

Paolo. Gathering up the planks, the pickaxe and the empty bag that had held the gold, he strode with them to a stunted tree, dug a shallow hole, in which he buried them, and with a swift glance around, strode away in the direction of the village. As soon as he was out of sight Holstead went direct to the tree, and with his pocket knife cut a cross deeply into the bark.

With the story of Don Paolo's insulting declaration of love for the Princess, and his threats against her, burning in his mind, everything that the "conjurer" did assumed a curious interest for the Englishman. His imagination was ready to see in any unexplained, mysterious act, a plot against the lonely, unprotected girl; and though, in the present instance, he could not comprehend how Don Paolo's burying of the gold could concern her, nevertheless he felt a haunting uneasiness which he could not banish.

The most feasible explanation appeared to be that the man in black had hidden treasure dishonestly come by, perhaps, which he would dig up at a convenient season. What if he had stolen it from the Princess? Holstead asked himself; and his supposition took him back to the same spot on the following night, at a later hour. He waited for some time, and at length in his impatience was about to go away, when from far away came the sound of footsteps. He stood in dense shadow, but the tree with the cross, and the stream, were silvered, so that he was able to see several men approaching, in a huddled group, with one leading.

This last was Paolo, erect, his tall body rigid, like a man hypnotized. In his right hand he held a polished brass rod, of which Holstead had heard that the magician's "familiar spirit" was said to have his habitation therein. Pressing close upon the necromancer, watching each movement of the rod as it dipped and swayed in his hand, were three men. As they came up, the moonlight touched their faces, and Holstead remembered that he had seen two of them before. The trio were worthless loafers from Minori, a village below Ravello, by the sea. Up the side

of the stream they came, jostling each other in their eagerness; but at length Paolo stopped. His rod slipped three times. "It is here," he said. Then, as if waking from a trance, he directed them to turn the course of the stream. Two of the men carried planks and a pick, and quickly did the work; the third stroke with the pick laid bare the cache. With guttural cries of joy, the three would have fallen upon the gold; but Paolo bestrode it and thrust them back.

"You see," he said, "I have kept my word. I never lie. Of this treasure I shall give you each a hundred lire; the rest is mine. But to-morrow I will discover for you in the Palazzo Stefano the much larger treasure the existence of which my familiar has revealed to me. In that we shall all share equally. You already know the conditions, and what you must do in order that I may win it for you." As he spoke, Paolo had been hastily stuffing the gold pieces into a bag he had brought with him, having first handed their shares to his open-mouthed dupes. This done, they undammed the stream, and disappeared like shadows.

The next day should have been Holstead's last in Ravello, but, having accomplished nothing, he made up his mind doggedly, that he would stay until he had. He would telegraph next morning to his father, Lord Dartmoor, at Naples, where the party would expect letters, saying that he was "unavoidably detained."

The day of his delay passed in failure; he dined gloomily, his thoughts divided between Immacolata, and wondering what villainy Don Paolo would be up to in the Palazzo Stefano. The night was glorious, and he strolled out upon the terrace after dinner, his cigar making a point of yellow brightness in the moonlight.

Suddenly, from below the terrace wall, a voice aspirated in a shrill whisper, the word "Signore!" He looked down, and saw the figure of a woman, which, with a thrill, he recognised to be that of Assunta, the Princess's old nurse.

To reach her he had to go through the hotel, as there was no other exit

from the terrace; but in three minutes he was by her side. "Do not think strangely of me, Signore," she implored in Italian, "for seeking you in such a way, and in secret. You are an Englishman and you have looked with honourable admiration at my mistress; so I trust you to help me in my trouble, as I could trust no other man here. It is wisdom and courage that may be needed, perhaps; so I thought of you, and I ran here in haste."

"Has anything happened to your mistress?" Holstead quickly asked.

"Listen, Signore, and it is for you to say what you think, and what is to be done," said the old woman. Then she poured out a strange story, hardly stopping to take breath. How she had been to an old friend in the upper part of the village as was her custom on this same evening, every week; how on her return to the Palazzo della Marra she had found the Princess gone. On the floor of the Princess's room, however, she had picked up a note. Unfortunately she could not read, but she had brought it to the English gentleman.

Holstead struck a wax vesta, and read the few lines on a crumpled slip of paper, by its flare. The mother of a certain Anita Strozzi prayed the Princess to come to her daughter, who was dying.

"It is a lie!" broke out Assunta. "I heard only this morning that Anita is better. This is a plot—a trick of someone who wishes my sweet lady harm; and who in all the world wishes that but one?"

"You mean the conjurer Paolo?" exclaimed Holstead.

"Oh, Signore," the old woman sobbed, "he is clever; he knows how to hide his tracks, yet I think I see his hand in this. Like the hawk that he is, he has watched her since she refused to listen to him, and—and since your coming to Ravello, he has looked at her—oh, I dare not say how he has looked. Perhaps I should not say this to you; but I believe you have admired her very much; she has thought of you too, sometimes, Signore, as a lady may when she leads a sad and lonely life with seldom a new interest.

And he has seen all—the arch fiend! Holy Maria, I cannot forget his threats! And now—she has disappeared."

"Trust me to find her, and bring her safely back to you," Holstead said earnestly. If I don't come with the Princess in an hour, go to the carabinieri for help." Assunta seized his hand, kissed it, much to his embarrassment, and hurried away, towards the Palazzo della Marra.

Holstead, without an instant's hesitation, ran lightly down the stony way to the Palazzo Stefano, one of the oldest and most noble ruins in the neighbourhood of Ravello. Lately it had been bought for a song by a rich archaeologist in Naples, who was having the Moorish court excavated. Already Holstead had explored the place, during the hours when the work of excavating was in progress; but he knew that the gate in the high wall which surrounded the old gardens was kept locked at night, since the work of restoration had been begun. Strange chilling suspicions flitted through his mind, and instinctively he had come here, to the place where the conjurer had appointed for a rendezvous with his dupes, for the solving of the mystery.

He listened outside the tall, locked iron gate in the thick wall, but could hear nothing—not even an echo from the village in the distance, for Ravello goes early to bed. The gate was high, and had spikes at the top, but in a moment he had climbed it, and dropped down on the other side. To his surprise, a great key was in the lock, which looked as if someone employed about the place were not far away. Perhaps one of Paolo's friends—but Holstead did not stop to finish the thought. He unlocked the gate, in case of future need, and put the big key into his pocket.

Keeping in the deep shadow of the wall, he moved noiselessly past the cloisters to the steps leading down to the partially excavated Moorish Court, the oldest part of the Palazzo. Now, above the soft whispering of the wind among the tree branches, came the sound of game, but the thought of danger to him subdued voices. Still cautiously Holstead descended. He was playing a risky

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