

The Letter

Edith Wharton

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COLONEL ALINGDON died in Florence in 1890.

For many years he had lived withdrawn from the world in which he had once played so active and even turbulent a part. The study of Tuscan art was his only pursuit, and it was to help him in the classification of his notes and documents that I was first called to his villa. Colonel Alingdon had then the look of a very old man, though his age can hardly have exceeded seventy. He was small and bent, with a finely wrinkled face which still wore the tan of youthful exposure. But for this dusky redness it would have been hard to reconstruct from the shrunken recluse, with his low fastidious voice and carefully tended hands, an image of that young knight of adventure whose sword had been at the service of every uprising which stirred the uneasy soil of Italy in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Though I was more of a proficient in Colonel Alingdon's later than his earlier pursuits, the thought of his soldiering days was always coming between me and the pacific work of his old age. As we sat collating papers and comparing photographs, I had the feeling that this dry and quiet old man had seen even stranger things than people said: that he knew more of the inner history of Europe than half the diplomatists of his day.

I was not alone in this conviction; and the friend who had engaged me for Colonel Alingdon had appended to his instructions the injunction to "get him to talk." But this was what no one could do. Colonel Alingdon was ready to discuss by the hour the date of a Giottoesque triptych, or the attribution of a disputed master; but on the history of his early life he was habitually silent.

It was perhaps because I recognized this silence and respected it that it afterward came to be broken for me. Or it was perhaps merely because, as the failure of Colonel Alingdon's sight cut him off from his work, he felt the natural inclination of age to revert from the empty present to the crowded past. For one cause or another he did talk to me in the last year of his life; and I felt myself mingled, to an extent inconceivable to the mere reader of history, with the passionate scenes of the Italian struggle for liberty. Colonel Alingdon had been mixed with it in all its phases: he had known the last Carbonari and the Young Italy of Mazzini; he had been in Perugia when the mercenaries of a liberal Pope slaughtered women and children in the streets; he had been in Sicily with the Thousand, and in Milan during the Cinque Giornate.

"They say the Italians didn't know how to fight," he said one day, musingly — "that the French had to come down and do their work for them. People forget how long it was since they had had any fighting to do. But they hadn't forgotten how to suffer and hold their tongues; how to die and take their secrets with them. The Italian war of independence was really carried on underground: it was one of those awful silent struggles which are so much more terrible than the roar of a battle. It's a deuced sight easier to charge with your regiment than to lie rotting in an Austrian prison and know that if you give up the name of a friend or two you can go back scot-free to your wife and children. And thousands and thousands of Italians had the choice given them — and hardly one went back."

He sat silent, his meditative fingertips laid together, his eyes fixed on the past which was the now only thing clearly visible to them.

"And the women?" I said. "Were they as brave as the men?"

I had not spoken quite at random. I had always heard that there had been as much of love as of war in Colonel Alingdon's early career, and I hoped that my question might give a personal turn to his reminiscences.

"The women?" he repeated. "They were braver — for they had more to bear and less to do. Italy could never have been saved without them."

His eye had kindled and I detected in it the reflection of some vivid memory. It was then that I asked him what was the bravest thing he had ever known of a woman's doing.

The question was such a vague one that I hardly knew why I had put it, but to my surprise he answered almost

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at once, as though I had touched on a subject of frequent meditation.

"The bravest thing I ever saw done by a woman," he said, "was brought about by an act of my own — and one of which I am not particularly proud. For that reason I have never spoken of it before — there was a time when I didn't even care to think of it — but all that is past now. She died years ago, and so did the Jack Alingdon she knew, and in telling you the story I am no more than the mouthpiece of an old tradition which some ancestor might have handed down to me."

He leaned back, his clear blind gaze fixed smilingly on me, and I had the feeling that, in groping through the labyrinth of his young adventures, I had come unawares upon their central point.

II

(COLONEL ALINGDON'S STORY)

When I was in Milan in 'forty-seven an unlucky thing happened to me.

I had been sent there to look over the ground by some of my Italian friends in England. As an English officer I had no difficulty in getting into Milanese society, for England had for years been the refuge of the Italian fugitives, and I was known to be working in their interests. It was just the kind of job I liked, and I never enjoyed life more than I did in those days. There was a great deal going on — good music, balls and theatres. Milan kept up her gayety to the last. The English were shocked by the insouciance of a race who could dance under the very nose of the usurper; but those who understood the situation knew that Milan was playing Brutus, and playing it uncommonly well.

I was in the thick of it all — it was just the atmosphere to suit a young fellow of nine-and-twenty, with a healthy passion for waltzing and fighting. But, as I said, an unlucky thing happened to me. I was fool enough to fall in love with Donna Candida Falco. You have heard of her, of course: you know the share she had in the great work. In a different way she was what the terrible Princess Belgioioso had been to an earlier generation. But Donna Candida was not terrible. She was quiet, discreet and charming. When I knew her she was a widow of thirty, her husband, Andrea Falco, having died ten years previously, soon after their marriage. The marriage had been notoriously unhappy, and his death was a release to Donna Candida. Her family were of Modena, but they had come to live in Milan soon after the execution of *Ciro Menotti* and his companions. You remember the details of that business? The Duke of Modena, one of the most adroit villains in Europe, had been bitten with the hope of uniting the Italian states under his rule. It was a vision of Italian liberation — of a sort. A few madmen were dazzled by it, and *Ciro Menotti* was one of them. You know the end. The Duke of Modena, who had counted on *Louis Philippe's* backing, found that that astute sovereign had betrayed him to Austria. Instantly, he saw that his first business was to get rid of the conspirators he had created. There was nothing easier than for a Hapsburg *Este* to turn on a friend. *Ciro Menotti* had staked his life for the Duke — and the Duke took it. You may remember that, on the night when seven hundred men and a cannon attacked *Menotti's* house, the Duke was seen looking on at the slaughter from an arcade across the square.

Well, among the lesser fry taken that night was a lad of eighteen, *Emilio Verna*, who was the only brother of *Donna Candida*. The *Verna* family was one of the most respected in Modena. It consisted, at that time, of the mother, *Countess Verna*, of young *Emilio* and his sister. *Count Verna* had been in *Spielberg* in the twenties. He had never recovered from his sufferings there, and died in exile, without seeing his wife and children again. *Countess Verna* had been an ardent patriot in her youth, but the failure of the first attempts against Austria had discouraged her. She thought that in losing her husband she had sacrificed enough for her country, and her one idea was to keep *Emilio* on good terms with the government. But the *Verna* blood was not tractable, and his father's death was not likely to make *Emilio* a good subject of the *Estes*. Not that he had as yet taken any active share in the work of the conspirators: he simply hadn't had time. At his trial there was nothing to show that he had been in *Menotti's* confidence; but he had been seen once or twice coming out of what the ducal police called "suspicious" houses, and in his desk were found some verses to Italy. That was enough to hang a man in Modena, and *Emilio Verna* was hanged.

The *Countess* never recovered from the blow. The circumstances of her son's death were too abominable, to unendurable. If he had risked his life in the conspiracy, she might have been reconciled to his losing it. But he was a mere child, who had sat at home, chafing but powerless, while his seniors plotted and fought. He had been sacrificed to the Duke's insane fear, to his savage greed for victims, and the *Countess Verna* was not to be consoled.

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As soon as possible, the mother and daughter left Modena for Milan. There they lived in seclusion till Candida's marriage. During her girlhood she had had to accept her mother's view of life: to shut herself up in the tomb in which the poor woman brooded over her martyrs. But that was not the girl's way of honoring the dead. At the moment when the first shot was fired on Menotti's house she had been reading Petrarch's Ode to the Lords of Italy, and the lines

l'antico valor Ne Vitalici cor non e ancor morto had lodged like a bullet in her brain. From the day of her marriage she began to take a share in the silent work which was going on throughout Italy. Milan was at that time the centre of the movement, and Candida Falco threw herself into it with all the passion which her unhappy marriage left unsatisfied. At first she had to act with great reserve, for her husband was a prudent man, who did not care to have his habits disturbed by political complications; but after his death there was nothing to restrain her, except the exquisite tact which enabled her to work night and day in the Italian cause without giving the Austrian authorities a pretext for interference.

When I first knew Donna Candida, her mother was still living: a tragic woman, prematurely bowed, like an image of death in the background of the daughter's brilliant life. The Countess, since her son's death, had become a patriot again, though in a narrower sense than Candida. The mother's first thought was that her dead must be avenged, the daughter's that Italy must be saved; but from different motives they worked for the same end. Candida felt for the Countess that protecting tenderness with which Italian children so often regard their parents, a feeling heightened by the reverence which the mother's sufferings inspired. Countess Verna, as the wife and mother of martyrs, had done what Candida longed to do: she had given her utmost to Italy. There must have been moments when the self-absorption of her grief chilled her daughter's ardent spirit; but Candida revered in her mother the image of their afflicted country.

"It was too terrible," she said, speaking of what the Countess had suffered after Emilio's death. "All the circumstances were too unmerciful. It seemed as if God had turned His face from my mother; as if she had been singled out to suffer more than any of the others. All the other families received some message or token of farewell from the prisoners. One of them bribed the gaoler to carry a letter — another sent a lock of hair by the chaplain. But Emilio made no sign, sent no word. My mother felt as though he had turned his back on us. She used to sit for hours, saying again and again, 'Why was he the only one to forget his mother?' I tried to comfort her, but it was useless: she had suffered too much. Now I never reason with her; I listen, and let her ease her poor heart. Do you know, she still asks me sometimes if I think he may have left a letter — if there is no way of finding out if he left one? She forgets that I have tried again and again: that I have sent bribes and messages to the gaoler, the chaplain, to every one who came near him. The answer is always the same — no one has ever heard of a letter. I suppose the poor boy was stunned, and did not think of writing. Who knows what was passing through his poor bewildered brain? But it would have been a great help to my mother to have a word from him. If I had known how to imitate his writing I should have forged a letter."

I knew enough of the Italians to understand how her boy's silence must have aggravated the Countess's grief. Precious as a message from a dying son would be to any mother, such signs of tenderness have to the Italians a peculiar significance. The Latin race is rhetorical: it possesses the gift of death-bed eloquence, the knack of saying the effective thing on momentous occasions. The letters which the Italian patriots sent home from their prisons or from the scaffold are not the halting farewells that anguish would have wrung from a less expressive race: they are veritable "compositions," saved from affectation only by the fact that fluency and sonority are a part of the Latin inheritance. Such letters, passed from hand to hand among the bereaved families, were not only a comfort to the survivors but an incentive to fresh sacrifices. They were the "seed of the martyrs" with which Italy was being sown; and I knew what it meant to the Countess Verna to have no such treasure in her bosom, to sit silent while other mothers quoted their sons' last words.

I said just now that it was an unlucky day for me when I fell in love with Donna Candida; and no doubt you have guessed the reason. She was in love with some one else. It was the old situation of Heine's song. That other loved another — loved Italy, and with an undivided passion. His name was Fernando Briga, and at that time he was one of the foremost liberals in Italy. He came of a middle-class Modenese family. His father was a doctor, a prudent man, engrossed in his profession and unwilling to compromise it by meddling in politics. His irreproachable attitude won the confidence of the government, and the Duke conferred on him the sinister office of physician to the prisons of Modena. It was this Briga who attended Emilio Falco, and several of the other

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prisoners who were executed at the same time.

Under shelter of his father's loyalty young Fernando conspired in safety. He was studying medicine, and every one supposed him to be absorbed in his work; but as a matter of fact he was fast ripening into one of Mazzini's ablest lieutenants. His career belongs to history, so I need not enlarge on it here. In 1847 he was in Milan, and had become one of the leading figures in the liberal group which was working for a coalition with Piedmont. Like all the ablest men of his day, he had cast off Mazzinism and pinned his faith to the house of Savoy. The Austrian government had an eye on him, but he had inherited his father's prudence, though he used it for nobler ends, and his discretion enabled him to do far more for the cause than a dozen enthusiasts could have accomplished. No one understood this better than Donna Candida. She had a share of his caution, and he trusted her with secrets which he would not have confided to many men. Her drawing-room was the centre of the Piedmontese party, yet so clever was she in averting suspicion that more than one hunted conspirator hid in her house, and was helped across the Alps by her agents.

Briga relied on her as he did on no one else; but he did not love her, and she knew it. Still, she was young, she was handsome, and he loved no one else: how could she give up hoping? From her intimate friends she made no secret of her feelings: Italian women are not reticent in such matters, and Donna Candida was proud of loving a hero. You will see at once that I had no chance; but if she could not give up hope, neither could I. Perhaps in her desire to secure my services for the cause she may have shown herself overkind; or perhaps I was still young enough to set down to my own charms a success due to quite different causes. At any rate, I persuaded myself that if I could manage to do something conspicuous for Italy I might yet make her care for me. With such an incentive you will not wonder that I worked hard; but though Donna Candida was full of gratitude she continued to adore my rival.

One day we had a hot scene. I began, I believe, by reproaching her with having led me on; and when she defended herself, I retaliated by taunting her with Briga's indifference. She grew pale at that, and said it was enough to love a hero, even without hope of return; and as she said it she herself looked so heroic, so radiant, so unattainably the woman I wanted, that a sneer may have escaped me: — was she so sure then that Briga was a hero? I remember her proud silence and our wretched parting. I went away feeling that at last I had really lost her; and the thought made me savage and vindictive.

Soon after, as it happened, came the Five Days, and Milan was free. I caught a distant glimpse of Donna Candida in the hospital to which I was carried after the fight; but my wound was a slight one and in twenty-four hours I was about again on crutches. I hoped she might send for me, but she did not, and I was too sulky to make the first advance. A day or two later I heard there had been a commotion in Modena, and not being in fighting trim I got leave to go over there with one or two men whom the Modenese liberals had called in to help them. When we arrived the precious Duke had been swept out and a provisional government set up. One of my companions, who was a Modenese, was made a member, and knowing that I wanted something to do, he commissioned me to look up some papers in the ducal archives. It was fascinating work, for in the pursuit of my documents I uncovered the hidden springs of his late Highness's paternal administration. The principal papers relative to the civil and criminal administration of Modena have since been published, and the world knows how that estimable sovereign cared for the material and spiritual welfare of his subjects.

Well — in the course of my search, I came across a file of old papers marked: "Taken from political prisoners. A.D. 1831." It was the year of Menotti's conspiracy, and everything connected with that date was thrilling. I loosened the band and ran over the letters. Suddenly I came across one which was docketed: "Given by Doctor Briga's son to the warder of His Highness's prisons." Doctor Briga's son? That could be no other than Fernando: I knew he was an only child. But how came such a paper into his hands, and how had it passed from them into those of the Duke's warder? My own hands shook as I opened the letter — I felt the man suddenly in my power.

Then I began to read. "My adored mother, even in this lowest circle of hell all hearts are not closed to pity, and I have been given the hope that these last words of farewell may reach you. . . ." My eyes ran on over pages of plaintive rhetoric. "Embrace for me my adored Candida . . . let her never forget the cause for which her father and brother perished . . . let her keep alive in her breast the thought of Spielberg and Reggio. Do not grieve that I die so young . . . though not with those heroes in deed I was with them in spirit, and am worthy to be enrolled in the sacred phalanx . . ." and so on. Before I reached the signature I knew the letter was from Emilio Verna.

I put it in my pocket, finished my work and started immediately for Milan. I didn't quite know what I meant to

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do — my head was in a whirl. I saw at once what must have happened. Fernando Briga, then a lad of fifteen or sixteen, had attended his father in prison during Emilio Verna's last hours, and the latter, perhaps aware of the lad's liberal sympathies, had found an opportunity of giving him the letter. But why had Briga given it up to the warder? That was the puzzling question. The docket said: " Given by Doctor Briga's son" — but it might mean "taken from." Fernando might have been seen to receive the letter and might have been searched on leaving the prison. But that would not account for his silence afterward. How was it that, if he knew of the letter, he had never told Emilio's family of it? There was only one explanation. If the letter had been taken from him by force he would have had no reason for concealing its existence; and his silence was clear proof that he had given it up voluntarily, no doubt in the hope of standing well with the authorities. But then he was a traitor and a coward; the patriot of 'forty-eight had begun life as an informer! But does innate character ever change so radically that the lad who has committed a base act at fifteen may grow up into an honorable man? A good man may be corrupted by life, but can the years turn a born sneak into a hero?

You may fancy how I answered my own questions. . . . If Briga had been false and cowardly then, was he not sure to be false and cowardly still? In those days there were traitors under every coat, and more than one brave fellow had been sold to the police by his best friend. . . . You will say that Briga's record was unblemished, that he had exposed himself to danger too frequently, had stood by his friends too steadfastly, to permit of a rational doubt of his good faith. So reason might have told me in a calmer moment, but she was not allowed to make herself heard just then. I was young, I was angry, I chose to think I had been unfairly treated, and perhaps at my rival's instigation. It was not unlikely that Briga knew of my love for Donna Candida, and had encouraged her to use it in the good cause. Was she not always at his bidding? My blood boiled at the thought, and reaching Milan in a rage I went straight to Donna Candida.

I had measured the exact force of the blow I was going to deal. The triumph of the liberals in Modena had revived public interest in the unsuccessful struggle of their predecessors, the men who, sixteen years earlier, had paid for the same attempt with their lives. The victors of 'forty-eight wished to honor the vanquished of 'thirty-two. All the families exiled by the ducal government were hastening back to recover possession of their confiscated property and of the graves of their dead. Already it had been decided to raise a monument to Menotti and his companions. There were to be speeches, garlands, a public holiday: the thrill of the commemoration would run through Europe. You see what it would have meant to the poor Countess to appear on the scene with her boy's letter in her hand; and you see also what the memorandum on the back of the letter would have meant to Donna Candida. Poor Emilio's farewell would be published in all the journals of Europe: the finding of the letter would be on every one's lips. And how conceal those fatal words on the back? At the moment, it seemed to me that fortune could not have given me a handsomer chance of destroying my rival than in letting me find the letter which he stood convicted of having suppressed.

My sentiment was perhaps not a strictly honorable one; yet what could I do but give the letter to Donna Candida? To keep it back was out of the question; and with the best will in the world I could not have erased Briga's name from the back. The mistake I made was in thinking it lucky that the paper had fallen into my hands.

Donna Candida was alone when I entered. We had parted in anger, but she held out her hand with a smile of pardon, and asked what news I brought from Modena. The smile exasperated me: I felt as though she were trying to get me into her power again.

"I bring you a letter from your brother," I said, and handed it to her. I had purposely turned the superscription downward, so that she should not see it.

She uttered an incredulous cry and tore the letter open. A light struck up from it into her face as she read — a radiance that smote me to the soul. For a moment I longed to snatch the paper from her and efface the name on the back. It hurt me to think how short-lived her happiness must be.

Then she did a fatal thing. She came up to me, caught my two hands and kissed them. "Oh, thank you — bless you a thousand times! He died thinking of us — he died loving Italy!"

I put her from me gently: it was not the kiss I wanted, and the touch of her lips hardened me.

She shone on me through her happy tears. "What happiness — what consolation you have brought my poor mother! This will take the bitterness from her grief. And that it should come to her now! Do you know, she had a presentiment of it? When we heard of the Duke's flight her first word was: 'Now we may find Emilio's letter.' At heart she was always sure that he had written — I suppose some blessed instinct told her so." She dropped her

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face on her hands, and I saw her tears fall on the wretched letter.

In a moment she looked up again, with eyes that blessed and trusted me. "Tell me where you found it," she said.

I told her.

"Oh, the savages! They took it from him — "

My opportunity had come. "No," I said, "it appears they did not take it from him."

"Then how — "

I waited a moment. "The letter," I said, looking full at her, "was given up to the warder of the prison by the son of Doctor Briga."

She stared, repeating the words slowly. "The son of Doctor Briga? But that is — Fernando," she said.

"I have always understood," I replied, "that your friend was an only son."

I had expected an outcry of horror; if she had uttered it I could have forgiven her anything. But I heard, instead, an incredulous exclamation: my statement was really too preposterous! I saw that her mind had flashed back to our last talk, and that she charged me with something too nearly true to be endurable.

"My brother's letter? Given to the prison warder by Fernando Briga? My dear Captain Alingdon — on what authority do you expect me to believe such a tale?"

Her incredulity had in it an evident implication of bad faith, and I was stung to a quick reply.

"If you will turn over the letter you will see."

She continued to gaze at me a moment: then she obeyed. I don't think I ever admired her more than I did then. As she read the name a tremor crossed her face; and that was all. Her mind must have reached out instantly to the farthest consequences of the discovery, but the long habit of self-command enabled her to steady her muscles at once. If I had not been on the alert I should have seen no hint of emotion.

For a while she looked fixedly at the back of the letter; then she raised her eyes to mine.

"Can you tell me who wrote this?" she asked.

Her composure irritated me. She had rallied all her forces to Briga's defence, and I felt as though my triumph were slipping from me.

"Probably one of the clerks of the archives," I answered. "It is written in the same hand as all the other memoranda relating to the political prisoners of that year."

"But it is a lie!" she exclaimed. "He was never admitted to the prisons."

"Are you sure?"

"How should he have been?"

"He might have gone as his father's assistant."

"But if he had seen my poor brother he would have told me long ago."

"Not if he had really given up this letter," I retorted.

I supposed her quick intelligence had seized this from the first; but I saw now that it came to her as a shock. She stood motionless, clenching the letter in her hands, and I could guess the rapid travel of her thoughts.

Suddenly she came up to me. "Colonel Alingdon," she said, "you have been a good friend of mine, though I think you have not liked me lately. But whether you like me or not, I know you will not deceive me. On your honor, do you think this memorandum may have been written later than the letter?"

I hesitated. If she had cried out once against Briga I should have wished myself out of the business; but she was too sure of him.

"On my honor," I said, "I think it hardly possible. The ink has faded to the same degree."

She made a rapid comparison and folded the letter with a gesture of assent.

"It may have been written by an enemy," I went on, wishing to clear myself of any appearance of malice.

She shook her head. "He was barely fifteen — and his father was on the side of the government. Besides, this would have served him with the government, and the liberals would never have known of it."

This was unanswerable — and still not a word of revolt against the man whose condemnation she was pronouncing!

"Then — " I said with a vague gesture.

She caught me up. "Then — ?"

"You have answered my objections," I returned.

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"Your objections?"

"To thinking that Signor Briga could have begun his career as a patriot by betraying a friend."

I had brought her to the test at last, but my eyes shrank from her face as I spoke. There was a dead silence, which I broke by adding lamely: "But no doubt Signor Briga could explain."

She lifted her head, and I saw that my triumph was to be short. She stood erect, a few paces from me, resting her hand on a table, but not for support.

"Of course he can explain," she said; "do you suppose I ever doubted it? But — " she paused a moment, fronting me nobly — "he need not, for I understand it all now."

"Ah," I murmured with a last flicker of irony.

"I understand," she repeated. It was she, now, who sought my eyes and held them. "It is quite simple — he could not have done otherwise."

This was a little too oracular to be received with equanimity. I suppose I smiled.

"He could not have done otherwise," she repeated with tranquil emphasis. "He merely did what is every Italian's duty — he put Italy before himself and his friends." She waited a moment, and then went on with growing passion: "Surely you must see what I mean? He was evidently in the prison with his father at the time of my poor brother's death. Emilio perhaps guessed that he was a friend — or perhaps appealed to him because he was young and looked kind. But don't you see how dangerous it would have been for Briga to bring this letter to us, or even to hide it in his father's house? It is true that he was not yet suspected of liberalism, but he was already connected with Young Italy, and it is just because he managed to keep himself so free of suspicion that he was able to do such good work for the cause." She paused, and then went on with a firmer voice. "You don't know the danger we all lived in. The government spies were everywhere. The laws were set aside as the Duke pleased — was not Emilio hanged for having an ode to Italy in his desk? After Menotti's conspiracy the Duke grew mad with fear — he was haunted by the dread of assassination. The police, to prove their zeal, had to trump up false charges and arrest innocent persons — you remember the case of poor Ricci? Incriminating papers were smuggled into people's houses — they were condemned to death on the paid evidence of brigands and galley-slaves. The families of the revolutionists were under the closest observation and were shunned by all who wished to stand well with the government. If Briga had been seen going into our house he would at once have been suspected. If he had hidden Emilio's letter at home, its discovery might have ruined his family as well as himself. It was his duty to consider all these things. In those days no man could serve two masters, and he had to choose between endangering the cause and failing to serve a friend. He chose the latter — and he was right."

I stood listening, fascinated by the rapidity and skill with which she had built up the hypothesis of Briga's defence. But before she ended a strange thing happened — her argument had convinced me. It seemed to me quite likely that Briga had in fact been actuated by the motives she suggested.

I suppose she read the admission in my face, for hers lit up victoriously.

"You see?" she exclaimed. "Ah, it takes one brave man to understand another."

Perhaps I winced a little at being thus coupled with her hero; at any rate, some last impulse of resistance made me say: "I should be quite convinced, if Briga had only spoken of the letter afterward. If brave people understand each other, I cannot see why he should have been afraid of telling you the truth."

She colored deeply, and perhaps not quite resentfully.

"You are right," she said; "he need not have been afraid. But he does not know me as I know him. I was useful to Italy, and he may have feared to risk my friendship."

"You are the most generous woman I ever knew!" I exclaimed.

She looked at me intently. "You also are generous," she said.

I stiffened instantly, suspecting a purpose behind her praise. "I have given you small proof of it!" I said.

She seemed surprised. "In bringing me this letter? What else could you do?" She sighed deeply. "You can give me proof enough now."

She had dropped into a chair, and I saw that we had reached the most difficult point in our interview.

"Captain Alingdon," she said, "does any one else know of this letter?"

"No. I was alone in the archives when I found it."

"And you spoke of it to no one?"

"To no one."

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"Then no one must know."

I bowed. "It is for you to decide."

She paused. "Not even my mother," she continued, with a painful blush.

I looked at her in amazement. "Not even — ?"

She shook her head sadly. "You think me a cruel daughter? Well — he was a cruel friend. What he did was done for Italy: shall I allow myself to be surpassed?"

I felt a pang of commiseration for the mother. "But you will at least tell the Countess — "

Her eyes filled with tears. "My poor mother — don't make it more difficult for me!"

"But I don't understand — "

"Don't you see that she might find it impossible to forgive him? She has suffered so much! And I can't risk that — for in her anger she might speak. And even if she forgave him, she might be tempted to show the letter. Don't you see that, even now, a word of this might ruin him? I will trust his fate to no one. If Italy needed him then she needs him far more to-day."

She stood before me magnificently, in the splendor of her great refusal; then she turned to the writing-table at which she had been seated when I came in. Her sealing-taper was still alight, and she held her brother's letter to the flame.

I watched her in silence while it burned; but one more question rose to my lips.

"You will tell him, then, what you have done for him?" I cried.

And at that the heroine turned woman, melted and pressed unhappy hands in mine.

"Don't you see that I can never tell him what I do for him? That is my gift to Italy," she said.