A FOREGONE CONCLUSION

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I.

As Don Ippolito passed down the long narrow *calle* or footway leading from the Campo San Stefano to the Grand Canal in Venice, he peered anxiously about him: now turning for a backward look up the calle, where there was no living thing in sight but a cat on a garden gate; now running a quick eye along the palace walls that rose vast on either hand and notched the slender strip of blue sky visible overhead with the lines of their jutting balconies, chimneys, and cornices; and now glancing toward the canal, where he could see the noiseless black boats meeting and passing. There was no sound in the calle save his own footfalls and the harsh scream of a parrot that hung in the sunshine in one of the loftiest windows; but the note of a peasant crying pots of pinks and roses in the campo came softened to Don Ippolito's sense, and he heard the gondoliers as they hoarsely jested together and gossiped, with the canal between them, at the next gondola station.

The first tenderness of spring was in the air though down in that calle there was yet enough of the wintry rawness to chill the tip of Don Ippolito's sensitive nose, which he rubbed for comfort with a handkerchief of dark blue calico, and polished for ornament with a handkerchief of white linen. He restored each to a different pocket in the sides of the ecclesiastical *talare*, or gown, reaching almost to his ankles, and then clutched the pocket in which he had replaced the linen handkerchief, as if to make sure that something he prized was safe within. He paused abruptly, and, looking at the doors he had passed, went back a few paces and stood before one over which hung, slightly tilted

forward, an oval sign painted with the effigy of an eagle, a bundle of arrows, and certain thunderbolts, and bearing the legend, CONSULATE OF THE UNITED STATES, in neat characters. Don Ippolito gave a quick sigh, hesitated a moment, and then seized the bell-pull and jerked it so sharply that it seemed to thrust out, like a part of the mechanism, the head of an old serving-woman at the window above him.

“Who is there?” demanded this head.

“Friends,” answered Don Ippolito in a rich, sad voice.

“And what do you command?” further asked the old woman.

Don Ippolito paused, apparently searching for his voice, before he inquired, “Is it here that the Consul of America lives?”

“Precisely.”

“Is he perhaps at home?”

“I don’t know. I will go ask him.”

“Do me that pleasure, dear,” said Don Ippolito, and remained knotting his fingers before the closed door. Presently the old woman returned, and looking out long enough to say, “The consul is at home,” drew some inner bolt by a wire running to the lock, that let the door start open; then, waiting to hear Don Ippolito close it again, she called out from her height, “Favor me above.” He climbed the dim stairway to the point where she stood, and followed her to a door, which she flung open into an apartment so brightly lit by a window looking on the sunny canal, that he blinked as he entered. “Signor Console,” said the old woman, “behold the gentleman who desired to see you;” and at the same time Don Ippolito, having removed his broad, stiff, three-cornered hat, came forward and made a beautiful bow. He had lost for the moment the trepidation which had marked his approach to the consulate, and bore himself with graceful dignity.

It was in the first year of the war, and from a motive of patriotism common at that time, Mr. Ferris (one of my many predecessors in office at Venice) had just been crossing his two silken gondola flags above the consular bookcase, where with their gilt lance-headed staves, and their vivid stars and stripes, they made a very pretty effect. He filliped a little dust from his coat, and begged Don Ippolito to be seated, with the air of putting even a Venetian priest on a footing of equality with other men under the folds of the national banner. Mr. Ferris had the prejudice of all Italian sympathizers against the priests; but for this he could hardly have found anything in Don Ippolito to alarm dislike. His face was a little thin, and the chin was delicate; the nose had a fine, Dantesque curve, but its final droop gave a melancholy cast to a countenance expressive of a gentle and kindly spirit; the eyes were large and dark and full of a dreamy warmth. Don Ippolito's prevailing tint was that transparent blueishness which comes from much shaving of a heavy black beard; his forehead and temples were marble white; he had a tonsure the size of a dollar. He sat silent for a little space, and softly questioned the consul's face with his dreamy eyes. Apparently he could not gather courage to speak of his business at once, for he turned his gaze upon the window and said, "A beautiful position, Signor Console."

"Yes, it's a pretty place," answered Mr. Ferris, warily.

"So much pleasanter here on the Canalazzo than on the campos or the little canals."

"Oh, without doubt."

"Here there must be constant amusement in watching the boats: great stir, great variety, great life. And now the fine season commences, and the Signor Console's countrymen will be coming to Venice. Perhaps," added Don Ippolito with a polite dismay, and an air of sudden anxiety to escape from his own purpose, "I may be disturbing or detaining the Signor Console?"

“No,” said Mr. Ferris; “I am quite at leisure for the present. In what can I have the honor of serving you?”

Don Ippolito heaved a long, ineffectual sigh, and taking his linen handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his forehead with it, and rolled it upon his knee. He looked at the door, and all round the room, and then rose and drew near the consul, who had officially seated himself at his desk.

“I suppose that the Signor Console gives passports?” he asked.

“Sometimes,” replied Mr. Ferris, with a clouding face.

Don Ippolito seemed to note the gathering distrust and to be helpless against it. He continued hastily: “Could the Signor Console give a passport for America ... to me?”

“Are you an American citizen?” demanded the consul in the voice of a man whose suspicions are fully roused.

“American citizen?”

“Yes; subject of the American republic.”

“No, surely; I have not that happiness. I am an Austrian subject,” returned Don Ippolito a little bitterly, as if the last words were an unpleasant morsel in the mouth.

“Then I can’t give you a passport,” said Mr. Ferris, somewhat more gently. “You know,” he explained, “that no government can give passports to foreign subjects. That would be an unheard-of thing.”

“But I thought that to go to America an American passport would be needed.”

“In America,” returned the consul, with proud compassion, “they don’t care a fig for passports. You go and you come, and nobody meddles. To be sure,” he faltered, “just now, on account of the secessionists, they *do* require you to show a passport at New York; but,” he continued more boldly, “American passports are usually for Europe; and besides, all the American passports in the world wouldn’t get *you* over the frontier at Peschiera. *You* must have a passport from the Austrian Lieutenancy of Venice.”

Don Ippolito nodded his head softly several times, and said, “Precisely,” and then added with an indescribable weariness, “Patience! Signor Console, I ask your pardon for the trouble I have given,” and he made the consul another low bow.

Whether Mr. Ferris’s curiosity was piqued, and feeling himself on the safe side of his visitor he meant to know why he had come on such an errand, or whether he had some kindlier motive, he could hardly have told himself, but he said, “I’m very sorry. Perhaps there is something else in which I could be of use to you.”

“Ah, I hardly know,” cried Don Ippolito. “I really had a kind of hope in coming to your excellency.”

“I am not an excellency,” interrupted Mr. Ferris, conscientiously.

“Many excuses! But now it seems a mere bestiality. I was so ignorant about the other matter that doubtless I am also quite deluded in this.”

“As to that, of course I can’t say,” answered Mr. Ferris, “but I hope not.”

“Why, listen, signore!” said Don Ippolito, placing his hand over that pocket in which he kept his linen handkerchief. “I had something that it had come into my head to offer your honored government for its advantage in this deplorable rebellion.”

“Oh,” responded Mr. Ferris with a falling countenance. He had received so many offers of help for his honored government from sympathizing foreigners. Hardly a week passed but a sabre came clanking up his dim staircase with a Herr Graf or a Herr Baron attached, who appeared in the spotless panoply of his Austrian captaincy or lieutenancy, to accept from the consul a brigadier-generalship in the Federal armies, on condition that the consul would pay his expenses to Washington, or at least assure him of an exalted post and reimbursement of all outlays from President Lincoln as soon as he arrived. They were

beautiful men, with the complexion of blonde girls; their uniforms fitted like kid gloves; the pale blue, or pure white, or huzzar black of their coats was ravishingly set off by their red or gold trimmings; and they were hard to make understand that brigadiers of American birth swarmed at Washington, and that if they went thither, they must go as soldiers of fortune at their own risk. But they were very polite; they begged pardon when they knocked their scabbards against the consul's furniture, at the door they each made him a magnificent obeisance, said "Servus!" in their great voices, and were shown out by the old Marina, abhorrent of their uniforms and doubtful of the consul's political sympathies. Only yesterday she had called him up at an unwonted hour to receive the visit of a courtly gentleman who addressed him as Monsieur le Ministre, and offered him at a bargain ten thousand stand of probably obsolescent muskets belonging to the late Duke of Parma. Shabby, hungry, incapable exiles of all nations, religions, and politics beset him for places of honor and emolument in the service of the Union; revolutionists out of business, and the minions of banished despots, were alike willing to be fed, clothed, and dispatched to Washington with swords consecrated to the perpetuity of the republic.

"I have here," said Don Ippolito, too intent upon showing whatever it was he had to note the change in the consul's mood, "the model of a weapon of my contrivance, which I thought the government of the North could employ successfully in cases where its batteries were in danger of capture by the Spaniards."

"Spaniards? Spaniards? We have no war with Spain!" cried the consul.

"Yes, yes, I know," Don Ippolito made haste to explain, "but those of South America being Spanish by descent"—

"But we are not fighting the South Americans. We are fighting our own Southern States, I am sorry to say."

“Oh! Many excuses. I am afraid I don’t understand,” said Don Ippolito meekly; whereupon Mr. Ferris enlightened him in a formula (of which he was beginning to be weary) against European misconception of the American situation. Don Ippolito nodded his head contritely, and when Mr. Ferris had ended, he was so much abashed that he made no motion to show his invention till the other added, “But no matter; I suppose the contrivance would work as well against the Southerners as the South Americans. Let me see it, please;” and then Don Ippolito, with a gratified smile, drew from his pocket the neatly finished model of a breech-loading cannon.

“You perceive, Signor Console,” he said with new dignity, “that this is nothing very new as a breech-loader, though I ask you to observe this little improvement for restoring the breech to its place, which is original. The grand feature of my invention, however, is this secret chamber in the breech, which is intended to hold an explosive of high potency, with a fuse coming out below. The gunner, finding his piece in danger, ignites this fuse, and takes refuge in flight. At the moment the enemy seizes the gun the contents of the secret chamber explode, demolishing the piece and destroying its captors.”

The dreamy warmth in Don Ippolito’s deep eyes kindled to a flame; a dark red glowed in his thin cheeks; he drew a box from the folds of his drapery and took snuff in a great whiff, as if inhaling the sulphurous fumes of battle, or titillating his nostrils with grains of gunpowder. He was at least in full enjoyment of the poetic power of his invention, and no doubt had before his eyes a vivid picture of a score of secessionists surprised and blown to atoms in the very moment of triumph. “Behold, Signor Console!” he said.

“It’s certainly very curious,” said Mr. Ferris, turning the fearful toy over in his hand, and admiring the neat workmanship of it. “Did you make this model yourself?”

“Surely,” answered the priest, with a joyous pride; “I have no money to spend upon artisans; and besides, as you might infer, signore, I am not very well seen by my superiors and associates on account of these little amusements of mine; so keep them as much as I can to myself.” Don Ippolito laughed nervously, and then fell silent with his eyes intent upon the consul’s face. “What do you think, signore?” he presently resumed. “If this invention were brought to the notice of your generous government, would it not patronize my labors? I have read that America is the land of enterprises. Who knows but your government might invite me to take service under it in some capacity in which I could employ those little gifts that Heaven”—He paused again, apparently puzzled by the compassionate smile on the consul’s lips. “But tell me, signore, how this invention appears to you.” “Have you had any practical experience in gunnery?” asked Mr. Ferris.

“Why, certainly not.”

“Neither have I,” continued Mr. Ferris, “but I was wondering whether the explosive in this secret chamber would not become so heated by the frequent discharges of the piece as to go off prematurely sometimes, and kill our own artillerymen instead of waiting for the secessionists?”

Don Ippolito’s countenance fell, and a dull shame displaced the exultation that had glowed in it. His head sunk on his breast, and he made no attempt at reply, so that it was again Mr. Ferris who spoke. “You see, I don’t really know anything more of the matter than you do, and I don’t undertake to say whether your invention is disabled by the possibility I suggest or not. Haven’t you any acquaintances among the military, to whom you could show your model?”

“No,” answered Don Ippolito, coldly, “I don’t consort with the military. Besides, what would be thought of a *priest*,” he asked with a bitter stress on the word, “who exhibited such

an invention as that to an officer of our paternal government?”

“I suppose it would certainly surprise the lieutenant-governor somewhat,” said Mr. Ferris with a laugh. “May I ask,” he pursued after an interval, “whether you have occupied yourself with other inventions?”

“I have attempted a great many,” replied Don Ippolito in a tone of dejection.

“Are they all of this warlike temper?” pursued the consul.

“No,” said Don Ippolito, blushing a little, “they are nearly all of peaceful intention. It was the wish to produce something of utility which set me about this cannon. Those good friends of mine who have done me the honor of looking at my attempts had blamed me for the uselessness of my inventions; they allowed that they were ingenious, but they said that even if they could be put in operation, they would not be what the world cared for. Perhaps they were right. I know very little of the world,” concluded the priest, sadly. He had risen to go, yet seemed not quite able to do so; there was no more to say, but if he had come to the consul with high hopes, it might well have unnerved him to have all end so blankly. He drew a long, sibilant breath between his shut teeth, nodded to himself thrice, and turning to Mr. Ferris with a melancholy bow, said, “Signor Console, I thank you infinitely for your kindness, I beg your pardon for the disturbance, and I take my leave.”

“I am sorry,” said Mr. Ferris. “Let us see each other again. In regard to the inventions,—well, you must have patience.” He dropped into some proverbial phrases which the obliging Latin tongues supply so abundantly for the races who must often talk when they do not feel like thinking, and he gave a start when Don Ippolito replied in English, “Yes, but hope deferred maketh the heart sick.”

It was not that it was so uncommon to have Italians innocently come out with their whole slender stock of English to him, for the sake of practice, as they told him;

but there were peculiarities in Don Ippolito's accent for which he could not account. "What," he exclaimed, "do you know English?"

"I have studied it a little, by myself," answered Don Ippolito, pleased to have his English recognized, and then lapsing into the safety of Italian, he added, "And I had also the help of an English ecclesiastic who sojourned some months in Venice, last year, for his health, and who used to read with me and teach me the pronunciation. He was from Dublin, this ecclesiastic."

"Oh!" said Mr. Ferris, with relief, "I see;" and he perceived that what had puzzled him in Don Ippolito's English was a fine brogue superimposed upon his Italian accent.

"For some time I have had this idea of going to America, and I thought that the first thing to do was to equip myself with the language."

"Um!" said Mr. Ferris, "that was practical, at any rate," and he mused awhile. By and by he continued, more kindly than he had yet spoken, "I wish I could ask you to sit down again: but I have an engagement which I must make haste to keep. Are you going out through the campo? Pray wait a minute, and I will walk with you."

Mr. Ferris went into another room, through the open door of which Don Ippolito saw the paraphernalia of a painter's studio: an easel with a half-finished picture on it; a chair with a palette and brushes, and crushed and twisted tubes of colors; a lay figure in one corner; on the walls scraps of stamped leather, rags of tapestry, desultory sketches on paper.

Mr. Ferris came out again, brushing his hat.

"The Signor Console amuses himself with painting, I see," said Don Ippolito courteously.

"Not at all," replied Mr. Ferris, putting on his gloves; "I am a painter by profession, and I amuse myself with consuling;" [Footnote: Since these words of Mr. Ferris were

first printed, I have been told that a more eminent painter, namely Rubens, made very much the same reply to very much the same remark, when Spanish Ambassador in England. “The Ambassador of His Catholic Majesty, I see, amuses himself by painting sometimes,” said a visitor who found him at his easel. “I amuse myself by playing the ambassador sometimes,” answered Rubens. In spite of the similarity of the speeches, I let that of Mr. Ferris stand, for I am satisfied that he did not know how unhandsomely Rubens had taken the words out of his mouth.] and as so open a matter needed no explanation, he said no more about it. Nor is it quite necessary to tell how, as he was one day painting in New York, it occurred to him to make use of a Congressional friend, and ask for some Italian consulate, he did not care which. That of Venice happened to be vacant: the income was a few hundred dollars; as no one else wanted it, no question was made of Mr. Ferris’s fitness for the post, and he presently found himself possessed of a commission requesting the Emperor of Austria to permit him to enjoy and exercise the office of consul of the ports of the Lombardo-Venetian kingdom, to which the President of the United States appointed him from a special trust in his abilities and integrity. He proceeded at once to his post of duty, called upon the ship’s chandler with whom they had been left, for the consular archives, and began to paint some Venetian subjects.

He and Don Ippolito quitted the Consulate together, leaving Marina to digest with her noonday porridge the wonder that he should be walking amicably forth with a priest. The same spectacle was presented to the gaze of the campo, where they paused in friendly converse, and were seen to part with many politenesses by the doctors of the neighborhood, lounging away their leisure, as the Venetian fashion is, at the local pharmacy.

The apothecary craned forward over his counter, and peered through the open door. “What is that blessed Consul

of America doing with a priest?”

“The Consul of America with a priest?” demanded a grave old man, a physician with a beautiful silvery beard, and a most reverend and senatorial presence, but one of the worst tongues in Venice. “Oh!” he added, with a laugh, after scrutiny of the two through his glasses, “it’s that crack-brain Don Ippolito Rondinelli. He isn’t priest enough to hurt the consul. Perhaps he’s been selling him a perpetual motion for the use of his government, which needs something of the kind just now. Or maybe he’s been posing to him for a picture. He would make a very pretty Joseph, give him Potiphar’s wife in the background,” said the doctor, who if not maligned would have needed much more to make a Joseph of him.

II

Mr. Ferris took his way through the devious footways where the shadow was chill, and through the broad campos where the sun was tenderly warm, and the towers of the church rose against the speck-less azure of the vernal heaven. As he went along, he frowned in a helpless perplexity with the case of Don Ippolito, whom he had begun by doubting for a spy with some incomprehensible motive, and had ended by pitying with a certain degree of amusement and a deep sense of the futility of his compassion. He presently began to think of him with a little disgust, as people commonly think of one whom they pity and yet cannot help, and he made haste to cast off the hopeless burden. He shrugged his shoulders, struck his stick on the smooth paving-stones, and let his eyes rove up and down the fronts of the houses, for the sake of the pretty faces that glanced out of the casements. He was a young man, and it was spring, and this was Venice. He made himself joyfully part of the city and the season; he was glad of the narrowness of the streets, of the good-humored jostling and pushing; he crouched into an arched doorway to let a water-carrier pass with her copper buckets dripping at the end of the yoke balanced on her shoulder, and he returned her smiles and excuses with others as broad and gay; he brushed by the swelling hoops of ladies, and stooped before the unwieldy burdens of porters, who as they staggered through the crowd with a thrust hero, and a shove there forgave themselves, laughing, with “We are in Venice, signori;” and he stood aside for the files of soldiers clanking heavily over the

pavement, then muskets kindling to a blaze in the sunlit campos and quenched again in the damp shadows of the calles. His ear was taken by the vibrant jargoning of the boatmen as they pushed their craft under the bridges he crossed, and the keen notes of the canaries and the songs of the golden-billed blackbirds whose cages hung at lattices far overhead. Heaps of oranges, topped by the fairest cut in halves, gave their color, at frequent intervals, to the dusky corners and recesses and the long-drawn cry of the venders, “Oranges of Palermo!” rose above the clatter of feet and the clamor of other voices. At a little shop where butter and eggs and milk abounded, together with early flowers of various sorts, he bought a bunch of hyacinths, blue and white and yellow, and he presently stood smelling these while he waited in the hotel parlor for the ladies to whom he had sent his card. He turned at the sound of drifting drapery, and could not forbear placing the hyacinths in the hand of Miss Florida Vervain, who had come into the room to receive him. She was a girl of about seventeen years, who looked older; she was tall rather than short, and rather full,—though it could not be said that she erred in point of solidity. In the attitudes of shy hauteur into which she constantly fell, there was a touch of defiant awkwardness which had a certain fascination. She was blonde, with a throat and hands of milky whiteness; there was a suggestion of freckles on her regular face, where a quick color came and went, though her cheeks were habitually somewhat pale; her eyes were very blue under their level brows, and the lashes were even lighter in color than the masses of her fair gold hair; the edges of the lids were touched with the faintest red. The late Colonel Vervain of the United States army, whose complexion his daughter had inherited, was an officer whom it would not have been peaceable to cross in any purpose or pleasure, and Miss Vervain seemed sometimes a little burdened by the passionate nature which he had left her together with

the tropical name he had bestowed in honor of the State where he had fought the Seminoles in his youth, and where he chanced still to be stationed when she was born; she had the air of being embarrassed in presence of herself, and of having an anxious watch upon her impulses. I do not know how otherwise to describe the effort of proud, helpless femininity, which would have struck the close observer in Miss Vervain.

"Delicious!" she said, in a deep voice, which conveyed something of this anxiety in its guarded tones, and yet was not wanting in a kind of frankness. "Did you mean them for me, Mr. Ferris?"

"I didn't, but I do," answered Mr. Ferris. "I bought them in ignorance, but I understand now what they were meant for by nature;" and in fact the hyacinths, with their smooth textures and their pure colors, harmonized well with Miss Vervain, as she bent her face over them and inhaled their full, rich perfume.

"I will put them in water," she said, "if you'll excuse me a moment. Mother will be down directly."

Before she could return, her mother rustled into the parlor.

Mrs. Vervain was gracefully, fragilely unlike her daughter. She entered with a gentle and gliding step, peering near-sightedly about through her glasses, and laughing triumphantly when she had determined Mr. Ferris's exact position, where he stood with a smile shaping his full brown beard and glancing from his hazel eyes. She was dressed in perfect taste with reference to her matronly years, and the lingering evidences of her widowhood, and she had an unaffected naturalness of manner which even at her age of forty-eight could not be called less than charming. She spoke in a trusting, caressing tone, to which no man at least could respond unkindly.

"So very good of you, to take all this trouble, Mr. Ferris," she said, giving him a friendly hand, "and I suppose you are

letting us encroach upon very valuable time. I'm quite ashamed to take it. But isn't it a heavenly day? What *I* call a perfect day, just right every way; none of those disagreeable extremes. It's so unpleasant to have it too hot, for instance. I'm the greatest person for moderation, Mr. Ferris, and I carry the principle into everything; but I do think the breakfasts at these Italian hotels are too light altogether. I like our American breakfasts, don't you? I've been telling Florida I can't stand it; we really must make some arrangement. To be sure, you oughtn't to think of such a thing as eating, in a place like Venice, all poetry; but a sound mind in a sound body, *I* say. We're perfectly wild over it. Don't you think it's a place that grows upon you very much, Mr. Ferris? All those associations,—it does seem too much; and the gondolas everywhere. But I'm always afraid the gondoliers cheat us; and in the stores I never feel safe a moment—not a moment. I do think the Venetians are lacking in truthfulness, a little. I don't believe they understand our American fairdealing and sincerity. I shouldn't want to do them injustice, but I really think they take advantages in bargaining. Now such a thing even as corals. Florida is extremely fond of them, and we bought a set yesterday in the Piazza, and I *know* we paid too much for them. Florida," said Mrs. Vervain, for her daughter had reentered the room, and stood with some shawls and wraps upon her arm, patiently waiting for the conclusion of the elder lady's speech, "I wish you would bring down that set of corals. I'd like Mr. Ferris to give an unbiased opinion. I'm sure we were cheated."

"I don't know anything about corals, Mrs. Vervain," interposed Mr. Ferris.

"Well, but you ought to see this set for the beauty of the color; they're really exquisite. I'm sure it will gratify your artistic taste."

Miss Vervain hesitated with a look of desire to obey, and of doubt whether to force the pleasure upon Mr. Ferris.