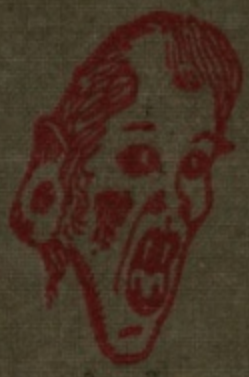

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Enter Three Witches

By Paul McGuire

To Tony Grant, the Spanish Steps was the most fascinating place in Rome. One evening as he stood there in the purple shadows, a girl spoke to him and he thought she was the loveliest thing he had ever seen.

Like Tony, she was English and, surprisingly, she claimed to know him. The encounter was as mystifying as the shadows in which they stood, and when she left, Tony was afraid he would never see her again.

Then he received an invitation to spend a weekend with a famous woman he had never met and he promptly packed his bags. He was a journalist—adventure was looking his way and he found it exciting.

Marie Beuil's huge villa was full of strange guests. When Tony found she wanted him to do her a service, he might not have stayed if he hadn't discovered there the girl of the Spanish Steps. It was as if a witches' curse forced the guests to move in a design already predetermined. Gradually Grant was drawn into the pattern and the evil that lurked in the halls of the villa began to walk. The girl was involved. He had to stay. But there was danger for all of them ahead. . . .

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also by Paul McGuire

A FUNERAL IN EDEN

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PAUL McGUIRE

Enter Three Witches

WILLIAM MORROW & CO.
NEW YORK 1940

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JAN 6 '41

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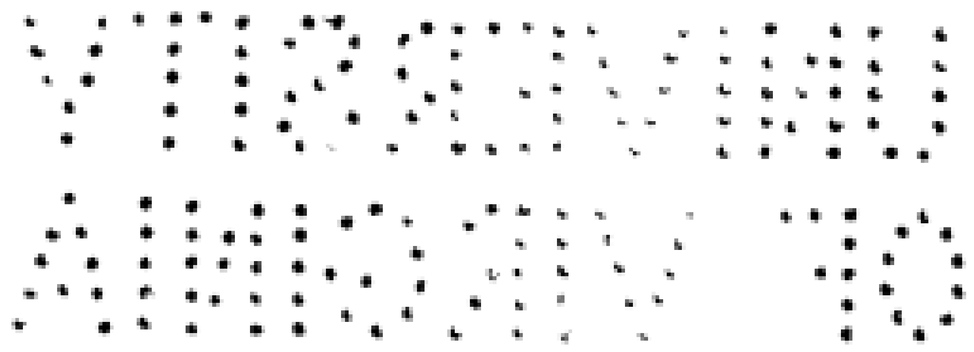

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Author's Note

Even where this story approaches reality, it belongs to the months before September, 1939, an epoch now as remote as the First Byzantium or Little Boy Blue. There is some evidence that the author did inhabit that distant age, but the plot and characters have no relation to any of his contemporaries there.

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CHAPTER ONE

Scala di Spagna

like a bubble in the sky, in its own green evening air, while below, the shadows deepened in the streets of the tawny town.

Grant leaned upon the balustrade which crowns that sweep of the Pincio from the Spanish Steps and by the Borghese Gardens, loud now with children. He had played once in the Gardens himself, during a winter of his childhood, and the soft plashing of fountains had always since recalled his thoughts to the dripping Cupids and the Four Horses. He remembered still the argot of his contemporary urchins. It had made him always in some part a Roman. Not a Roman of the classic Rome, which must have been a distressingly progressive sort of place. When Augustus' marble was new, and the place was clamorous with rich wheat merchants and urgent concessionaires from the new provinces and ambitious, loud-mouthed lawyers, Rome must have been like the Chicago of the nineteen-twenties. Nor was he a Roman of Rome's latest melodrama. He was a Roman of the perennial Rome: of the cool wine-shops under stone arches and of the gossips at the corners and of the violet evenings in the narrow streets towards the Tiber; of the Rome which endures, the Rome which has discovered through its ages the essential human things, the Rome which knows that men and empires are tomorrow's

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dust, and which has seen in a crumbling and buried Forum what all our eloquence and our great policies must come to at the end of the day. Yet that Rome too is entertained with the passing show, and there is a good deal to say for the new Italian uniforms. The long, lined cloak with its elegant sweep, the flash of braid, the Fascist dagger: a man can cut a figure in these things, and what is an army for if soldiers do not cut figures? The Italian is a child, a child and an artist. A child, and trailing clouds of glory. He has all his centuries and all their experience behind him. Perhaps he is taken in by the modern solemnities, playing at them as a child plays, with deadly seriousness. But beneath he knows, surely, as a child knows, that it is all a phase of the drama which men invent to fill a tedium between the womb and the grave. At heart, he is too wise to take all our modern earnestness, our noise, our Mechanic's Progress at more than its silly worth. It is, anyhow, comforting to hope so.

The crowds went up and down, as they have done immemorially at evening on the Pincio: soldiers and students and laughing girls and a long crocodile of seminarians coming from their afternoon walk, artists, and trim little old ladies from the *pensions* in the Ludovisi and about the Via Sistina, blowsy washerwomen, coifed nuns, plump business men, and officials in the leaner fashion of the new régime, strolling sailors, a private or two in the helmets and khaki of the colonial battalions, a brace of tall Abyssinians, a Coptic priest. The show of Rome, Rome from which so many sources spring, Rome which renews the spirit of man.

Grant grinned. His own spirit was in urgent need of renewal. It was worn to tatters.

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And the fragments of his calico drawers
Was a-fluttering in the breeze.

Twice before he had come to Rome when he was a thing of shreds and patches. Twice before Rome had mended him, sealing and healing. Now it was all to do again.

What were the things that soothed one here, in spite of the contemporary clamour of politics and politicians? The dome of St. Peter's, heavy-bearded friars from Ohio and students in red soutanes from the Rhine, German beer in low, cellared places, yellow candles and old women praying in the corners of churches, baroque, and the historic dust, carozzas trotting slowly in sun and leafy shadow towards the Pons Vaticanus, gewgaws in shop windows, girls brown as autumn leaves, caffé-crema, and wine in rosy carafes, American bishops eating beefsteaks in that little place off the Via Condotti, lunch under the Colonnade of St. Peter's.

There were fasces and swastikas pasted in windows, but there was peace in the stones and the dust of Rome. Peace, after the storm and blood of Spain.

He thought of the last two years. It had become possible now to think of them with some sort of order and proportion: to think of an aged woman pulped beside her door, of savage winter nights in the passes of the Pyrenees, of a long line of dazed refugees stumbling along frozen, secret paths in the high hills, of winds that cut one's bones, of a burst of yellow flame and houses dissolving in slow clouds of rubble and mortar, of the whining air, and of the blanched, unshaven faces of militiamen staring upwards at a sky that crashed upon them. He could even think, steadily, of Michael, who used to take his truck by in-

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credible ways down from Andorra to gather hunted men from the villages, and of the fierce sunlight in which Michael died. And of Hughes, in his ancient battered ship, who had flown six times out of Spain with fugitives before his nerve broke. And of the endless boredom of journeys between Paris and the frontier in third-class carriages, and of oddly ineffective spies drinking coffee in the station-buffet at Bayonne.

Well, it was done with now, and now again the dome of St. Peter's floated in the sky, as it had floated for his childhood. It had always strangely reassured him, that so vast a work of men's hands could be so light a thing: that all men's works were weighed in another dimension than theirs.

He dropped his eyes to the lovely sweep of the Spanish Steps beneath him. They were all that he wanted of Spain, now and for years. He remembered his nurse who had toiled up them beside him, past the house where Shelley once lived and Keats died, on and up to Sallusts' Obelisk, which had seemed so remote from the Square below. He remembered how, in his adolescence, he had read the *Ode to a Nightingale,* sitting there, a few feet from the room where Keats wrote it, by Bernini's Fountain of the Boat: and how, often in the pearly mornings, he had wondered if the girls sitting amongst the flowers were models waiting for artists' hire.

A girl was sitting there now, on the curve of the fifth flight, and her face, lifted towards him, was like a white petal dropped upon the shadows. The streets beyond were already-purple canyons of dusk, but the light still fell here as if the Steps went down into a pool of bronze. It was one

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moment's exquisite effect. He hoped that she would not stir before he went away.

Then he smiled wryly. She had stirred. She had risen, and he saw that she was very tall. She walked up the steps towards him. And still, in that light she had a curious grace, as if she were coming through a buoyant element.

He turned away, not wishing to look at her. He had always been so much of a sentimentalist that he strove to preserve a chance effect: he would be unreasonably irritated if the girl became some lanky English tourist with an Oxford *Shelley* underneath her arm.

She was English. At least, she spoke English. She said, "Good evening, Mr. Grant."

He turned sharply. The light was a golden glow on the clean line of her jaw. She was smiling.

"It is annoying, isn't it, to have one's Rome interrupted by casual acquaintances? I *am* an acquaintance, you know." She paused, and smiled again. "I mean, we have been introduced, even if you have forgotten me utterly."

"Why, yes, of course," he said. He saw her face now in the full, and if a girl who looked like something of Luini's wished to claim his acquaintance, who was he to deny her?

She frowned. "I'm not sure that we ever were introduced. Properly. And that's very honest of me, because you have certainly forgotten about it in any case."

"Incredible," said Grant, and he meant it.

"I met you on a raft," she said.

"Of course," said Grant. "It was a very nice raft. We had been shipwrecked, hadn't we? Where the remote Bermoothes ride, or thereabouts." He looked at her again and

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thought it a plausible shot. One may have been enchanted and not know it.

"No, I'm sorry. It was only a diving raft, off the Hotel Bristol at La Napoule. Around the Bay from Cannes. Don't you remember?"

"Of course," muttered Grant, hauling at his subconscious. "Where all the English go." He gave a tug. "And the bus is always late." He looked at her again, in the sense that he looked at her more intently. He had yet to find an adequate reason for not looking at her. "But it's ten years since I sat on a raft opposite the Hotel Bristol at La Napoule. Oh dear, is it actually ten years?"

"It is. And that, I hope, is why you don't remember me. I was fourteen and very school-girl. Plaits, though you may not believe it, and awkward legs, like a calf's."

"I think that there is a great deal to say for calves' legs," said Grant. "But how did you manage plaits, in an age so given to the shears?"

"A convent education, a romantic father and a firm Mother Superior. A very firm Mother Superior. You were staying with the Wilds, in that Moorish lighthouse sort of place up on the cliffs, where the hot tap in the bathroom runs in icy spurts."

"Bill and Jane. Good lord, yes. Jane and Bill."

"Do you remember me now?"

"Of course I do. I've been remembering you for years. Plaits and calf's legs and all. What did we do on the raft, though?"

"I bumped my head on it, and you had pity and took m in. We dived off it a good deal, too. That is what it wa there for."

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"Why didn't I take you to dinner sometime?" said Grant.

"I was fourteen years old. I was never invited. There were also the plaits, the legs, the immeasurable superiority of an undergraduate, and . . . wasn't there a lady who played something in a band at Juan?"

Grant jumped. "By jove, so there was! I'd almost forgotten, myself. She was a clarionet. Solo, too. She had yellow hair, very yellow hair. But she did play solo. It is comforting to think of that." He made a gesture and almost shook the girl. "Now how did you know about her?"

"One can be very interested in romances, at fourteen," she said. "Do you remember my name?"

"Of course I do," he said, resolving to discover it.

"That's good. Then you don't really mind me speaking to you like this? And after all these years?"

"My dear lady, I feel as if my Uncle Joe, who went to Australia in 1892 and who has, I trust, made a fortune since we last heard of him, had died and left it all to me."

"Am I something like a bolt from the blue?"

"No, that was Uncle Joe."

"What are you doing in Rome?" she asked, and her voice quickened a little.

Grant had the impression that now she was coming to business.

"I'm reporting," he said, "for a newspaper. I am Our Special Correspondent."

"I knew that you wrote things," she said. "I did not know that you made it a labour."

"It isn't. It's a love. At any rate, Rome is. And what one writes doesn't much matter. It's impossible to find out anything important, so I don't try, much. If I say anything

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against the régime, I shall get thrown out of the country. If I say anything in favour of it, I shall be sacked by my newspaper, which is Liberal and positively reeking of Democracy. So I write between the lines and try to avoid offence."

"Several of your people have already been expelled, haven't they?"

"People on my paper? Yes. We're always being kicked across one frontier or another. In fact, our supply of special correspondents has been almost used up. That is how I got the job."

"How?"

"Well, I wanted to come to Italy and they wanted someone to come to Italy and I happened to meet the Managing Editor one day at the club, just underneath two busts and a fine oil, all of Gladstone, and it was all arranged like that. I was not even asked to make a profession of faith, though I did recall the Midlothian campaign. But you won't mention that, I hope, in Rome."

"Yes, but the newspaper seems to have been only the opportunity. What are you really doing in Rome?"

"Breathing its atmosphere, and the dust of ages. I like them to settle on my soul."

She laughed a little. "Yes, I know. 'Sceptre and crown must tumble down, and in the grave be equal made, with the poor crooked scythe and spade.' That sort of feeling. One can believe, in Rome, that time, after all, will confound their politics and frustrate their knavish tricks, or however the thing goes."

Grant nodded. "And then, as I was just saying to my-

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self, I like Franciscan friars and cowled Dominicans who talk in the richest notes of Illinois and Sioux Falls."

"I can understand that too," she said quickly, and Grant was surprised that she should have understood it. "It gives you some hope of a new civilisation . . . of a new synthesis. When there is so little hope here." She made a sweep with her hand, and he took it to include all Europe. "Here the old and the new collide. And crack. Smash. Wasn't that the root of the matter in Spain?"

Once more her voice quickened as if she approached the point of this curious conversation.

"Traditions are not necessarily cast-iron, you know," he said. "That has been the strength of Europe. It has been a dynamic culture. It has grown."

"Yes, but in Spain . . ." She had been a trifle too eager. "Were you ever in Spain?"

"Oh, yes, I've been in Spain."

"Lately? During the war?"

"Well, yes. I had rather hoped that it was notorious that I had been in Spain. I wrote about it."

"Yes, of course, I knew that." She stopped, and he saw that she was a little flustered. She was apparently new to chicanery. He decided to help her.

"Until I sickened of politics and of writing about politics and of all the hell and hate that politics can loose. Then I tried to make myself useful."

"How?" She turned sharply, and now he knew that she was after something; but what, he could not imagine.

"Oh, sometimes someone might drop in on me and tell me about someone else—a grandmother, say—stranded in some odd corner of Spain and having a very thin time. I

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used to note the details and then persuade one of my friends to go and bring the old lady out."

"But how could your friends do that?"

"They were very ingenious fellows. One of them had a truck which he could convert into an ambulance or back into a truck within about five minutes, if he found a quiet road. Very baffling to the constabulary. And he knew some back ways in and out. Bumpy ways, but lacking traffic cops."

"Did he save very many people?"

"Quite a few."

"Was he ever caught?"

"He was. One is, you know, if one goes in for that sort of thing overmuch."

"What happened to him?"

"He was shot. Against a white wall, at two o'clock in the afternoon. It was a very hot day, so they buried him."

"How else did people get out?"

He considered her question and her curiosity in general. They were normal enough; and there was no need to be silent now, now that it was all over, no need to be silent unless it wrung the marrow of one's bones to talk. He felt himself grimace and thought that these questions were still her prelude. She had something more coming.

He decided to let it come.

"Sometimes they walked through the lines. Sometimes they had to be led. Sometimes they could not walk at all. Like the grandmother I was thinking of just now. Her husband had been kicked to death in their garden, and she . . . well, she could not walk. So one of my friends brought her out by plane."

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She stared. "But how could he do that?"

"Oh, he just flew over and landed in a field at the back of the village. Then he walked across to her house and knocked. She had three other old ladies living in her house, one in her bathroom and one in her wine-cellar and another up the backstairs, so he brought them all. He was lucky to get out. He had landed in a turnip-field, and the take-off was sticky."

"And . . . was he caught too?"

"No. He lost his nerve, so we persuaded him to take a holiday. He went to Newfoundland. He was very busily trying to invent a way to balance the local budget or something of the sort, the last I heard. Entirely in an unofficial capacity. He is always pushing a nose of unofficial capacity into other people's worries."

"I should rather like to know him," she said. And she suddenly shivered.

Grant felt that shiver. "Look here, what's up?" he said. "Why all these questions?"

"Oh, I don't know. Aren't we just talking? It's getting dark, isn't it?"

She leaned out over the balustrade and stared down into the shadows of the Steps; and now he realised that she had been staring down the Steps for minutes.

"Waiting for someone?" he said.

"Who, me? Oh, no. Why, did I look like . . . who would I look like if I were waiting for someone?"

"You could look like Juliet. But was she expecting Romeo?"

"I certainly am not."

"Penelope, twenty years on? Patience on a monument?"

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"It is very rude of me, in any case, to look as if I am looking for someone while I am talking to you."

But it was only for a moment that she withdrew her eyes from the shadowy Steps.

"What are you doing in Rome yourself?" said Grant.

"Holidaying," she said, and she plainly lied.

"You seem to be holidaying every time we meet," he said. "First, the Riviera, and then Rome."

She laughed, but he knew that she was hardly attending to him. "I haven't been holidaying all these ten years. Not all of them."

"What have you been doing?"

"Discovering life. Or I like to think so. What does one do? Eat and sleep and lie a little in the sun. Read a few books, buy a few clothes, take a few jobs, feel a little of . . . of winter and rough weather." She shivered again, sharply, and he realised that her body was tensed. He too looked down at the Steps and into the Piazza, where Bernini's fountain now loomed like a vast grotesque in the half light, that light after dusk before the night is wholly come, when the street-lamps only cast more shadows, and men who need to hide their faces may most safely walk.

"This is the twilight, this is the dark," she said, "in all that was Europe. One does think about the past in Rome, and it all seems to lie in a clear day. But now it is after sunset. Is that silly to you? Does one look at the world only through one's own glass?"

"A good deal, I suppose. But why should your glass be dark?"

"The air is melancholy."

A group drifted down from the foot of the Steps and

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were gone in the depths of the street. But out of its shadows came another shape, moving slowly to the Steps, a heavy figure in a long cloak that flowed into the gloom. As he climbed, he took form; and his stick clicked sharply against each step. The noises of the town were suddenly stilled, unless the impression of quiet spread from an intensity of silence in the woman beside him. Her fingers were crooked at the edge of the balustrade, and a thin gleam of light shone on her white knuckles.

The man came on, nine flights, ten flights, the eleventh: and halfway up those last twelve steps, where there is light from the tall lamp, he raised his head as if to be sure that he approached the top. Grant, his own back to the light, stared straight into the face; and his heart turned with a queer, sickening little shock, for he was looking into the face of a man who had been dead and rotten these eighteen months.

2.

The girl had only glanced at the man, but she was staring at Grant.

"Do you know him?" she said.

He leaned back, stretching his arms from the parapet, and watched the heavy cloak and its dark hat crossing towards the Via Gregoriana. Was that only a casual question?

"You looked as if he might have been a ghost," she said. "I see ghosts too, in Rome."

"I have never seen a ghost with quite such a healthy beard before," said Grant.

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"Oh, but didn't you know that hair grows in the grave?" She laughed, and it was not a pleasant laugh.

"Hair grows in the grave," said Grant. "So it does. Would you like a drink? There's a place over there in the Via Sistina which has a little court. Pot-plants and palms and wicker chairs, you know. In fact, why not stay to dinner, now that you've shed your plaits?"

She looked at her watch. "I should love to, some other time. I'm late now, and that is very annoying of me. Will you ask me some other evening?"

"Where can I find you?"

"Let me find you. Here, one night on the Spanish Steps. That will be much more fun, don't you think?"

"It sounds ominously vague."

"If you are not here the night that I come, I shall come another night. If you don't want to be pestered with me, you can always escape as I come up the Steps."

"How do you know that I usually hang about here in the evenings?"

"Oh, one does, doesn't one, in Rome?" She held out her hand. "Good night. I'm glad we've met again. I've always been grateful for the use of the diving raft."

"There is quite a good raft of my acquaintance at Ostia," he said, half reluctant to let her go, "if you would care to honour it sometime."

"Sometime, perhaps," she said, and then she was gone, running down the Steps.

He watched her, and for a moment he was tempted to follow. But she would see him if she glanced back and up at the Steps. Was that why she had gone that way?

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He turned to stroll home. With deliberate effort, he cleared his mind and began at the beginning.

Who was the girl? He was quite, quite certain that he had not met her at La Napoule or anywhere else, ten years ago or since. A girl's appearance may change a great deal in the ten years between fourteen and twenty-four, but he would have remembered her. He had a cultivated knack for remembering faces. He had recognised immediately and unmistakably that other face tonight . . . even though it had grown a beard in the tomb.

He had not recognised her, but she had recognised him. Well, even a modest man may know when he has some small reputation in the world and perhaps he had been pointed out to her. But she had not only recognised him; she knew something of him, even of one trivial passage in his life which he had almost forgotten. The Wilds could have babbled to her of the blonde in the band, or perhaps she had really been at La Napoule, a child who had gathered and retained some gossip. He had been a bumptious youth and excessively undergraduate in the mode of that season. Doubtless, people had been pleased to find a little fun in him.

But why had the girl come to him tonight, and why had she lied to make an excuse for talking to him? She was plainly not a practised liar. She had blundered about his newspaper work, for instance. If she knew that his predecessors had been expelled from Italy, then she must have known, before they met, what he did here in Rome. He found it difficult to believe that she had lied merely to make his acquaintance, even assuming that his acquaintance

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could offer her any prospect of pleasure. She had another motive than his *beaux yeux*.

It had something to do with the man who came up the steps, the man who was dead. She had led the conversation to Spain, and she had waited, staring into the shadowy depths of the Steps, until the man appeared. Yet when he had appeared, she had seemed more interested in Grant himself than the ghost. Though when the man had come and gone, Grant must have served whatever purpose she had had with him, for almost at once she remembered some appointment for which she was late.

He turned into the Via Venti Settembre, and then he thought of Hawker. So he went and pulled at the bell of Hawker's flat.

Hawker was dressing for dinner.

"Hullo," he said. "Have some sherry. I'm getting some decent sherry from the Spaniards again, now that we've resumed relations. What do you want? If it's something for your scandal sheet you'd better agitate at the Embassy. They don't tell us poor bloody consulars anything, even when they've got anything to tell."

Grant sat on the edge of the bed and poured himself a sherry. "I want to know about a girl," he said.

"A girl or any girl?" said Hawker, fixing his collar.

"A girl. English. Up towards six feet, barring a couple of inches. A voice that was obviously meant for a dulcimer. Very long hands. Good clean line of jaw. Good bony structure altogether."

"Have you been taking snapshots with an X-ray? Doesn't sound very decent to me."

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"Brownish to dark hair—the light wasn't very good—and a skin that might have been marbled. Twenty-four years of age, and she pronounces place names with an exactness which suggests that she speaks both French and Italian well. Contemplative disposition. 'The world is too much with us' kind of thing. But she would probably manage very well at a party. Not your kind of party, but a nice party. Distinctly intelligent, and worried about something." He hesitated. "Very worried. Got her on your files at the consulate?"

"My dear chap, we don't enter up every big-boned British female who arrives in Rome. We don't even know who has arrived, unless they come and tell us. And they don't do that unless they get into trouble with the police."

"I was really thinking of that. The lady has something on her mind."

Hawker frowned. "A police sort of something?"

"I don't know. I shouldn't think so, but possibly. The point is, do you know her? You would remember her if you had seen her."

"Well, as I don't remember her, I couldn't have seen her. If she is a large item in your life, I'll sniff about, though. Is she?"

"I don't know, yet."

"What is her name?"

"I don't know that, either. That's why I came to you."

"One of those casual encounters, eh? No dirty work attached, Grant?"

Grant met Hawker's shrewd eyes. "I sincerely trust not."

"But you're not so sure. You newspaper people do seem to breed bother. For us, sometimes, as well as for yourselves.

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We have had quite enough nuisance of late to last out my time here. If you are walking into trouble, at least give me fair warning."

"I'm not looking for trouble, I assure you."

"Have another sherry." Hawker pulled his tie straight. "But you know what mysterious ladies, who speak several languages and do not leave their names, mean in the novels. And not only in the novels, sometimes. Did she put pressing questions?"

"Questions, yes. Oh no, nothing that the régime would be interested in, any longer. I thought of that at the time, but she was too well-dressed for any sort of a police agent. I know something about women's clothes. And police agents."

Hawker hooked his braces over his shoulders and reached for his waistcoat. "Well, if your choice is between some salon languorous with scented air and being found in the Tiber with your throat slit, choose the salon. If you get into gaol, ring me up and I'll send round your toothpaste and some gramophone records. Have another sherry? Sorry I can't ask you to eat, but I have to go and chow with a cove who wants to invest money in Abyssinia or somewhere."

Grant shook his head. "I don't think she means any of those sorts of things. Good night, Hawker. Thanks for the sherry."

He resumed his homeward stroll, chewing the cud. He was more and more aware of his ill-ease. One could hardly expect that all the ghosts of Spain were laid: but why had this particular ghost been shown to him?

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On an impulse, he swung aside and turned to a post-office. And there he addressed a telegram to Bill Wild:

WHO IS A TALL ENGLISH GIRL AGED TWENTY-FOUR WHO HAS LATELY BEEN ASKING YOU QUESTIONS ABOUT MY FLIRTATION WITH THE FIRST CLARIONET AT JUAN TEN YEARS AGO WHEN I WAS STAYING WITH YOU AT NAPOULE STOP DISTINCTLY ATTRACTIVE AND PRONOUNCES ENGLISH TOO WELL TO HAVE BEEN EDUCATED IN ENGLAND STOP SHE IS FAMILIAR WITH YOUR PLUMBING AT NAPOULE AND MAY HAVE STAYED THERE REGARDS

TONY GRANT

He felt a trifle better after that, and reflected upon the inevitability of rusty pens, even in the new splendour of Italian post-offices. Then he went home.

Metro was waiting for him in his flat. Metro had been Metro to several generations of special correspondents, partly because his name sounded sufficiently like that and partly because he went round and round his theme, in the manner of the Inner Circle. He was one of Grant's sources of information, and sometimes, Grant suspected, an avenue of misinformation. But he had the gossip of the newspaper offices in Rome and a talent for producing curious conclusions from official statistics. Grant's newspaper was very fond of curious conclusions from official statistics.

He was drinking Grant's vermouth and smoking one of Grant's cigarettes.

"Good evening," he said. "What have we today?"

"What have you got?" grunted Grant and tossed his hat across the room.

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"Not even an international crisis. It has been a very dull day. Il Duce was laying bricks at the new city in the Pontine, very vigorously, with Fascist fire. But the bricks occupied his attention. And your Prime Minister, no doubt, is fishing. There must still be many fish in England, in spite of his efforts. They have such good weather for it there, of course,"

"For fish?" Grant mixed himself a drink. "Well, there's something in that, certainly. Has there been any more talk of that business in Tunis?"

"Talk, yes, talk, but only talk."

"Anything from Madrid?"

"Only that the Ambassador called on the Minister and that the Minister dined with the Ambassador. The Minister likes bouillabaisse, one is informed. The French are very heartened since they heard of it. Orders have been given for the demobilisation of three further divisions, an editor was arrested in Vizcaya, and it is reported that the Caudillo has strong views on the matter of bathing gowns. But that may be merely *blague*." He sighed. "It has been a dull day. And M. Izinir has arrived in Rome."

That was characteristic of Metro, saving his one item until the last. It was a habit which probably doubled his consumption of other people's liquor.

Grant snapped. "What the devil is Izinir doing in Italy?"

"Looking for cargoes, perhaps. After all, he has lost a great many. And perhaps trade is dull, in an interval between wars. And perhaps he is looking for new insurance brokers. His old ones must be a trifle tired of him."

"But what about the authorities here? He can hardly be *persona grata* in Italy?"

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"And why not? His cargoes were very evenly distributed between our friends and their enemies. It is true that his cargoes were not consigned to our friends, but it is a great thing to have command of the seas, my dear Grant, as an Englishman should know."

Grant whistled. "Has he seen anyone in Rome?"

"He gave a dinner at the Europa last night for that new contralto from Turin."

"You know what I mean. Has he seen anyone official?"

"How should I know?" Metro lit one of his own foul cigarillos, and Grant opened the shutters. "I imagine that he is here to enjoy himself. Rome, after all, is a pleasant place for a man with money. It is not Paris, but it is Rome. And M. Izinir must now have a great deal of money. Running blockades was always a profitable trade, and nowadays, when the world is filled with insurance men, what you lose on the swings you pick up on the roundabouts."

"And you think that Izinir can pay a holiday visit to Rome without attracting the attention of your police?"

"Everything attracts the attention of our police, Mr. Grant. But we are not ogres. If a man wishes to pass a pleasant holiday in Italy, why should he be prevented? Especially if he is a man in good credit. And M. Izinir must have much good credit."

Grant reached for his pipe, partly in self-defence against Metro's cigarillos. "I suspect that you know more than you are saying, Metro. I don't want stuff for my paper about Izinir. Not at the moment, anyhow. But as background, he may be important."

"Oh, I realise that perfectly, good Grant. And I am, of course, curious. I shall do my best to gratify my curi-

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osity, and yours. Izinir is a very lucky man. When I first knew of him, he was buying fish on the waterside at Constantinople. But that is a long time ago."

"How long?" said Grant.

"Oh, during our trouble with Turkey. The Tripoli affair, you remember. When you were a child, no doubt."

Grant sucked at his pipe. "A man buying fish on the quays at Constantinople might have had his uses to Italy then."

"Possibly, possibly. But I was hinting at nothing. You have the correspondent's imagination, my friend. And that was a very long time ago. Before our New Era, years before it."

Grant swung his legs on to the window-sill, and Metro poured himself another drink.

"Metro, what chance would a man have of getting into this country on a false passport?"

"Are we still speaking of M. Izinir?"

"No. I am considering a purely hypothetical case for a short story which I shall write next summer, or maybe the summer after."

"In fiction, anything is possible."

"But it should have a certain verisimilitude. What would be the prospects?"

"We have a very efficient police, and passports are carefully inspected. But there have been very neat forgeries, and if our suspicions were not aroused, then it would not be difficult in itself. You know how it is on the Rome Express, or when a shipload of passengers are disembarking at Naples or Genoa."

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"Yes, of course."

"Unless the officers notice something suspicious, a sufficiently plausible passport should carry one through. But it is a dangerous trick. The passport may be checked again when you put up at your hotel, when you apply for a permit to stay in the country, and so on."

"Yes, of course, I know all that."

"Or it may be checked back to the country of origin. There are all sorts of chances that must be taken. But perhaps if you describe to me the case of your friend . . ."

"Of my villain," said Grant, "in the short story. He is a man who has lost his own identity. He has found it necessary to shed himself. But passing, he has left behind him footsteps on the sands of time. In other words he does not dare to use his old passport. He needs a new one. He probably needs a new personality to go with it, but we can leave that. He somehow acquires another passport, with a description and a photograph sufficiently like to serve. He comes into the country and settles down to a quiet life, a very quiet life. Now, what are his chances?"

"If he should give the police no concern, no occasion for enquiries, I think he might live here very comfortably. There would always be a risk, naturally. Where did he acquire his false passport?"

"I don't know," said Grant. "I haven't got to that yet. If you have any ideas, you might tell me."

Metro beamed. "I am very good at short stories myself. I shall offer you some I have written for you to read at your convenience."

"Thank you," said Grant. "Have another drink. And then

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I shall have to get my contribution off to London. If I didn't send it, someone would be sure to miss it. What was that about Il Duce laying bricks . . . ?"

He drifted into the bathroom and turned on the taps. He had a prejudice that upon the Continent you should always let the water run.

"Have you ever heard, Metro," he said through the open door, "of a Spanish writer named Bergante?"

Metro looked up idly from Grant's unopened mail. "Bergante? Yes, I think I have. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, he wrote short stories. I think you'd like them."

"I shall borrow them, my dear fellow, if you recommend them. But now I see that you are going to wash yourself. I shall go, and until tomorrow, addio."

"Addio," said Grant and walked to open the door. Metro gathered his stick, his gloves, his hat, his black leather satchel, and bowed.

"Addio," he said in the doorway.

"Addio," said Grant, and closed the door.

He went to look at his mail himself. The fourth envelope was large and square and saffron edged. Almost before he opened it, he knew that it was the letter which he had awaited for three weeks. It read:

My dear Mr. Grant,

Would you care to come to Castello Feroce for the week-end? You can surely get away from Rome until Monday morning, at least. And I have the most solemn assurances that there will not be a war before Monday afternoon.

Bring your tennis-racquet, if you care about that

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sort of thing and have a liking for your own. We swim here, too, in the lake.

I do hope you can manage.

Very sincerely yours,
Marie Beuil

He turned over the envelope again, and then he rang for his man.

"When did this come?" he asked. "It wasn't posted."

The servant glanced at the clock. "About half an hour ago, sir. It was delivered by hand, just before you came in."

"Who delivered it?"

"A boy from the Hotel Italia, sir."

Grant grunted. An invitation from Marie Beuil was charged with possibilities. "Childe Roland to the dark tower came" or "Fee, fi, fo, fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman."

He sat down and wrote a note of acceptance. But even then he wondered whether a tennis-racquet was sufficient protection for a week-end at Feroce.

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CHAPTER TWO

Castello Feroce

CASTELLO FEROCE IS BETWEEN Rocca di Papa and Frascati, in the Alban Hills, with a view from its terraces that ranges from Tusculum, whence Cicero wrote to Atticus and where the Caesars lounged, to Monte Cavo where the Cardinal Stuart built his Passionist Convent above the ruins of Jupiter Latiaris. From its high tower one can see the blue waters of Albano, and the soaring stones of the Papal Villa; and in the clear light at evening, a finger of Lake Nemi.

Grant took the road across the Campagna and then by Mount Compatri, with its sweeping view towards Tivoli and Arsoli and Subiaco in the Sabine mountains. He always felt the present reduced to its right proportions when he had so much history under his eye; and it is an attractive landscape in itself, with just that hint of the sinister which its long career requires, in sharp rocks and dark woods and hanging streams. Yet it is shaped and ordered in the valleys, the fields, the orchards, the little towns, the vineyards, and the shrines, by man's long use and custom. He had wandered across most of it in his days, sitting where lizards sunned on the rocks of fallen forts in craggy places, climbing upwards through the woods in cool dawns, eating his bread and drinking his wine beneath the fig trees by wayside taverns, rowing across to Genzanno in the rich evening light.

Amongst the Alban Hills, one could still believe in Europe. The cities were filled with loud-voiced men and

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