

# THE WHITE SISTER\*

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"THE PRIMA DONNA," ETC.

## SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTERS ALREADY PUBLISHED

**S**UDDEN and terrible misfortune has overtaken Angela Chiaromonte. Her father, the head of an old Roman house, has been killed in a street accident; and the dead man's sister-in-law, the Marchesa del Prato, has told the young girl that she is not her father's legitimate daughter, and will not inherit a penny of the family estate. It appears that in the controversy between church and state in Italy, the prince was so devoted an adherent of the papal cause that he refused to be married by civil ceremony, and to register his daughter's birth as required by the government regulations. In consequence, it is true that in the eye of the law she is illegitimate. The *marchesa*—who hates Angela because she herself had desired the late prince for a husband, and had made a loveless match with his younger brother when the elder Chiaromonte married another—follows up this disclosure by warning her niece that she need expect no help from the family, and by recommending her to apply to one of the two convents on which her dead father had lavished money.

Angela has two friends—Giovanni Severi, a young officer whom she loves and hopes to marry, and Mme. Bernard, her old French governess; and the latter takes the girl to her own lodging. Severi is anxious to marry her as soon as possible; and as he has no income beyond his pay, he tells her that he will leave the army and enter civil life, in which, being a skilled engineer, he counts on finding remunerative work. Angela, however, makes him promise to wait a month before resigning.

Before the month passes, Severi is ordered to join a surveying-expedition on the Red Sea coast—a service of some difficulty and danger. He wishes to refuse the commission; but when he goes to Mme. Bernard's to see Angela, the girl tells him that it is a call of duty, which he cannot honorably decline. He therefore sails for Africa, and a few weeks later the news comes that his party has met hostile natives and has been exterminated.

Angela, all her earthly hopes destroyed by this new disaster, enters the convent of Santa Giovanna d' Aza—a nursing sisterhood—where she takes the vows under the name of Sister Giovanna. About five years later, it chanced that she is called to nurse the Princess Chiaromonte, who is stricken with a severe attack of influenza. The princess is delirious and does not recognize Sister Giovanna as the niece whom she has wronged. During the night the patient becomes hysterical and begins to laugh and scream.

## XV

**T**HE delirious woman screamed once more, and then gulped several times as if she were going to sob. At last she lay quite still for a moment, gazing up into her nurse's eyes. Then a change came into her face, and she spoke in a hoarse whisper and as if frightened.

"Are you going to refuse me absolution for taking the will?" she asked.

The question was so unexpected that Sister Giovanna did not find anything to say at once; and before any words oc-

curred to her the princess was speaking hurriedly and earnestly, but still in a loud whisper, which occasionally broke into a very low and trembling tone of voice:

"I did it for the best. What could that wretched girl have done with the money, even if the lawyers had proved the will good? Why did not my brother-in-law get civilly married, instead of leaving his daughter without so much as a name? There must have been a reason. Perhaps she was not really his wife's child! It was all his fault. The will was not legal, and would only have

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given trouble if I had let them find it. So I took it away and burned it in my own room. What harm was there in that? It saved so many useless complications, and we had a right to the fortune. The lawyers said so. I cannot see that it was really a sin at all, father; indeed, I cannot. I have confessed it from a scruple of conscience, and you will not refuse me absolution? How can you, when I say I am sorry for it? Yes, yes, I am." The voice rose to a low cry. "Since you say it was a sin, I repent; I will—what? You are not in earnest, father? Make restitution? Give the whole fortune to a nun? Oh, no, no! You cannot expect me to do that. Rob my children of what would have been theirs, even if I had not taken the will? It is out of the question, I tell you. It is utterly out of the question. Besides, the property is not mine at all—I have not got a penny of it. It is all my husband's, and I cannot touch it. Do you understand?"

Sister Giovanna had listened in spite of herself.

"The nun expects nothing, and does not want the money," she said, bending down. "Try to rest now, for you are very tired."

"Rest!" cried the princess, starting up in bed and leaning on one hand. "How can I rest, when it torments me day and night? I come to you for absolution, and you refuse it and tell me to rest."

She broke into a wild laugh again; but Sister Giovanna instantly seized her arm as she had done before, and spoke in the same commanding way.

"Be silent!" she said energetically.

The delirious woman began to whine.

"You are so rough, father—so unkind to-day! What is the matter with you? You never treated me like this before."

She was sobbing the next moment, and real tears trickled through her fingers as she covered her face with her hands.

"You see—how—how penitent I am!" she managed to cry in a broken voice. "Have pity, father!"

She was crying bitterly; but, though she was out of her mind, the nun could not help feeling that she was acting a part—even in her delirium—

and in spite of the tears that forced themselves through her hands and ran down, wetting the lace and spotting the scarlet ribbons of her elaborate night-dress. Sister Giovanna put aside the thought as a possibly unjust judgment, and tried to quiet her.

"If you are really sorry for what you did, you will be forgiven," said the nun.

This produced an immediate effect: the sobbing subsided, the tears ceased to flow, and the princess repeated the Act of Contrition in a low voice; then she folded her hands and waited in silence. Sister Giovanna stood upright beside the pillows, and prayed very earnestly in her heart that she might forget what she had heard; or, at least, bear her aunt no grudge for the irreparable wrong.

But the delirious woman, who still fancied that her nurse was her confessor, was waiting for the words of absolution; and after a few moments, as she did not hear them, she broke out again in senseless terror, with sobbing and more tears. She grasped the sister's arms wildly and dragged herself up till she was on her knees in bed, imploring and weeping, pleading and sobbing, while she trembled visibly from head to foot.

The case was a difficult one, even for an experienced nurse. A lay woman might have taken upon herself to personate the priest and pronounce the words of the absolution in the hope of quieting the patient, but no member of a religious order would do such a thing, except to save life, and such a case could hardly arise. The Princess Chiaramonte was in no bodily danger, and the chances were that the delirium would leave her before long; when it disappeared she would probably fall asleep, and it was very unlikely that she would remember anything she had said in her ravings. Meanwhile, it was certainly not good for her to go on crying and throwing herself about, as she was doing, for the fever was high already, and her wild excitement might increase the temperature still further.

Sister Giovanna took advantage of a brief interval, when she was perhaps only taking breath between her lamentations, out of sheer necessity.

"You must compose yourself," the nun said with authority. "You seem to for-

get that you have been ill. Lie down for a little while, and I will come back presently. In the meantime, I give you my word that your niece has forgiven you with all her heart."

She could say that with a clear conscience, just then. Gently disengaging herself, she succeeded without much difficulty in making the princess lay her head on the pillow, for the words had produced a certain effect; then, leaving the bedside, she went back to the table. But she did not sit down, and remained standing only about a minute before going back to the patient.

She went round by the opposite side of the screen, however, with the hope that the princess, seeing her come from another direction, would take her for a different person. Very small things sometimes affect people in delirium, and the little artifice was successful. Sister Giovanna came forward, speaking cheerfully in her ordinary voice; and at once put her arm under the pillow, propping her aunt's head in order to make her drink comfortably. There was no resistance now.

"You are much better already," she said in an encouraging tone. "Does your head ache much?"

"It feels a little light," the princess said, quite naturally, "but it does not hurt me now. I think I have been asleep—and dreaming, too."

Perhaps some suspicion that she had been raving crossed her unsettled brain, for she glanced quickly at the nun and then shut her eyes.

"Yes," she said, apparently satisfied; "I have been dreaming."

Sister Giovanna only smiled as sympathetically as she could; and, sitting down by the head of the bed, she stroked the burning forehead with her cool hand, softly and steadily, for several minutes; and little by little the Princess Chiromonte sank into a quiet sleep, for she was exhausted by the effort she had unconsciously made. When she was breathing regularly, the nun left her side and went noiselessly back to her seat behind the screen.

She did not open her breviary again that night. For a long time she sat quite still, with her hands folded on the edge of the table, gazing into the far-

thest corner of the room with unwinking eyes.

She had said that she forgave her aunt with all her heart, and she had believed that it was true; but she was less sure now that she could think of her past life, and of what might have been if she had not been driven from her home destitute and forced to take refuge with Mme. Bernard.

In the light of what she had just learned, the past had a very different look. It was true that she had urged Giovanni to join the expedition, and had used arguments which had convinced herself as well as him. But she had made him go because, if he had stayed, he would have sacrificed his career in the army in order to earn bread for her, who was penniless. If she had inherited even a part of the fortune that should have been hers, it never would have occurred to him to leave the service and go into business for her support; or, if it had crossed his mind, she would have dissuaded him easily enough. So far as mere money went, he had not wanted or needed it for himself, but for her; and if she had been rich and had married him, he could not have been reproached with living on her.

To persuade him, she had urged that his honor required him to accept a post of danger instead of resigning from the army as soon as it was offered to him, and this had been true to some extent; but if there had been no question of his leaving the service, she would have found him plenty of satisfactory reasons for not going to Africa, and he was not the kind of man whom gossips care to call a coward. Reasons? She would have invented twenty in those days when she was not a nun, but just a loving girl, with all her womanhood before her!

If her aunt had not stolen the will and robbed her, she would have hindered Giovanni from leaving Italy; and she would have married him—that was the plain truth. He would have been alive now, in his youth and his strength and his love for her, instead of having perished in the African desert. That was the thought that tormented the guilty woman, too; it was the certainty that her crime had indirectly sent him to his death.

So thought Sister Giovanna as she sat staring into the dark corner through the hours of the night, and she wondered how she had been able to say that she forgave, or had dared to hope that she could forget. If it had been only for herself, it might have been quite different; but her imagination had too often unwillingly pictured the tragic death of the man she had loved so well to forgive the woman who had caused it, now that she had revealed herself at last.

So long as Angela had believed that her father had left no will, because he had been in ignorance of the law, she had been able to tell herself that her great misfortune had been inevitable; but since it turned out that he had provided for her and had done his duty by her, according to his light, the element of ineluctable fate disappeared, and the awful conviction that Giovanni's life had been wantonly sacrificed to enrich Princess Chiaromonte and her children forced itself upon her intelligence, and would not be thrust out.

It seemed to Sister Giovanna that this was the first real temptation that had assailed her since she had taken her vows—the first moment of active regret for what might have been—as distinguished from that heartfelt sorrow for the man who had perished which had not been incompatible with a religious life. Recalling the mother superior's words of warning, she mentally recorded her failure as the first of its kind, and prayed that it might not be irretrievable, and that resentment and regret might speedily ebb away and leave her again as she had been before the unforgettable voice had pierced her ears with the truth she had never guessed.

It was a great effort now to go to the bedside and do what must be done for the sick woman—to smooth the pillow for the head that had thought such thoughts, and to stroke the hand that had done such a deed. She was tempted to take her little black bag and leave the house quietly, before any one was up. That was not a very dreadful thought, of course; but it seemed terrible to her, whose first duty in life was to help sufferers and soothe those who were in pain. It seemed to her almost as bad as if a soldier in battle were suddenly tempted

to turn his back on his comrades, throw down his rifle, and run away.

She felt it each time that she had to rise and go round the screen; and when she saw the flushed face on the pillow in the shadow, the longing to be gone was almost greater than she could resist. She had not understood before what it meant to loathe any living thing; but she knew it now, and if she did her duty conscientiously that night, easy and simple though it was, she deserved more credit than many of the sisters who had gone so bravely to nurse the lepers in far Rangoon.

She did not feel the smallest wish to hurt the woman who had injured her—let that be said in her praise; for though vengeance be the Lord's, to long for it is human. She only desired to be out of the house, and out of sight of the face that lay where her father's had lain, and beyond reach of the voice that had told her what she wished she had never known.

But there was no escape, and she had to bear it; and when the night wore away at last, it had been the longest she remembered in all her life. Her face was as white as the mother superior's, and her dark blue eyes looked almost black; even Mme. Bernard would not have recognized the bright-haired Angela of other days in the weary and sad-faced nun who met the doctor outside the door of the sick-room when he came at eight o'clock.

She told him that the patient had been delirious about midnight, but had rested tolerably ever since. He glanced at the temperature-chart she brought him, and then looked keenly at her face and frowned.

"What is the matter with all of you White Sisters?" he growled discontentedly. "First, they send me one who cannot stay overnight, and then they send me one who has not been to bed for a week and ought to stay there for a month! When did you leave your last case?"

"Yesterday morning," answered Sister Giovanna submissively. "I slept most of the afternoon. I am not tired, and can do my work very well, I assure you."

"Oh, you can, can you?" The

excellent man glared at her savagely through his spectacles. "You cannot say anything yourself, of course; but I shall go to your hospital to-day and give your mother superior such a scolding as she never had in her life! She ought to be ashamed to send out a nurse in your worn-out condition."

"I felt quite fresh and rested when I left the convent in the evening," said the sister in answer. "It is not the mother superior's fault."

"It is!" retorted the doctor, who could not bear contradiction. "She ought to know better, and I shall tell her so. Go home at once, sister, and go to bed and stay there."

"I am quite able to work," protested Sister Giovanna quietly. "There is nothing the matter with me."

Still the doctor glared at her.

"Show me your tongue," he said roughly.

The nun meekly opened her mouth and put out her little tongue; it was as pink as a rose-leaf. The doctor grunted, grabbed her wrist, and began to count the pulse. Presently he made another inarticulate noise, as if he were both annoyed and pleased at having been mistaken.

"Something on your mind?" he asked more kindly. "Some mental distress?"

"Yes." The word was spoken reluctantly.

"I am sorry I was impatient," he said, and his large brown eyes softened behind his round spectacles as he turned to enter the sick-room.

It was not his business to ask what had so greatly disturbed the peace of Sister Giovanna.

## XVI

WHEN the Princess Chiaromonte was getting well, she asked some questions of her doctor, to which he replied as truthfully as he could. She inquired, for instance, whether she had been delirious at the beginning, and whether she had talked much when her mind was wandering, and his answers disturbed her a little.

As often happens in such cases, she had disjointed recollections of what she had said, and vague visions of herself that were not founded on imagination

only. It was like a dream that had not been quite a dream; opium-eaters know what the sensation is better than other men. Under the influence of laudanum, or the pipe, or the hypodermic, they have talked brilliantly, but they cannot remember what the conversation was about; or else they know that they have been furiously angry, but cannot recall the cause of their wrath nor the person on whom it was vented; or they have betrayed a secret, but for their lives they could not say who it was to whom they told it.

The middle-aged woman of the world felt that her reputation was a coat of many colors, and her past, when she looked back to it, was like a badly constructed play in which the stage is crowded with personages who have little connection with one another. There was much which she herself did not care to remember, but much more that no one else need ever know; and as she had never before been delirious, nor even ill, the thought that she had now perhaps revealed incidents of her past life was anything but pleasant.

"It is so very disagreeable to think that I may have talked nonsense," she said to the doctor, examining one of her white hands thoughtfully.

"Do not disturb yourself about that," he answered in a reassuring tone, for he understood much better than she guessed. "A good trained nurse is as silent about such accidental confessions as a good priest is about intentional ones."

"Confession!" cried the princess, annoyed. "As if I were concealing a crime! I only mean that I probably said very silly things. By the bye, I had several nurses, had I not? You kept changing them. Do you happen to know who that Sister Giovanna was, who looked so ill? You sent her back after two days, I think, because you thought she might break down. She reminded me of a niece of mine whom I have not seen for years, but I did not like to ask her any questions, and, besides, I was much too ill."

"I have no idea who she was before she entered the order," the doctor answered.

He was often asked such futile questions about nurses, and would not have



answered them if he had been able to do so. But in asking information the princess was unwittingly conveying it, for it flashed upon him that Sister Giovanna was perhaps indeed that niece of whom she spoke, and whom she was commonly said to have defrauded of her fortune.

The nun herself had told him of the sick woman's delirious condition, and he remembered her looks and her admission that she was in mental distress. All this tallied very well with the guess that her aunt had made some sort of confession of her deed while her mind was wandering, and that she now dimly recalled something of the sort. He put the theory away for future consideration, and left the princess in ignorance that he had thought of it or even attached any special meaning to her words.

She was far from satisfied, however, and made up her mind to follow up the truth at all costs. As a first step, she sent a generous donation to the convent of the White Sisters, as soon as she was quite recovered; and as her illness had not been serious enough to explain such an important thank-offering, she wrote a line to say that she had never been ill before, and had been so much impressed by the care she had received that she felt she must really do something to help such an excellent institution. It would give her the most genuine pleasure to visit the hospital, she said in conclusion, but that was no doubt too great a favor to ask.

In thanking her, the mother superior replied that it would be no favor at all, and that the princess would be welcome whenever she chose to send word that she was coming. On the day following that, the mother told Sister Giovanna what had happened, and with characteristic directness asked what she thought about her aunt's charity.

"It is very kind of her," answered the young nun in that monotonous, business-like tone which all religious people use when speaking of an apparently charitable action for the motive of which they are not ready to vouch, though they have no reasonable ground for criticism.

People of the world often speak in that voice when unexpectedly asked to express an opinion about some person

whom they greatly dislike but do not dare to abuse.

The little White Volcano flared up energetically, however.

"I hate that sort of answer!" she cried, with a delicate snort.

Sister Giovanna looked at her in surprise, but said nothing.

"I cannot refuse the money," said the mother superior, "but I heartily wish I could! She has given it in order to come here and to be well received if she chooses to come again. I am sure of that, and she can have no object in coming here except to make mischief for you. It may be wicked of me, but I do not trust that lady in the least. Do you?"

She asked the question suddenly.

"She cannot harm me more than she did years ago," Sister Giovanna answered.

"I wish that were certain!" said the other. "I wish I had gone to nurse her myself that night instead of sending you!"

She was so evidently in earnest that the sister was even more surprised than before, and wondered what was the matter. But as it was not her place to ask questions, and as the mother superior's doubt, or presentiment of trouble, was evidently suggested by sincere affection for herself, she said nothing, and went about her work without letting her mind dwell too long on the conversation.

Men and women who lead the religious life in earnest acquire a much greater control of their secret thoughts than ordinary people can easily believe it possible to exercise. Nevertheless, the princess's voice came back to Sister Giovanna's ears when she was alone, and told the story over and over again.

Her aunt was often mentioned in the convent as a recent benefactress who was showing a lively interest in the hospital, and would perhaps give further large sums to it which could be expended for good. Sister Giovanna never said anything when the subject came up, but she could not help thinking of Judas's suggestion that the alabaster box of precious ointment might have been sold and given to the poor, and a disturbing spirit whispered that Princess Chiaromonte, whose

past might well be compared with the Magdalen's, had done what Iscariot would have advised.

In due time, too, the great lady visited the convent and hospital, and was shown over it systematically by the mother superior herself, followed by an admiring little escort of nurses and novices, for it was of course permissible to appreciate and admire the smart clothes of a benefactress, whereas it would have been the height of levity to bestow so much attention on a lady visitor who was merely fashionable and had done nothing for the institution. This, at least, was the novices' point of view. But the little White Volcano seemed quietly cross, and held her small head very high as she led the princess through one ward after another to the beautifully fitted operating-room; and when she spoke, her tone was strangely cold and mordant, as a woman's voice sometimes sounds in the Alps when she speaks across an ice-fall or a frozen lake.

The princess looked behind her repeatedly, and her eyes sought her niece's face among those she saw, but she asked no questions about her, and apparently gave all her attention to what was shown her. Sister Giovanna was in her cell during all that time, and should no doubt have been occupied; but instead, she was standing idly at her window, looking through one of the diamond-shaped openings in the lattice, in the direction of Monteverde. She was hardly aware of what she saw, however, for in imagination she was following her aunt through the halls and wards and long corridors, and a struggle was going on in her heart which hurt her and made her despise herself.

The woman who had ruined her life was under the same roof with her again, and she could not forgive her; and that seemed a very great sin. What had she gained in the five years that had gone by since the beginning of her novitiate, if she could not even forgive an injury? That was the question. Since her life had led her to nothing better than smoldering resentment and sharp regret, it had not been the holy life she had meant it to be—the failure she must score against herself was a total one, a general defeat—and all that she had be-

lieved she had been doing for the dead man's sake must count for nothing, since she had not once been really in a state of grace.

No doubt her self-accusation went too far, as a confessor would have told her, or even the mother superior, if that good and impulsive woman had known what was in her mind. But Sister Giovanna did not believe she could go far enough in finding fault with herself for such great sins as her regret for a married life that might have been, and her lasting anger against a person who had robbed her; and it was while she was standing at her latticed window that morning that she first thought of making an even more complete sacrifice by joining the sisters who intended to go out to the Rangoon leper hospital in the spring.

It was not with the hope of dying young that she wished to go and face death daily, but in the earnest desire to escape from what she called her temptation, and to regain that peace of mind which had been hers for a long time and now was gone. She had made for herself a little treasure-house of grace laid up, to be offered for the soul of Giovanni Severi, and the gold of her affliction and the jewels of her unselfish labors had been gathered there to help him. That had been her simple and innocent belief, but it had broken down suddenly and completely as soon as she discovered that she was only a human, resentful, regretful woman, after all, as far below the mystic detachment from the outward world as she had been in those first days of her grief, at Mme. Bernard's, when she had sat listless all the day long, a broken-hearted girl.

What she had taken for gold and had stored up for Giovanni's welfare was only the basest metal, her jewels were but chips of gaudy glass, her sacrifice was a failure after all. Worse than that, her dead man came back alive from his grave and haunted her in dreams, threatening righteous judgment on the woman who had cheated her and him of earthly happiness.

I shall not dwell on what she felt. Men and women who have honestly tried to lead the good life for years and have suddenly realized that they are as human as ever before will understand what I

have written. The rest must either believe that it is true, or, not believing, read on for the sake of knowing Sister Giovanna's strange story, or else throw my tale aside for a dull novel not worth reading. We cannot always be amusing, and real life is not always gay.

The young nun waited in her cell till the mother superior herself opened the door and entered. For the princess was gone, after seeing everything, praising everything with the flattering indiscriminate of total ignorance, and, finally, after asking permission to make another visit. She had spent ten minutes in the mother's own rooms before leaving, and had asked the names of the three sisters who had taken care of her in succession, writing them down on the back of a visiting-card. She wished to remember them in her prayers, she said; but the little White Volcano almost laughed in her face, and the black diamond eyes twinkled furiously as they turned away to hide their scornful amusement—so strong was the nun's conviction that the new benefactress was a humbug.

The princess looked at the names quite calmly after she had written them—Sister St. Paul, Sister Giovanna, and Sister Marius—and asked whether she had seen any of them during her visit. But the mother superior answered that they were all three either nursing private cases or not on duty, which might mean that they were resting in their cells.

Sister Giovanna started slightly as the door of her cell opened, for she had scarcely realized that she had not moved from the window for a long time. The elder woman had not taken the trouble to knock, and, strange to say, a faint blush rose in the sister's face, as if she had been surprised and were a little ashamed of being caught in idleness instead of reading her breviary for the day or doing something useful with her hands.

The black eyes looked at her searchingly, for nothing escaped them.

"What have you been thinking of?" asked the impulsive woman.

There was a moment's silence.

"The Rangoon lepers," answered the sister in a quiet voice.

The mother superior's white face hardened strangely.

"The Princess Chiaromonte is gone," she said rather sharply, "and you are wanted in the surgical ward at once."

She turned without another word and went quickly away, leaving the door open. It was clear that she was not pleased with the answer she had received.

Six weeks later Sister Giovanna went to the mother superior's rooms on the other side of the cloistered court after first chapel and knocked at the door. It was a Monday morning in March, and she was to be supervising nurse for the week, but the regular custom was to go on duty at eight o'clock and it was not yet seven.

"Well?" asked the mother superior, looking up from her papers, while the young nun remained standing respectfully at the corner of the big desk.

The tone did not invite confidence; for some reason as yet unexplained the mother had avoided speaking with her best nurse since that morning in the cell.

"I have made up my mind to go to the lepers with the others, mother, if you will give me your permission."

The alabaster face suddenly glowed like white fire in the early light, the dark eyebrows knitted themselves angrily, and the lips parted to speak a hasty word, but immediately closed again. A long silence followed Sister Giovanna's speech, and the elder nun looked down at her papers and moved some of them about mechanically, from one place to another on the table.

"Are you angry with me, mother?" asked Sister Giovanna, not understanding.

"With you, child?" The mother looked up, and her face had softened a little. "No, I am not angry with you—at least, I hope I am not."

It was rather an ambiguous answer, to say the least, and the young nun waited meekly for an explanation. None came, but instead, advice, delivered in a direct and businesslike tone.

"You had better put the idea out of your mind for a month or so, honestly and with all the intention of which you are capable. If this is a mere impulse, felt under some mental distress, it will subside and you will think no more about it. If it is a true call, it will come back and you will obey it in due time. More



than that I cannot tell you. If you are not satisfied that I am advising you well, go to Monsignor Saracinesca the next time he is here. It is my place to warn, not to hinder; to help you if I can, not to stand in your way. That is all, my daughter. Go to your duties."

Sister Giovanna bent her head obediently and left the room at once. When she was gone, the mother superior rose from her desk and went into her cell, locking the door after her. An hour later she was still on her knees and her face was buried in her hands. She was weeping bitterly.

## XVII

IN all that numerous community which she governed and guided so well there was not one person who would have believed that the mother superior of Santa Giovanna d' Aza could shed tears, scalding and passionate—even rebellious, perhaps, if the whole truth were known; for no sister or novice of them all could have imagined that such irresistible grief could take possession of a woman who, as they all said among themselves, was made of steel and ice, merely because one more of them wished to go to the Far East where so many had gone already.

But they did not know anything about the mother superior. Indeed, when all was said, they knew next to nothing of her past, and as it was against all rules to discuss such matters, it was not likely that they should ever hear more, even if a new sister joined them who chanced to have some information. They were aware, of course, that her name, in religion, was Mother Veronica, though they did not speak of her except as the mother superior.

It was true that they had never heard of a nun of their order taking the name of Veronica, but that was not a matter to criticize either. She spoke exceedingly pure Italian, with the accent and intonation of a Roman lady, but it was no secret that when she had come to take the place of her predecessor, who had died suddenly, she had arrived from Austria; and she also spoke German fluently, which argued that she had been in that country some time. There was certainly nothing in these few facts to account for what she suffered when Sister Giovanna spoke of

going to Rangoon, and it would have been hard to believe that her burning tears overflowed in spite of her, not only that first time but often afterward, at the mere thought of parting with the best nurse in the hospital, even if she felt some special sympathy for her.

Whatever the cause of her trouble was, no one knew of it; and that she found no cause for self-accusation in what she felt is clear, since she made no mention of it in her next confession. Indeed, she more often found fault with herself for being harsh in her judgments and too peremptory and tyrannical in the government of her community, than for giving way easily to the impulses of human sympathy. She was not nervous, either, in the sense of her nerves being unsteady or overwrought in consequence of a long-continued strain; there was nothing in her weeping that could have suggested a neurotic breakdown even to the most skeptical of physicians. It was genuine, irresistible, overwhelming grief, and she knew that its cause was not even in part imaginary, but was altogether real, and terrible beyond any expression.

Nevertheless, she found strength to speak to Monsignor Saracinesca of Sister Giovanna's intention, one day when he came to see her early in the morning on a matter of business; for he managed the finances of the convent hospital, and was also its representative in any questions in which the institution, as distinguished from the order, had secular dealings with the world.

The prelate and the mother met as usual in the cloistered garden. When convent affairs had been disposed of, they continued their walk in silence for a few moments.

"I want your unprejudiced opinion about the future of one of the sisters," said the mother superior at last, in her usual tone.

"I will try to give it," answered Monsignor Saracinesca.

"Sister Giovanna wishes to go to Rangoon with the other three."

The churchman betrayed no surprise, and answered without hesitation:

"You know what I always say in such cases, when I am consulted."

"Yes. I have given her that advice—to wait a month, to try to put the idea

out of her mind, to make sure that it is not a passing impulse."

"You cannot do more," said Monsignor Saracinesca, "nor can I."

The mother superior turned up her white face and looked at him so steadily that he gazed at her in surprise.

"It ought to be stopped," she said, with sudden energy. "It may be wrong to call it suicide and to interfere on that ground, but there is another, and a good one. I am responsible for the hospital here, for the nursing in it, and for the sisters who are sent out to private cases. Year after year, one, two, and sometimes three of my best young nurses go away to these leper asylums in Rangoon and other places in the Far East. It is not the stupid ones that go, the dull, devoted creatures who could do that one thing well, because it is perfectly mechanical and a mere question of prophylaxis, precaution, and routine—and charity. Those that go always seem to be the best, the very nurses who are invaluable in all sorts of difficult cases from an operation to a typhoid fever; the most experienced, the cleverest, the most gifted! How can I be expected to keep up our standard if this goes on year after year? It is outrageous! And the worst of it is that the 'vocation' is catching! The clever ones catch it because they are the most sensitively organized, but not the good, simple, humdrum little women who would be far better at nursing lepers than at a case of appendicitis—and better in heaven than in a leper asylum, for that matter!"

Monsignor Saracinesca listened in silence to this energetic tirade; but when the little White Volcano was quiescent for a moment, he shook his head. It was less an expression of disapproval than of doubt.

"It is manifestly impossible to send the least intelligent of the sisters, if they do not offer to go," he answered. "Besides, how would you pick out the dull ones? By examination?"

He was not without a sense of humor, and his sharply chiseled lips twitched a little, but were almost instantly grave again. The mother superior's profile was as still as a marble medallion.

"It ought to be stopped altogether," she said presently, with conviction.

"Meanwhile, though I have told Sister Giovanna that it is not my place to hinder her, much less my right, I tell you plainly that I will prevent her from going if I can!"

This frank statement did not surprise the prelate, who was used to her direct speech and energetic temper, and liked both. But he said little in answer.

"That is your affair, reverend mother. You will do what your conscience dictates."

"Conscience?" repeated the nun with a resentful question in her tone. "If the word really means anything, which I often doubt, it is an instinctive discernment of right and wrong in one's own particular case, to be applied to the salvation of one's own soul. Is it not?"

"Undoubtedly."

"What have I to do with my own particular case?" The Volcano flared up indignantly. "It is my duty to do what is best for the souls and bodies of forty women and girls, more or less, and of a great number of sick persons here and in their own homes, without considering myself at all, my instincts, or my little individual discernment of my own feelings, or my human likes and dislikes of people. If my duty leads me into temptation, I have got to face temptation intentionally, instead of avoiding it, as we are taught to do, and if I break down under it, so much the worse for me—the good of the others will have been accomplished nevertheless! That is one side of my life. Another is that if my duty demands that I should tear out my heart and trample on it, I ought not to hesitate, though I knew I was to die of the pain!"

The mother superior's clear low voice vibrated strangely.

"But I will not do it, unless it is to bring about some real good to others," she added.

Monsignor Saracinesca glanced at her face again before he answered.

"Your words are clear enough, but I do not understand you," he said. "If I can possibly help you, tell me what it is that distresses you. If not, let us talk of other things."

"You cannot help me." Her thin lips closed upon each other in an even line.

"I am sorry," answered the church-

man gravely. "As for Sister Giovanna's intention, I share your opinion, for I think she can do more good here than by sacrificing herself in Burma. If she consults me, I shall tell her so."

"Thank you."

They parted, and the mother superior went back to her room and her work with a steady step and holding her head high. But she did not even see a lay sister who was scrubbing her small private staircase, and who rose to let her pass, saluting her as she went by.

Monsignor Saracinesca left the garden by the glass door that opened into the large hall, already described, and he went out past the portress's little lodge. She was just opening the outer door when he came up with her, and the next moment he found himself face to face with Mme. Bernard. He stepped back politely to let her pass, and lifted his hat with a smile of recognition; but instead of advancing, she uttered a little cry of surprise and satisfaction, and retreated to let him come out. He noticed that her face betrayed great excitement, and she seemed hardly able to speak.

"What is the matter?" he asked kindly, as he emerged from the deep doorway.

The portress was waiting for Mme. Bernard to enter, but the Frenchwoman had changed her mind and held up her hand, shaking one forefinger.

"Not to-day, Anna!" she cried. "Or later—I will come back, perhaps—I cannot tell. May I walk a few steps with you, *monseigneur*?"

"By all means," answered the prelate.

The door of the convent closed behind them, but Mme. Bernard was evidently anxious to get well out of hearing before she spoke. At the corner of the quiet street she suddenly stood still and looked up to her companion's face, evidently in great perturbation.

"Well?" he asked. "What is it?"

"Giovanni Severi is alive."

Monsignor Saracinesca thought the good woman was dreaming.

"It is impossible," he said emphatically.

"On the contrary," returned Mme. Bernard, "it is perfectly true. If you do not believe me, look at this."

She opened her governess's reticule

and fumbled among the little school-books and papers it contained. In a moment she brought out a letter, sealed, stamped, and postmarked, and held it up before the tall prelate's eyes. It was addressed to "Donna Angela Chiaromonte," to the care of Mme. Bernard at the latter's lodgings in Trastevere. The stamp was an Italian one, and the postmark was that of the military post-office in Massowah.

Monsignor Saracinesca looked at the envelope curiously, took it from Mme. Bernard, and examined the stamped date. Then he asked her if she was quite sure of the handwriting, and she assured him that she was; Giovanni had written before he ever started into the interior with the expedition, and she herself had received the letter from the postman and had given it to Angela. What was more, after Angela had gone to live at the convent, Mme. Bernard had found the old envelope of the letter in a drawer and had kept it, and she had just looked at it before leaving her house.

"He is alive," she said with conviction; "he has written this letter to her, and he does not know that she is a nun. He is coming home, I am sure!"

Monsignor Saracinesca was a man of great heart and wide experience, but such a case as this had never come to his knowledge. He stood still in deep thought, bending a little as he rested both his hands on the battered silver knob of his old stick.

"He is coming home!" repeated Mme. Bernard in great distress. "What are we to do?"

"What were you going to do just now, when I met you at the door?" asked the prelate.

"I do not know! I was going to see her! Perhaps I would have broken the news to her gently, perhaps I would have said nothing and kept the letter to give it to her at another time! How can I tell what I would have done? It would have depended so much on the way she heard the first suggestion! People have died of joy, *monseigneur*! A little weakness of the heart, a sudden joyful surprise, it stops beating—that has happened before now!"

"Yes. It has happened before now. I knew of such a case myself."

"And I adore the child!" cried the impulsive Frenchwoman, ready to burst into tears. "Oh, what shall we do? What ought we to do?"

"Do you know the mother superior?"

"Oh, yes! Quite well. Are you going to tell me that I should take the letter to her? She is a cold, hard woman, *monseigneur*! A splendid woman to manage a hospital, perhaps, but she has no more heart than a steel machine! She will burn the letter, and never tell any one!"

"I think you are mistaken about her," answered the churchman gravely. "She has more heart than most of us, and I believe that even you yourself are not more devoted to Sister Giovanna than she is."

"Really, *monseigneur*? Is it possible? Are you sure? What makes you think so?"

"To the best of my knowledge and belief, what I have told you is the truth, though I might find it hard to explain my reasons for saying so. But before you go to the mother superior, or speak of the matter to Sister Giovanna, there is something else to be done. This letter, by some strange accident of the post, may have been written before Giovanni Severi died. There is a bare possibility that it may have been mislaid in the post-office, or that he may have given it to a comrade to post, who forgot it—many things may happen to a letter."

"Well, what must I do?"

"If he is alive, the fact is surely known already at headquarters, and you should make inquiries. To give Sister Giovanna a letter from the dead man would be wrong, in my opinion, for it would cause her needless and harmful pain. If he is dead, it should be burned, I think. But if he is really alive, after all, you have no right to burn it, and sooner or later she must have it and know the truth, with as little danger to her health and peace of mind as possible."

"You are right, *monseigneur*," answered Mme. Bernard. "What you say is full of wisdom. I have three lessons to give this morning, and as soon as I am free I will go myself to the house of a superior officer whose daughter I used to teach, and he will find out the truth by the telephone in a few minutes."

"I think that is the best course," said the churchman.

So they parted, for he was going to St. Peter's, and she turned in the direction of the nearest tramway, hastening to her pupils. And meanwhile the inevitable advanced on its unchanging course. For Giovanni Severi was alive and well, and was on his way to Rome.

### XVIII

GIOVANNI SEVERI'S adventures, between his supposed death in the massacre of the expedition and his unexpected reappearance at Massowah nearly five years later, would fill an interesting little volume in themselves; but inasmuch as an account of them would not make this story clearer and would occupy much space, it is enough to state the bare facts in a few words. Such tales of danger, suffering, and endurance have often been told at first hand, by the heroes of them, far more vividly and correctly than a mere story-teller can narrate them on hearsay.

The expedition had been attacked and destroyed by a handful of natives from a wandering tribe that was camping very near. When their chief was informed of what they had done, he rode out to the spot with a large body of men at his heels. Among the dead, Giovanni Severi lay bleeding from a gash in the head, but not mortally hurt.

The chief was by no means a mere dull savage, and finding an Italian officer alive, he recognized at once that it would be a mistake to knock him on the head and leave him with his comrades to be disposed of by the vultures and hyenas. On the other hand, he must not be allowed to escape to the Italian colony with news of the disaster. At some future time, and from a safe distance, it might be possible to obtain a large ransom for him; or, on the other hand, if a large force were ever sent up the country to revenge the outrage, it might be to the credit of the chief if he could prove that the deed had been done without his knowledge and that he had treated the only survivor humanely. He therefore took possession of Giovanni, and provided for his safety in a simple manner by merely stating that if the prisoner escaped he would cut off ten heads, but

if any harm came to him he would cut off at least a hundred.

As no one doubted but that he would keep his word, as he invariably did in such matters, Giovanni had but small chance of ever regaining his liberty, and none at all presented itself for nearly five years. During that time he traveled with his captors or lived in camps, hundreds of miles from the outposts of civilization. He learned their language, and the chief insisted on learning his, as it might be useful. Furthermore, the prisoner was required to teach his master whatever he could about modern warfare, and what little he knew of agriculture and the other arts of peace. In return he was well fed, well lodged when possible, and as well clad as any man in the tribe, except the chief himself, which was not saying much.

His chance came at last, and he did not let it pass. It involved killing one of his guards, stunning another, and seizing the chief's own camel, and it was not without great risk to his life that he got away. A fortnight later he had traveled five hundred miles and reported himself at headquarters in Massowah, dressed in a long native shirt, a dirty turban, and nothing else, as Lieutenant Giovanni Severi, formerly of the Staff College and late of the expedition that had perished five years earlier.

It chanced—for the inevitable was at work—that the mail steamer for Italy was to leave the next morning, and a small man-of-war on the following day, also homeward bound. Giovanni wrote to Angela Chiaromonte by the former, and went on board the government vessel twenty-four hours afterward. He himself sent no telegram, because he did not know where his brothers were, and he feared lest a telegraphic message might give Angela a bad shock, if it reached her at all. Moreover, he had no news of her, and could get no information whatever; so he addressed his letter to Mme. Bernard's old lodgings on the mere possibility that it might reach its destination.

Any one might have supposed that the news of his escape would be in the newspapers before he reached Italy, for it was telegraphed to the War Office in

Rome by the officer in command of the force at Massowah. But the minister chose to keep the intelligence a secret till Giovanni's arrival, because he expected to gain much information from him, and feared lest the newspapers should get hold of him and learn facts from him which would be more useful to Italy if not made public. When the Italian government wishes to keep a secret, it can do so quite as well as any other, to the despair of the public press.

The consequence of the minister's instructions was that Giovanni was met by a superior officer who came on board the man-of-war at Naples, in order to forestall any possible attempt on the part of correspondents to get hold of him, and also for the purpose of giving him further directions for his conduct. He was to proceed to Rome at once, and the minister would receive him privately on the following day at twelve o'clock. He was recommended not to go to a hotel, but to put up with his brother, who, as he now learned, was at Monteverde, and who had been privately informed of his arrival and warned to be discreet.

The mail steamer which had brought Giovanni's letter to Mme. Bernard had stopped at Port Saïd, Alexandria, and Messina, but the man-of-war came direct to Naples, and, though slower than the packet-boat, arrived there only a few hours later. Mme. Bernard's inquiries, made through the old colonel whose daughter she had formerly taught, proved fruitless, because the War Office would not allow Giovanni's coming to be known. The result was that she took the letter home with her in her bag, and spent the evening in a very disturbed state of mind, debating with herself as to what she ought to do.

She would have given anything to open the envelope, if only to see the date. Once or twice, when she reflected on the importance of knowing whether the writer was alive before giving his letter to Sister Giovanna, she almost yielded; but not quite, for she was an honorable little woman, according to her lights.

Late that night, Giovanni got into the train that was to bring him to Rome before Mme. Bernard would be ready to go out in the morning.

*(To be continued)*





"WILLIE SAID THAT THERE MIGHT BE TALK ABOUT ME"

[See story, "The McDrummond Mark," page 177]