

## **The End Of The Path**

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Set far back in the hills that have thrown their wall of misty purple about the laughing blue of Lake Como, on a sheer cliff three thousand feet above the lake, stands a little weather-stained church. Beneath it lie the two villages of Cadenabbia and Menaggio; behind and up are rank on rank of shadowy mountains, sharply outlined against the sky,-the foothills leading back to the giant Alps.

The last tiny cream-colored house of the villages stands a full two miles this side of the tortuous path that winds up the face of the chrome-colored cliff. Once a year, in a creeping procession of black and white, the natives make a pilgrimage to the little church to pray for rain in the dry season. Otherwise it is rarely visited.

Blagden climbed slowly up the narrow path that stretched like a clean white ribbon from the little group of pastel-colored houses by the water. There was not a breath of wind, not a rustle in the gray-green olive trees that shimmered silver in the sunlight. Little lizards, sunning themselves on warm flat stones, watched him with brilliant eyes, and darted away to safety as he moved. The shadows of the cypress trees barred the white path like rungs of a ladder. And Blagden, drinking deep of the beauty of it all, climbed upward.

When he opened the low door of the little chapel the cold of the darkness within was as another barrier. He stepped inside, his footsteps echoing heavily through the shadows, though he walked on tiptoe. After the brilliant sunlight outside he could make out but little

of the interior at first. At the far end four candles were burning, and he made his way toward them across the worn floor.

In a cheap, tarnished frame of gilt, above the four flickering pencils of light, hung a picture of the Virgin. Blagden stared at it in amazement. It had evidently been painted by a master hand. Blagden was no artist; but the face told him that. It was drawn with wonderful appreciation of the woman's sweetness. Perhaps the eyes were what was most wonderful,--pitiful, trusting, a little sad perhaps.

The life-sized figure, draped in smoke-colored blue, blended softly with the dusky shadows, and the flickering candlelight lent a witchery to blurred outlines that half deceived him,--at moments the picture seemed alive. She was smiling a little wistful smile.

And the canvas over the heart of the Virgin was cut in a long, clean stroke--and opened in a disfiguring gash. Beneath it, on a little stand, lay a slim-bladed, vicious knife, covered with dust.

Blagden wonderingly stooped to pick it up--and a voice spoke out of the darkness behind him.

"I would not touch it, Signor," it said, and Blagden wheeled guiltily.

A man was standing in the shadow, almost at his elbow.

He was old, the oldest man Blagden had ever seen, and he wore the long brown gown of a monk. His face was like a withered leaf, lined and yellow, and his hair was silver white.

Only the small, saurian eyes held Blagden with their strange brilliance. The rest of his face was like a death mask.

"Why not?" said Blagden.

The monk stepped forward into the dim light, crossing himself as he passed the picture. He looked hesitatingly at the younger man before him, searching his face with his wonderfully piercing eyes. He seemed to find there what he was searching for, and when he spoke Blagden wondered at the gentleness of his voice.

"There is a story. Would the Signor care to hear?"

Blagden nodded, and the two moved back in the shadows a short distance to the front line of little low chairs. Before them, over the dancing light of the four candles, stood the mutilated picture of Mary, beneath it the dust-covered dagger.

And then the withered monk began speaking, and Blagden listened, looking up at the picture.

"It all happened a great many years ago," said the old man; "but I am old, so I remember.

"Rosa was the girl's name. She lived with her father and mother in a little house above Menaggio. And every day in the warm sunlight of the open fields she sang as she watched the goats for the old people, and her voice was like cool water laughing in the shadows of a little brook.

"She was always singing, little Rosa; for she was young, and the sun had never stopped shining for her. People used to call her beautiful.

"And there was Giovanni. Each morning he would pass her home where the yellow roses with the pink hearts grew so sweetly, and always she would blow him a kiss from the little window.

"Then Giovanni would toil with all the strength of his youth, and he too would sing while he toiled; for was it not all for her?"

"Often Rosa's goats would stray toward Giovanni's vineyard as dusk came, and they would drive them home together, always laughing, always singing, hand in hand, as the sun slipped golden over the top of the hills across the lake. Sometimes they would walk together in the afterglow, and Giovanni would weave a crown of the little flowers that grew about them, and his princess would wear it, laughing happily.

"They were like two children, Signor. There were nights spent together on the lake, when he told her of his dreams, while the gentlest of winds stirred her curls against his brown cheek, and the moon's wake stretched like a golden pathway from shore to shore.

"They were to be married when the grapes were picked, people used to whisper.

"And then one day a new force came into the girl's life. The Church, Signor!

"No one understands when or why this comes to a young girl, I think. She was torn with the idea that she should join her church, go into the little nunnery across the lake, and leave the sunshine.

"She did not want to go, and it was a strange yet a beautiful thing. This young, beautiful girl who seemed so much a part of the sunshine and the flowers was to close the door of the Church upon it all!

"You are thinking it was strange, Signor.

"Giovanni was frantic--you can understand.

"He had dreamed so happily of that which was to be, that now to have the cup snatched from his lips was torture. He took her little sun-kissed hands in his and begged on his knees with tears streaming down his cheeks. And Rosa wept also--but could not answer as he

begged. I think she loved the boy, Signor. Yet there is something stronger than the love of a boy and a girl.

"She asked for one more night in which to decide. She would come up here to this little church and pray for Mary to guide her. He kissed her cold lips and came away.

"He was a boy, and he never doubted but that she would choose his strong young arms.

"The girl came here. All night she knelt on the rough stone floor, praying and--weeping; for she loved him. And the Virgin above the four candles looked down with the great, wistful eyes you see--and bound the girl's soul faster and faster to her own.

"And when morning came she entered the white walls across the lake without seeing her lover again.

"Giovanni went mad, I think, when they told him. He screamed out his hate for the world and his God, and rushed up the little white path to where we are sitting now, Signor.

"Once here, he drew the dagger you see beneath the Virgin and stabbed with an oath on his lips. That is why I did not let you touch it."

Blagden nodded, and the old monk was silent for a moment before he went on.

"Giovanni disappeared for two days. When he came back his face was that of a madman still. He was met by a white funeral winding up the little path. You understand, Signor,--a virgin's funeral. Giovanni was hurrying blindly past when they stopped him.

"There was no reproach spoken for what he had done, no bitterness; only a kind of awe--and pity.

"Rosa had died on her knees in the nunnery at the exact time he stabbed yonder picture. And they told him months afterward that her face was strangely like that of the Virgin when they found her,-- beautiful and pleading and sad. There was no given cause for her death--there are things we cannot understand. She was praying for strength, the sisters said."

The monk ceased speaking, and for a long moment they sat silent, Blagden and the withered, white-haired man, staring mutely up at the beautiful face above them. It was Blagden who broke the silence.

"What do you think happened?" he asked slowly.

"I do not know," said the monk.

There was another pause, then Blagden spoke again.

"Anyway," he said, brushing his hand across his eyes, "she paid in part the debt Giovanni owed his God."

"Yes?" said the monk softly. "I wonder, Signor! For I am Giovanni."