

# Madonna Bianca: The Story of a Portrait

By ANNA McLURE SHOLL

YOU have lived in this villa many years, Guiseppe?"

The old man bowed as he put down the wine-glass before Bernard.

"All my life, signor. I was born here."

"Who are the present owners?"

"Who but the Segaloni, signor—a minor branch. The main line of the family has been extinct for over a hundred years."

Bernard glanced across the table at Prescott, who seemed entirely preoccupied with the view of Florence in the distance. The city, bathed in the light of sunset, its domes and campaniles like pure gold, had an ethereal and unearthly look, heightened by the faint mists already rising from the intervening fields and gardens.

"And do the Segaloni never come to this beautiful villa?"

Guiseppe hesitated. A look of embarrassment crossed his wrinkled features.

"They live in Rome, signor. The head of the house is in poor health. For a man in poor health the villa is not accounted wholesome. I should warn the signor against walking in the gardens after sundown."

"Malaria!" said Prescott, between two puffs of his cigar.

"Yes, signor."

Bernard laughed.

"I intend to see them under every aspect. Imagine the moonlight, Prescott, on this broad terrace, or stealing along that path between the flex hedges. How uncanny those prinning satyr terms must look when the shadows are closing in. You may leave us now, Guiseppe. We intend to explore the garden at once."

The old man bowed and withdrew. A look of consternation was in his face, but he said nothing.

When he was gone, Bernard rose and ascended toward the marble balustrade of the terrace. Just beneath, a garden of fantastic, and at this hour, of mysterious beauty stretched downward to the remote walls of the villa. Two hundred years before it had been a marvel of that art of landscape gardening which attained its height nowhere but in Italy. Now Nature had smothered art. In the faint green light it seemed as if a wealth of decay had, in very extremity, flowered again. The peached evergreens had taken on stranger shapes than ever gardener dreamed of. The mossy marble benches were buried in too luxuriant grass. A multitude of rank, strangely coloured blossoms choked the stone fawns and nymphs gleaming white through the gloom. All the malady of spring's rarer and more voluptuous moods was in the heavy perfumed air that drifted over the terrace in a languid wave.

"What beauty!" Bernard exclaimed. "Prescott, if we don't do some good work in the picture galleries this summer, it will not be for lack of inspiration."

Prescott smiled.

"To me there is something almost malignant in this loveliness. Remember Guiseppe's warning."

"Well, I'm seasoned. I lived for three years on the edge of a New Jersey marsh."

He led the way down into the garden, and Prescott followed with a slow, reluctant step. He had not been as enthusiastic over the discovery of the Villa

Segaloni as had Bernard—but then Bernard was by nature a dreamer and an enthusiast. He pursued the beautiful with as much avidity as Shelley.

After a while, however, even Prescott came under the spell of this garden, when the greenish twilight was replaced by the full white glory of the moon. Up and down the paths the two friends strolled, smoking and chatting and making plans for the long, brilliant summer which stretched before them. Occasionally they glanced toward the broad, blank front of the villa, like a dead face in the moonlight.

"There's something mysterious about this place," Prescott said. "Why should such a paradise be left to caretakers for generations?"

"It can't be haunted," Bernard answered; "it wasn't offered to us for a mere song."

"No, the rent's high enough in all conscience! We'll start Guiseppe talking some day, or his wife Picarda."

"She's a good cook. Well, here we are, the four of us, in a villa that could lodge a hundred."

Just then a turn in the path brought them to a circular grass-plot, in the centre of which was a broad marble basin filled with black stagnant water. A Cupid embracing a Psyche rose from the water. Near this ancient fountain was a marble bench.

Suddenly Bernard paused and clutched his companion's arm.

"Look," he said, in a hoarse whisper, "what's that woman doing there?"

"Where? I see no woman."

"On the bench there—why, no—why, Prescott, those Italian vines have gone to my head!"

Prescott turned sharply. Bernard was as white as death for an instant, then a slow flush of mortification crept up his face.

"This brilliant moonlight plays tricks," he said, "I could swear, Prescott, that a woman was sitting on that bench when we emerged from the walk."

Prescott's smile was incredulous.

"Italian wines are heady. How did she look?"

"She was brilliantly fair—a very lovely, very cruel face—a high round forehead, a pointed chin. She wore pearls in her head-dress."

"The devil! you're too circumstantial, Bernard. You're guying me."

"I wish I were," Bernard said heartily. "I do not like such tricks of vision."

Their first fortnight at the villa, aside from this incident, which seemed to have left an unpleasant impression upon Bernard, was one of unalloyed pleasure. They spent their days in the picture-galleries, their evenings on the marble terrace above the garden. The house itself, with its treasures of old pictures and furniture, were they exploring at their leisure.

One night Bernard seemed restless; and because there was a chill in the air he proposed that they should go indoors, and providing themselves with candles, go over some yet unvisited portions of the villa.

They found that Guiseppe had lit a fire for them on the hearth of the only room on the ground floor that had an appearance of comfort. Prescott suggested that they take possession of the two armchairs drawn up before it.

"What can we see by candle-light in rooms with ceilings twenty feet high!" he protested. "Look at that fresco

above us. Can you tell whether it's allegorical or religious in this dimness?"

"Allegorical," I should say. The Segaloni seemed to have had frankly pagan tastes. Come along, Prescott."

Taking his candle he led the way through the central hall. Their footsteps on the stone floor made hollow echoes which seemed to die away in far-off rooms and corridors. Through a succession of apartments they went—ghostly places from whose walls classic or saintly figures looked out dimly. From behind pictures, black with age, fat spiders ran out; nameless insects emerged from the thick shadows.

Opening a door at the end of a long wide hall, a draught of cold air met them, and they found themselves in a room, with windows open to the terrace. It was empty, save for a great bed with tattered hangings, a crucifix, life-size, and a picture over a prie-dieu, the portrait of a woman.

They saw at once that the painting, though old, was clear, and in a good state of preservation. As Bernard drew near it, he gave an exclamation of surprise. A gray pallor overspread his face.

"What is it?" Prescott cried, a note of alarm in his voice.

Bernard hesitated. "If you'll not think I'm crazy, I'll tell you it's the portrait of the woman I thought I saw by the fountain."

Prescott held his candle close. In the soft light the portrait glowed with a vitality over which years could have no power. It showed the full face of a young and beautiful woman, whose beauty was not without a sinister element. The curves of the lips were thin and cruel. The pointed chin imparted a certain harshness to the countenance. The light brown eyes were irresponsive. Yet the face fascinated and held by its very mystery.

"Do you see the head-dress?" Bernard asked in a low voice.

"She wears pearls."

"So did the woman in the garden," Bernard said, with an uneasy laugh.

He gazed long at the picture. Suddenly, he leaned forward and pressed his lips for an instant to the lips of the portrait.

"I have fallen in love at last," he said gaily.

"I am glad she is not alive," Prescott answered, with a grim smile. "She has an evil face."

"That's just the beauty of it," Bernard said. "She has no soul. You can go to the devil with her without compunction. She is as soulless as the gorgeous flowers in yonder garden."

"Let us ask Guiseppe who she was. One of the Segaloni, I suppose."

"No, let us keep her a mystery. We might find her the virtuous wife of a Florentine grandee. I prefer to think her some beautiful enchantress—a Lucretia Borgia."

"That golden hair should be Lucretia's. Let's go back to the fire. This room is as damp as a crypt."

Bernard announced his intention of copying the portrait, which, aside from the interest of its subject, had a distinct value of its own. The long-end painter, whoever he was, had produced at least one work of power.

So, while Prescott continued to haunt the galleries, Bernard remained at the villa spending hours before the picture, whose peculiar grace and dark charm again and again eluded his brush. But after a time he came into more intimate relations with the portrait, so that the lady seemed to him his actual sister—a marvellously still and obedient model.

He never left her without a kiss, bestowed gaily and with a kind of triumph that she could not turn her lips away. She was his, all his!

"You do not think it is the malaria, Guiseppe?" Prescott asked incessantly of the old man.

"I think it something worse, signor. The Signor Bernardo looks already like a dead man. He's as gray as a dead St. Lawrence, and his bones show like the saints'. His eyes are sunken."

Prescott shivered. "He will not admit that he is ill. He works every day on that damnable portrait. I wish to God it were finished."

Guiseppe shook his head. "It never will be, signor."

"What do you mean?" said Prescott sharply.

"Picarda was weeping like a Magdalen this morning. She says the signor is bewitched."

"Nonsense! It is more likely that this villa is unhealthy. You said as much when we first came here."

He turned away abruptly and rejoined Bernard, who was seated in a reclining chair at the farther end of the terrace. His appearance horribly confirmed Guiseppe's description—as if he had spent the past three months in the subterranean vaults of the villa. His lips, dry and purplish, parted in a smile as Prescott came up to him.

"I suppose you and Guiseppe were croaking over me as usual. I assure you, Prescott, there's nothing the matter with me, but this infernal head."

"And you're talking infernal rot," Prescott burst out angrily.

"A man who has fever night and morning, and who looks as you do, is a sick man. I shall send for a physician this very night, if you don't consent to leave the villa."

"Why should I?" Bernard said dreamily. "It is paradise."

"An unhealthy paradise."

"Well, here I stay!" Bernard answered stubbornly. "Give me a light, will you? The mosquitoes are getting bad."

"Everything's bad here," Prescott muttered, "big, and bad, and blotted. I never saw such monstrous spiders. I picked a fly in the garden yesterday, and a great hairy one dropped on my hand."

Bernard made no answer. He was gazing dreamily up at facade of the villa.

"How often she must have looked from those windows!" he said, in a low voice, as if to himself.

After a time he rose and walked away from Prescott, who called after him:

"Where are you going?"

"To take a look at my picture. It seems to me, now, as if a few strokes of the brush would complete it."

"Don't stay long."

Bernard made no answer, going over stage by stage the trifling events of their uneventful summer. Its sharpest impression was Bernard's curious and complete absorption in the portrait of an unknown woman. His strange, wasting illness seemed to Prescott inexplicably joined to this absorption.

The silence, the heavy warmth of the