finished his egg and hers too, before she appeared, as nonchalant and smiling as if she were out the earliest of all.

‘I think you might have waited!’ was her greeting from the doorway.

She advanced to the table, saluted in military fashion, dropped a kiss on her father's bald spot, and possessed herself of the empty chair. She too was clad in mountain-climbing costume, in so far as blouse and skirt and leather leggings went, but above her face there fluttered the fluffy white brim of a ruffled sun hat with a bunch of pink rosebuds set over one ear.

‘I am sorry not to wear my own Alpine hat, Aunt Hazel; I look so deliciously German in it, but I simply can't afford to burn all the skin off my nose.’

‘You can't make us believe that,’ said her father. ‘The reason is, that Lieutenant di Ferara and Captain Coroloni are going with us to-day, and that this hat is more becoming than the other.’

‘It's one reason,’ Constance agreed imperturbably, ‘but, as I say, I don't wish to burn the skin off my nose, because that is unbecoming too. You are ungrateful, Dad,’ she added as she helped herself to honey with a liberal hand, ‘I invited them solely

on your account because you like to hear them talk English. Have the donkeys come?’

‘The donkeys are at the back door nibbling the buds off the rose bushes.’

‘And the driver?’

‘Is sitting on the kitchen doorstep drinking coffee and smiling over the top of his cup at Elizabetta. There are two of him.’

‘Two! I only ordered one.’

‘One is the official driver and the other is a boy whom he has brought along to do the work.’

Constance eyed her father sharply. There was something at once guilty and triumphant about his expression.

‘What is it, Dad?’ she inquired sternly. ‘I suppose he has not got a sash and earrings.’

‘On the contrary, he has.’

‘Really? How clever of Gustavo! I hope,’ she added anxiously, ‘that he talks good Italian?’

‘I don’t know about his Italian, but he talks uncommonly good English.’

‘English!’ There was reproach, disgust, disillusionment, in her tone. ‘Not really, father?’

‘Yes, really and truly—almost as well as I do. He has lived in New York and he speaks English like a dream—real English—not the Gustavo—Lieutenant di Ferrara kind. I can understand what he says.’

‘How simply horrible!’

‘Very convenient, I should say.’

‘If there’s anything I detest, it’s an Americanized Italian—and here in Valedolmo of all places, where you have a right to demand something unique and romantic and picturesque and real. It’s too bad of Gustavo! I shall never place any faith in his judgment again. You may talk English to the man if you like; I shall address him in nothing but Italian.’

As they rose from the table she suggested pessimistically, ‘Let’s go and look at the donkeys—I suppose they’ll be horrid, scraggly, knock-kneed little beasts.’

They turned out, however, to be unusually attractive, as donkeys go, and they were innocently engaged in nibbling, not rose leaves, but grass, under the tutelage of a barefoot boy. Constance patted their shaggy mouse-coloured noses, made the acquaintance of the boy, whose name was Beppo, and looked about for the driver proper. He rose and bowed as she approached. His appearance was even more violently spectacular than she had ordered; Gustavo had given good measure.

He wore a loose white shirt—immaculately white—with a red silk handkerchief knotted about his throat, brown corduroy knee-breeches, and a red cotton sash with the hilt of a knife conspicuously protruding. His corduroy jacket was slung carelessly across his shoulders, his hat was cocked jauntily, with a red heron feather stuck in the band; last, perfect touch of all, in his ears—at his ears rather (a close examination revealed the thread)—two golden hoops flashed in the sunlight. His skin was

dark—not too dark—just a good healthy out-door tan: his brows level and heavy, his gaze candour itself. He wore a tiny suggestion of a moustache which turned up at the corners (a suspicious examination of this, might have revealed the fact that it was touched up with burnt cork); there was no doubt but that he was a handsome fellow, and his attire suggested that he knew it.

Constance clasped her hands in an ecstasy of admiration.

‘He’s perfect!’ she cried. ‘Where on earth did Gustavo find him? Did you ever see anything so beautiful?’ she appealed to the others. ‘He looks like a brigand in opera bouffe.’

The donkey-man reddened visibly and fumbled with his hat.

‘My dear,’ her father warned, ‘he understands English.’

She continued to gaze with the open admiration one would bestow upon a picture or a view or a blue-ribbon horse. The man flashed her a momentary glance from a pair of searching grey eyes, then dropped his gaze humbly to the ground.

‘*Buon giorno*,’ he said in glib Italian.

Constance studied him more intently. There was something elusively familiar about his expression; she was sure she had seen him before.

‘*Buon giorno*,’ she replied in Italian. ‘You have lived in the United States?’

‘*Si, signorina.*’

‘What is your name?’

‘I spik Angleesh,’ he observed.

‘I don’t care if you do speak English; I prefer Italian—what is

your name?’ She repeated the question in Italian.

‘*Si, signorina,*’ he ventured again. An anxious look had crept to his face and he hastily turned away and commenced carrying parcels from the kitchen. Constance looked after him, puzzled and suspicious. The one insult which she could not brook was for an Italian to fail to understand her when she talked Italian. As he returned and knelt to tighten the strap of a hamper, she caught sight of the thread that held his earring. She looked a second longer, and a sudden smile of illumination flashed to her face. She suppressed it quickly and turned away.

‘He seems rather slow about understanding,’ she remarked to the others, ‘but I dare say he’ll do.’

‘The poor fellow is embarrassed,’ apologized her father. ‘His name is Tony,’ he added—even he had understood that much Italian.

‘Was there ever an Italian who had been in America whose name was not Tony? Why couldn’t he have been Angelico or Felice or Pasquale or something decently picturesque?’

‘My dear,’ Miss Hazel objected, ‘I think you are hypercritical. The man is scarcely to blame for his name.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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