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The Mountain Path

by FRANK WHITFIELD

When at last I stopped climbing and looked back I could still see the village far below me, the houses tiny and remote. In the square I could see the coach that had brought me from Gardone, blue and silver, shining in the sunlight, like a child's toy.

I turned and moved on up the dusty path, and when I paused again the village was out of sight. I was gloriously alone.

I moved from the path onto the grass, and stood looking at the mountains, breath-taking in their grandour, glittering against the deep blue sky. And happiness welled up in me so strongly that I had to fling my arms out towards them and laugh from sheer joy of living.

For life had become so very good. I loved, I was loved, and this evening I should be with him again. Even this day away from him had a special happiness in the thought of the reunion to come. Meanwhile, I had this glorious place, this precious day to catch up with myself, to measure the happiness that filled my heart.

I took off my shirt and lay on the grass, feeling the sunshine hot on my body. Absolute peace, not a sound but the few insects that droned lazily by. I seemed to have escaped from the worries of the world, time seemed to have stopped. I just lay, half sleeping, half thinking, completely relaxed.

Presently I roused myself to investigate the lunch carrier that the hotel had insisted on providing, and as I expected they had given me enough for three people. Cold chicken, ham, tongue, cheese, rolls, cake, fruit, and at the bottom, carefully wrapped in soft paper, a small bottle of wine. A delicious picnic meal, but I could not hope to eat half of it.

And it was then, as I was trying to decide what to eat first, that I saw him, such an incongruous figure that I had to smile a little to myself. He was coming very slowly up the path towards me, most unsuitably dressed in a very thick-looking suit, obviously feeling the heat quite desperately. His shoes were equally unsuitable for mountain walking, very pointed, looking tight and uncomfortable, making him limp slightly. Strangest of all, on his shoulder was a large, battered suitcase, evidently heavy, for he was bent a little sideways.

He was walking slowly, but with a grim determination, and I think he would have passed without seeing me if I had not called out to him.

«Buon giorno!»

He stopped, a little startled, not seeing me at first in the glare of the sun. Then he smiled and moved across to me.

«Buon giorno!»

«Parla inglese?»

«Si, si, yes, a little, not very good.»

I saw then that he was younger than I had thought, not more than twenty-one or twenty-two. His smile was engaging and brightened his face, but he looked fatigued.

«You look hot. Why not rest for a while?»

«I have far to go; I must not stay.»

«If you rest now, you will be able to walk faster.»

He considered this, then: «Well, just for a short time.»

He lowered the case from his shoulder, then sank down on the grass beside me.

«Very hot. You will excuse if I . . .» He could not find the words to continue, so made a show of taking off his jacket. «You will not mind?»

«Of course not. Well, look at me.»

He slipped off his jacket and shirt, and I was surprised at the maturity of his tanned body, well built and muscular.

On a slender chain round his neck he wore a silver medallion depicting the Madonna, exquisite in design and detail.

«That is beautiful,» I told him. «May I look?»

As I took it in my fingers his flesh was warm against my hand.

«You like it? It is my treasure, my only treasure. I have had it for many years.»

«It is really lovely; keep it carefully, it would be sad to lose it.»

He smiled again, delighted at my praise.

«You are from England?»

«Yes.»

«My poppa has told me so much of the English. He was there in the war, as a prisoner, you understand. The people were kind and good to him. That is how I have some English. He taught me all he had learnt, and in Milano I have learnt a little more, One day I hope to go to England. I hope . . . but . . .» he gave an expressive little gesture of doubt.

«Have you eaten? I have plenty here, far too much for me. Will you have some?»

I passed the carrier to him. For a moment he hesitated.

Then: «Grazie. Thank you. Just a little. I have not eaten since early.»

At first he was diffident, but soon he gained confidence and ate with relish. It was obvious that he was very hungry.

«Now a little wine,» I said presently. «We must drink from the bottle. Do you mind?»

«You first, please,» he demurred, then when I insisted, he drank then wiped the bottle carefully before handing it to me.

I drank a little, then made him finish the wine. «It will make me too sleepy.»

We lay lazily for a while, talking a little, drowsy and content. Then he put his hand on my shoulder.

«I think you have had enough sun; you will be sore. Better sit in the shade.»

He jumped up, and taking my hands pulled me to my feet. Then gathering our things we moved further from the path into the shade of a tree.

«And now this,» he said, «To make it perfect.» And quickly he took off the rest of his clothes and threw himself on the grass, laughing at my surprise.

«Don't be alarmed, nobody will come. This path is very rough, and few people use it. And now everyone is sleeping. Take off your's and I shan't feel shy.»

Laughing, I did so, and sat beside him. How different was this handsome, smiling boy from the strange figure I had seen toiling up the path.

«My suit is much too hot, it is for winter, but it would not go in the case, I had to wear it.»

«Where are you going?»

«Home.» He mentioned a place I did not know. «You will not have heard of it. It is small, hardly a village.»

As he spoke of this, his face seemed to become shadowed with sadness, and he fell silent. I felt that there was something he wanted to tell me, and presently I gave him an opening.

«Have you been away long?»

«Nearly three years. I have been in Milano. My poppa farms some land. I became tired of the life, hard work, little money. I wanted to see the world. I felt I could do well and become rich.»

«Did your family not want you to go?»

«My poppa is a good man. He say it is my life; I must choose. My mamma weep, but she does not tell me to stay.»

«So you went to Milan.»

He nodded, saying nothing, remembering it all.

«And now you return home. Will you stay there?»

«I must. My mamma write to say poppa is very ill. I must come home. She does not say so, but I think he is dying. She would not have written if this were not so. I must go home to take his place, to work the land, to look after them.»

Again the sadness in his face, in his voice.

«I think you do not want to go.»

He shook his head. «It is not that. I love my mamma, and my poppa, my brother and sisters. I shall be happy to see them. It is something else. But you do not want to hear of my problems.»

«Indeed I do. Please tell me, and tell me your name.»

«Roberto. I am named after my poppa. But I am not a man like him. He is a good man, and wise, but I am foolish, and I have lied to them. I have lied very badly.»

«Sometimes our lies are not as bad to others as they seem to us. I expect they will understand. From what you say of your father I think he will understand. What is this lie?»

He told me of his time in Milan, speaking carefully, almost as if he spoke to make it clear to himself.

«I could not let them know that I was a failure. I found I am not clever, not with my brain, not even with my hands. Work was hard to find and harder to keep. But to them I lied. I could not let them know the truth. I wrote of my good work, big money, how I would come home to see them later when work was less pressing. I even went without food sometimes to send them presents, to back up my lie. I told them that I was saving, that I should come home with much money. All lies, and now I have to face them with the truth.»

His voice was desperate, his eyes dark with his small tragedy.

«That is why I was walking, to save money. I got a lift in a lorry from Milano to the village down there. Now I walk across the mountain to my home on the other side. That is why I wear that thick suit, those stupid shoes. That is why I carry this case with all I own.»

And suddenly his voice broke, he hid his face against my shoulder, weeping bitterly.

I held his strong young body against me, trying to comfort him, but he was racked with sobs, and it was some time before he ceased and became calmer.

«You will see, Roberto. Your mamma, your poppa will understand. They love you. They will know why you lied so that they should be proud of you.»

They will be so pleased to have you home that they will soon forget. You will find it does not really matter. And you can work for them, take your rightful place.»

He was calmer now. «Yes, I can work, I will work. I am not clever, but I am strong and can work all day.»

«So you see, it's not so bad after all.»

There was a long pause, and I could see that he was still troubled.

«But that is not all. I have not told you of Maria.»

«Who is she?»

«We are betrothed. She lives in the village, we grew up together. When I went away it was arranged that I should return to marry her.»

«But that is good, isn't it? Your sweetheart will help you to face things. Someone you love can always help.»

He looked at me then, and I saw that this was quite different. This was his real problem.

«You don't love her now? There is someone else?»

It was a long time before he replied. He seemed to be choosing his words with great care.

«When I was in Milano I... I learnt about myself. I met someone there, a man, older than me, a good man. When I was in difficulty he took me into his home, he helped me in many ways. I came at last to see that I loved him, oh quite differently from Maria and what I felt for her. It was deeper, finer; I really loved him. Perhaps you do not understand that this is possible between men—real love.»

I put my arms round him again, trying to stop his trembling.

«Roberto, listen to me. I can understand. You see, for me it is the same. I too am in love, with me also it is a man. I know that love between men can be the sweetest, finest thing.»

He hugged me to him again, once more almost crying, but now with relief.

«You do understand! That makes it so much easier for me. I can talk to you about it. When I first went with this man I knew so little, next to nothing. To begin with he just let me live in his home, he helped me, gave me a little money, even once found me work.

«When at last I understood what he would like from me I was quite willing. I had become fond of him. I enjoy sex, I enjoy it very much, but I can see now how badly I behaved. In bed with him I just did the things I wanted, satisfied myself. I did not stop to consider him, if he was happy. I found his body exciting, something new. I think I was violent and greedy, and often selfish. It would have been good for me if he had finished with me and sent me away, but that was not his way.»

He smiled a little to himself, remembering.

«Gradually he taught me. He showed me that real love is unselfish, that to give happiness to the other increases one's own happiness. And so at last this became not just a thing of the body, but a thing of the heart and the mind. I came to love him very dearly. I shall love him, the memory of him, all my life.»

Now he looked much older, his face deeply sad. I saw that he had indeed faced his first great loss.

«You say that you will love the memory of him. Do you mean that he is dead?»

«Ah no, what I mean is that now I can have only the memory of him, I shall not see him again.»

«Do you mean that he did not want you to leave, to return home? He was angry about it?»

«Not that. Oh he would have wished me to go, he would have helped me. I think you do not understand how it is with the poor. To go to Milano again would be such a big thing, money would be needed that could not be spared. And it would not be understood why I must go.»

He shook his head slowly. «No, I shall not see him again. Knowing him, loving him has been something wonderful for me. But I know it is ended.»

«But, Roberto, he will know how it is with you. He will understand, and certainly he will come to see you.»

He shook his head violently.

«He will not come. He will know that it would not be understood, that it would make trouble for me. And with him, as it is with me, it must be everything, or be nothing. No, we both know that it is finished.»

Again tears were running down his face. He could not control the sobs that shook him. Once more I took him in my arms, trying to comfort him.

«Don't grieve, Roberto. Who knows, you may see him again. And if you don't, and if you both realise that it must be that way, at least you will have those years, the memory of all you have been to each other, to help you.»

«Yes, yes, that I do know and understand. I weep now because of my sadness that we could not say goodbye.»

«You have left without telling him?»

«He was away on business. Often he had to go away for a few days, to Firenze, sometimes to Roma. When my mamma's letter came I waited a whole day, hoping that he would return. Then I dared not wait any longer. I think my poppa may die before I reach him. He may think that I will not come. So I must leave.»

«I left a letter to tell Guido why I have gone, but I am stupid with words, for me it is difficult to write, I am so afraid that he will not understand. I am afraid he will think that I have left because I am tired of him. That is why I am so sad. Somehow that is worse even than having to leave him.»

I just held him, there seemed nothing I could say that would help him. Then quite suddenly the idea came to me.

«Roberto, if you like, I think I can help you. I shall be in Milan for one night on my way back to England, shall I see your friend and explain all this to him? Would you like me to do this?»

«You will do this for me? Oh, that is wonderful. I know you will make him understand; tell him that I shall love him always. Let me give you his address, quickly, quickly. I am so happy that you will meet him. You will see that all I have told you of him is true.»

For a few minutes he was laughing excitedly, then suddenly his face clouded again. «But there is still Maria.»

«Must you break with her? You can't possibly go through with it?»

«Oh no, I couldn't do it. My whole life would be a lie. And I know now that there can never be a woman in my life, not in that way. I must tell her this, but can she ever understand it?»

And then, before I could say anything: «Her father and her brother will be very angry. To them it will be an insult to her whole family.»

«Look, Roberto, may I advise you?»

«Of course, yes, of course.»

«I see that you must tell Maria, and you must tell her soon. But don't tell her why, the real reason. Don't mention your Guido, don't tell her all the things you have told me. She would never understand that. Tell her, very gently, that you have come to see that you do not love her, and that the marriage could only bring you both unhappiness. From what you say, I think Maria is a fine girl. She may be hurt and unhappy, but I think she will come to see that you are right. And if she accepts it her family will too. Oh it will be difficult at first, but not perhaps as bad as you fear.»

He nodded, and for a few moments he seemed to have gone far away from me, as if he were planning exactly what he must say and do.

«Yes, I will tell her very soon, but I think you are right that she must not know the real reason. This is something I have to face, and if it is bad at first, well, I have Guido to remember. And I have you too, who have helped me so much. How happy I am that I came this way and found you here.»

We lay quietly together in our patch of shade, protected from the brilliance of the sun and the fierceness of the noon heat. A little island of security. He folded his arms round me and drew me close to him, turning his head so that his mouth was sweetly on mine. All the tension seemed to have dropped away from him, leaving him at peace. His strong young body was ardent and inviting, his hands moved gently about me, his voice was soft and caressing.

«This is so nice, so very nice. Would you like it to be more? It shall be whatever you wish.»

For a moment it seemed that I must let things move on to their natural climax, then with an effort I strengthened my will.

«Let it be just like this. You have your love Guido, I have my dear love too. Later we might regret, and feel that this happy moment had been spoiled.»

He sighed, but a sigh of content. We lay happily together, and presently I knew he was asleep.

Poor Roberto, he seemed so young, so defenceless to face these difficulties. I wished so much that I could do something to help him. Of course, I would see Guido and put things right there, but I wished there was something more. Well, there was perhaps one thing that I could do.

Easing myself quietly from his arms I went to my coat and took out my wallet. I had 20 000 Lire with me, not much, but at least it would help a little. I slipped it into his coat pocket; by the time he found it it would be too late for him to refuse it. While he still slept I would dress and slip away.

But I lay down for a last few drowsy, lazy minutes, sleep must have claimed me, for when I woke with a start I saw from my watch that more than an hour had passed, and Roberto had gone.

Jumping up I ran to the edge of the grass, gazing up the path, half expecting to see him. But the path winding upwards in the shimmering heat was empty. Roberto had gone.

And then I saw something else. Folded up on top of my clothes were the notes I had put in his pocket. So after all he had found them and would not take them. I hoped desperately that I had not hurt him by my action, but as I took the notes in my hand I knew that indeed I had not, and for a moment a foolish tear dimmed my eye. For carefully folded in the notes was something that I shall keep and value always, his treasured silver medallion.