

Giacinta.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

CHAPTER I.

On an early autumn evening, warm, and still, and golden, Edward Ingram threw himself down to rest almost at the top of a steep, rocky hill in the loveliest and least known portion of the Province of Aquila.

'Whew! what a climb!' he exclaimed, pushing his straw hat back on his fair, close cropped head, and stretching himself luxuriously on a little patch of verdure that shone like a green oasis among the grey rocks and boulders.

The sun was going down in crimson glory, dooding with ruddy gold the steep hillside and the green, quiet valley far below.

A pungent, aromatic scent of pines and larches filled the air from a sombre looking wood that stretched in a wide belt over the mountain top.

Far down in the shadow of the hills was a little straggling village and a grey old church, from whose slender campanile the Ave Maria sounded faint, and sweet, and drowsy.

It died away, and Edward Ingram laid his head back on his clasped hands, closed his eyes, and revelled to the full in the soft, scented air and delicious, restful silence.

'It is worth more than the climb,' he told himself, 'to be up here at last, above the world almost, and away from everyone.'

A moment later, he raised his head to listen, and then sat up and looked round wondering, as a few strains of music fell faint but clear on the still air.

'Music here?' he exclaimed; 'and it sounds like an organ. Where does it come from?'

He searched quickly with his eyes in every direction, but could see no signs of habitation, and he listened more intently, feeling puzzled and mystified.

The sound grew fuller and louder, and seemed to come from the wood behind him.

'Very strange,' muttered Edward; 'mine host said nothing of any church or house up here, though he is always so careful to tell me of all there is to see—and I am sure I told him that I was coming here; I must investigate.'

He was soon in the wood, and following the sound of the music, he came to an open, grassy space, in the midst of which stood a small stone building, apparently a chapel, very grey and old and weather-worn.

He walked around it, wondering until he came to the entrance, a heavy, oak door that stood wide open, and showed him a dim, half-ruined looking interior.

The light that streamed in a many-colored shaft from the painted window shone softly on a beautiful lamp of tarnished old silver that swung before the altar, and on the white-clad figure of a girl, who sat playing on the stained and yellowing organ keys with dreamy, half-caressing touches.

Her book was turned towards the door, and in the sound of her playing Edward's footsteps fell unheeded, so that he stood for some time looking and listening unnoticed.

Then, remembering suddenly that he had no right to do either, and was probably trespassing, he turned to go away.

But the movement roused the girl's attention, and she looked round, a little startled.

Edward stopped mechanically, and she got down from her seat, and came forward.

'I beg your pardon,' stammered Edward guiltily, 'Please forgive me if I have been impertinent. I do not know of any chapel here, and, hearing music, I was so astonished that I came to investigate.'

'It is no impertinence, and there is nothing to forgive.'

The girl smiled frankly and simply as she answered, and Ted saw that, though he had at first thought her older, she could not be more than sixteen.

Her tresses, which were of brightest bronze, looked very childish, though the long white frock she was wearing was almost nun-like in its severe simplicity, the only suspicion of ornament being a quaint-looking waist-belt of old silver.

Her whole appearance was so unexpected, and so different from all Edward's former experience of present day girlhood, that he was seized with a curiosity and interest that would not let him do as his conscience prompted, and go away without trying to know more about her.

'I thought no one lived near here?' he said inquiringly. 'And yet—pardon me, signorina—you cannot have come up from the village?'

He had noticed that she was bare headed and showed no signs of having come from a distance.

'Oh, no,' she said, 'I do not live in the village. I am at home here; the villa is not five minutes' walk away.'

'The villa?' echoed Edward, looking in the direction she indicated, but seeing nothing through the trees.

'Yes; the Villa Castagna,' she explained. 'It is old and beautiful, but I cannot show it to you; my grandfather dislikes strangers.'

'Oh! then I am doubly guilty in being here,' Edward began, but she interrupted quickly.

'Oh, no! the chapel is my own; I can show you that if you care to see it. You

will like to examine the frescoes, for you are English, are you not?'

'You are very good—yes. I am not only English, but a painter, too,' Edward answered, with a shade of diffidence and a little reddening of his bronzed face; 'and I should like very much to look at the frescoes.'

They turned back into the chapel; but during their few minutes' talk, the sun had gone down—its warm, red glow was fast fading, and inside the chapel it was already dusk.

'Oh, it is too dark!' the girl exclaimed, disappointed, 'and the colors are so dim that, without a good light, you can see nothing at all. But, perhaps, you could come tomorrow or another day; they are quite worth it.'

'May I?' asked Edward, with a sudden eagerness that surprised himself. 'It is exceedingly kind of you, and I will come tomorrow at whatever hour you like. In the meantime, please let me introduce myself. I am Edward Ingram, and I am staying at the inn down at Paesello for a few weeks sketching.'

She glanced mechanically at the card he and then read it again more carefully.

'You did not mention your second name,' she said. 'And how strange it is the same as one of mine.'

'Freers!' exclaimed Ted, wondering. 'Is your name Freers, signorina?'

'Yes,' she said, 'I am Giacinta Freers Castagna. I know it, because the name is marked on many of the things that were mine when I was little. I once asked my grandfather the meaning of it, but the subject seemed to pain him, and I have never spoken of it since.'

Her face clouded as if with some unpleasant memory, and Ted, with his interest increased by the fact of their common name, was eager to learn more.

But already it had grown quite dusk up there among the pine trees.

In a few moments the brief purple twilight would have faded, and the night would be upon them.

'I must not keep you talking any longer, it is almost dark,' he said, 'but I will take advantage of your kindness, and come to-morrow afternoon.'

The girl bowed gravely, with an old-fashioned courtesy that contrasted quaintly with her childish face and air, and Ted started quickly on his walk home.

'Villa Castagna,' he repeated thoughtfully to himself. 'Surely it's not the first time that I have heard that name; and she is called 'Freers,' too—a queer coincidence if nothing more, for the name is not quite as common as Jones or Smith. I must ask mine host to tell me something about this mysterious villa—no, I won't, though. I will hear what the little lady herself may have to tell me first.'

It was quite late when Ted arrived at the long, low, old house, that was all the hotel existing in the little village of Paesello.

Lucas Panuzzi, his big, good-natured landlord, stood in the porch, awaiting his arrival.

Ted thought there was a keener inquiry than usual in his tone, as he asked politely if his guest had had a pleasant ramble.

'Very,' replied Ted carelessly; 'and the view is splendid from the hill-top.'

Lucas seemed inclined to say more, but Ted was hungry, and set himself at once to discuss his supper and his letters.

It was not much past noon on the next day, when he made his way through the pines towards the little chapel.

The organ was silent now, and through the warm, drowsy stillness came a fluttering and whirring of many wings and the gentle cooing of a flock of pigeons.

Ted's footsteps fell noiselessly on the thick scented carpet of pine needles, and he reached the open space round the chapel and caught sight of Giacinta before she was aware of it.

The sun shone dazzlingly bright on the little grassy clearing with its framework of shadowy pines, and lay like a powdering of gold on Giacinta's bronze hair and snow-white dress.

She held a basket of bread, which she broke and crumbled, and threw up in handfuls to the pigeons as they wheeled and circled about her.

'They are my only pets,' she said, when Ted had come forward and greeted her. 'They give me all the pleasure I have—they and the organ.'

She threw the last crumbs up in a shower to the expectant birds, and then led the way into the chapel.

The bright noontide sun gave new life to its faded colors, and showed Ted that the frescoes, though dim and blurred by time, were very beautiful.

'There are more in the house,' said Giacinta, 'and many other things that I should like to show you, but grandfather has grown so strange, so inhospitable, ever since—'

She did not finish the sentence, and Ted broke in quickly.

'Please do not blame Signor Castagna for that; it is natural that he should dislike his treasures to be inspected by every curious stranger, and he is, perhaps, too old to care for visitors.'

Giacinta shook her head.

'He is old of course; but it is not that, for he is healthy and strong like a young man, but he is grown so morose and odd that he shuts himself up here like a mit-

anthrope, not a bit like the dear, grave old man I remember years ago.'

Ted felt some compunction at encouraging the child in her confidence, but she seemed to find relief in talking to him, and his own interest in her and her surroundings was rapidly increasing.

'It was, perhaps, some illness or great trouble that caused the change in him,' he suggested, and Giacinta nodded.

'Yes; it must have been the trouble,' she said, 'for he has been quite altered since the death of poor Alessandro, his old servant, though during his life I don't remember that he seemed so much attached to him; and he will never consent to replace him.'

'And he will not explain the meaning of your being named Freers?' asked Edward. 'I have only asked him once, and he told me not to speak of it again. 'You are a Castagna,' he said, 'and the other name means nothing to you now.'

'It is very strange,' remarked Ted, 'but I am as ignorant as yourself of the reason of my second name, though I vaguely remember hearing that it was due to my father's wish. Almost all my people are dead, but I am sure that none of them had that name. I will write to my old friend, Doctor Gran, who became my guardian when my father died, and ask him to explain it. Will you let me come and tell you the result when I get his answer?'

Giacinta agreed with childish eagerness. 'I shall be quite impatient for the letter,' she said frankly. 'I spend the best part of the day in the chapel or here among my birds, so you will easily find me, though'—and her manner grew quaintly formal again—'I cannot offer you the hospitality of the villa.'

'Please don't mind that,' said Ted, with an inward smile. 'It is too good of you to let me see you at all, and I will come and tell you as soon as I have the answer myself.'

Ted's letter was despatched that same night, and by dint of severe attention to his sketching, he managed to subdue his impatience for the result, and resist the impulse that was strong upon him to pay another visit to the chapel in the pine-woods without waiting for the legitimate excuse of his friend's letter.

It arrived in due course, and with an eager interest that half astonished himself, Ted sat down in his bare, brick paved room at the inn to read it.

'My Dear Ted,'—it began—'I was a little surprised to learn your present whereabouts, believing that you meant to stay in Rome or the neighborhood. There is something strange, too, in your having drifted, without knowing it, to the spot to which Fate, many years ago, led your father, with a college friend, to whom the visit was destined to be an eventful one.'

'As you seem to know nothing of the affair, nor even of the reason of your being called Freers, I will tell you the whole story, and begin by saying that Hugh Freers and your father were devoted chums at Cambridge, and remained so during the whole of their lives, with the result that at your birth you were given the name of your father's friend. You, I believe, were still in petticoats when your father, leaving you with your mother in Bologna, started on a long rambling tour with his chum for the purpose of sketching.'

'They wandered into Aquila, and it was during their stay in that province that they got acquainted with the Marchese di Castagna, and were invited to inspect the many works of art in his beautiful old villa.'

'They were glad to accept his hospitality, and on their first visit Hugh Freers met his fate, in the person of the marchese's only daughter, Riccarda.'

'It was love at first sight with both of them, but a love that was destined to be stormy, for Riccarda was already promised in marriage to a neighbouring noble, who was in every way suitable, excepting for the fact that he had failed to win her love.'

'In face of this it was not surprising that Hugh Freers, with his slender means and a name as yet unknown to fame, should receive an unqualified refusal to his request for her hand.'

'The marchese was polite, but immovable; but the daughter, who had inherited something of his own obstinacy, was equally determined. So, when the day arrived for the signing of the marriage contract, the bride-elect was missing—was, in fact, already on her way to England in the care of your mother, in this case an unwilling but helpless chaperon.'

'Hugh Freers and Riccarda di Castagna were married in London almost as soon as they arrived, and, so far as mutual devotion was concerned, the marriage was a happy one; but Hugh was pursued by ill-fortune, and though possessed of undoubted talent, his name remained obscure and his work unappreciated. Added to this, his health began to fail as he died six years after his marriage, leaving a delicate wife and a baby daughter named Giacinta.'

'The young people had long ago appealed to the marchese to forgive them, but in vain; the old man was adamant, and their last letter was sent back unopened. It was only when Riccarda herself lay dying that his stern old heart relented, and he came here to London in time to see his daughter die, and assume the charge of his little grandchild.'

I had attended both Hugh and his wife in their illness, and was present with the marchese at his daughter's death, and a fine, old-style aristocrat I found him, in spite of his hardness—a gallant old soldier, and a most courteous gentleman.'

'He was pleased to express a very friendly feeling towards me, and on the strength of that I inclose you a letter of introduction to him, which I hope will gain you a welcome to his house.'

The young lady whom you have seen is undoubtedly the daughter of your father's friend, though the marchese seems to be trying to ignore that, and the fact that her name is legally and really Freers.'

'It is quite likely that he may carry his resentment so far as to refuse to receive your father's son, even at my request, but I hope for better luck for you. In any

case, should you see the Signorina Giacinta again, give her a kind message from an old man who was the first to welcome her into this queer world, and has still a pleasant memory of her small sunny presence.'

'So the coincidence of the names is not an accident, after all,' reflected Ted, 'and a most interesting story I shall have to tell her little ladyship to-morrow. What a grand idea that was of the doctor's to send me a letter to the marchese! It was horrible to think of not seeing the signorina any more, but, of course, I couldn't have continued those sly visits to the chapel. Now, if the marchese will only consent to see me once, it is hard if I can't make myself sufficiently interesting to earn a second welcome.'

'So that is the story—poor mother! Giacinta exclaimed softly, when Ted had translated his friend's letter to her, and he sat musing on its contents with a new feeling of tenderness for the parents whose story she heard for the first time to day.

'I used when a child to ask about her often, but grandfather seemed always hurt at the mention of her. 'Another time, figliola,' he would say; 'some other time I will tell you all about her.' But the time never came, and now for several years I have asked him no questions at all on any subject.'

'Is the marchese really such a formidable person?' asked Ted, half laughing. 'In that case I am afraid even my old friend's letter will fail to soften him toward me.'

'He cannot refuse to see you! He may be odd and ungracious, but he must remember, that he is a gentleman. Giacinta spoke diffidently, and with a sudden hardening of her childish face, and then added under her breath; 'Though it is true I almost forget it myself sometimes.'

Her color had deepened with a sudden flush, and her brown eyes shone angrily with some unpleasant memory.

'The marchese had a great disappointment in his daughter's marriage and death,' Ted reminded her, 'and I think I can understand his dislike to strangers, for I believe you said he would see no visitors.'

'For the last five years he has not moved beyond the villa grounds, and has seen no one at all, excepting, sometimes, Luca Panuzzi.'

Giacinta's voice had a tone of contempt, and Ted felt a little surprised at her information.

'Oh, Luca!' he repeated, 'I suppose you mean mine host down in the village? I find him rather an interesting old fellow.'

'Oh! he is very well. I like poor old Luca, and he is devoted to me; but an occasional visit from him cannot make up the monotony of this life.'

'But there must be other things to divert you, signorina,' said Ted, half incredulous. 'You say the villa is so beautiful, and surely you go about sometimes?'

Giacinta smiled contemptuously.

'Oh, yes,' she said; 'I go down to the church on Sundays with Filomena. I see the villagers all trooping to Mass, the men with a laugh and a greeting for everyone they meet, and the girls escorted by their parents, or someone who cares for them, and sometimes I envy them.'

'Oh, poor little girl, is it as bad as that?' exclaimed Ted involuntarily, and with a sudden sharp pity for the warm young life condemned to wear itself out in loneliness and longing, at the caprice of an eccentric old man.

Giacinta nodded silently, and there was a suspicion of tears on her dark eyelashes. Then suddenly she sprang up from the low, lichen-grown seat where they were sitting at the door of the little chapel.

'But it will be better now,' she said cheerfully. 'I feel sure that you coming will bring some change. Who knows? you may be able to persuade the marchese to give up his solitude and live like other people. Come, we will go and present your letter to him at once.'

'I will do my best, and I hope you may be right, signorina,' Ted replied, as he got up and followed Giacinta by an almost invisible path that led through the pine trees.

The wood grew presently less thick, and then with a sudden glare of sunshine it ended altogether, and the villa stood before them.

It was a large, very ancient looking house, raised on terraces and broad flights of steps, the marble of which was stained and tawny, and lichen-grown from long neglect.

On the wide, sloping lawn, the grass was thick and vividly green, but rank and uncared for, and the few flower-beds there were had long since degenerated into mere tangles of weed and blossom.

There was not a sign of life, nor any sound in the heavy stillness.

An air of desolation brooded over the whole scene, in spite of the brilliant noon-day sun.

Now that they had arrived, Giacinta was seized with a sudden misgiving as to the reception Ted was likely to get.

'Perhaps it would be better if I spoke to him first,' she said doubtfully, 'if you would not mind waiting a moment.'

'As long as you like,' Ted answered. 'There is a seat in that sunny corner of the terrace. You will find me there when you want me.'

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Giacinta ran up the steps and in at the great door of the villa, across the wide dim lit marble vestibule, where her light footsteps echoed with a dismal, ghostly sound, and down a large corridor.

A door at the end of this she opened suddenly, and an exclamation of annoyance escaped from someone within, who had started violently at her entrance.

'You startled me,' said a querulous voice. 'I have told you so often to knock first before you disturb me.'

'I am very sorry; I forgot,' said Giacinta, not very repentently, as she went forward into the dusky room and stood before her grandfather.

He was sinking back into a deep arm-chair, his tall form still trembling from the shock of her sudden entrance, and his dark searching eyes, after one glance at her face, were turned away with a curious kind of shrinking.

'I have news for you,' said Giacinta. 'An English gentleman, an artist, is staying in the village and begs to be allowed to come and see you.'

'To see me? I receive no visitors—I surely need not tell you that.'

'I know, but this one is an exception. He brings a letter from an old friend of yours.'

'I have no friends; it is an imposture.'

'It is no imposture; the letter is from Doctor Grant in London, who attended my parents in their illness, and knew me as a little child.'

The old man's face twitched a little, and he did not look at her for a moment.

When he at last turned and faced her, Giacinta thought his lips were more colourless than usual.

'Who has been speaking to you of those things?' he asked coldly.

And Giacinta told him in a few words the story of her meeting with Ted and the information it had led to.

The marchese's face grew dark as he listened.

'So you have disobeyed me,' he said, in a voice unsteady with anger. 'You have made free with this stranger, and even dared to question him concerning my most private affairs!'

Giacinta flushed scarlet, and held up her hand defiantly.

'They are my affairs, too,' she said. 'I surely have a right to know my parents' history and my lawful name.'

The old man sank back in the chair from which he had partly risen, and a look of care and worry settled on his haggard face that softened Giacinta directly.

'Forgive me,' she said gently. 'I am sorry if what I have done has hurt you, but you are so cold with me, and I have no one else. Can't you understand how sweet it was to hear, even from this stranger, a little about the parents who loved me?'

The marchese was silent, and she went on pleadingly—

'The visit or is waiting. You will receive him, will you not? It only to please me. It is so little I ever ask of you.'

Still he did not speak and she watched his gloomy features with regretful memory of the time when, to obtain a favour of the grave old man, she would have climbed upon his knee and kissed the sadness from his face until he laughed and yielded.

Why could she not do so now? Why was he altered so terribly since then that the mere suggestion of it brought a shudder of repulsion?

'You will not refuse me?' she said softly. 'You will make an exception to your rule, and welcome this stranger, for your old friend's sake? He will interest you, and it will do you good to hear news of the world again.'

'I will not be pestered. I am master here, and I will be respected and obeyed.'

The speech roused all Giacinta's ire afresh.

'It is easy enough to enforce obedience from two women who are in your power,' she said hotly, 'but it is a little unreasonable to expect them to respect a man who seems afraid to show his face to his fellow men.'

The marchese sprang from his chair with an angry exclamation. 'Afraid!' he echoed. 'How dare you? Who says that I am afraid?'

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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