

# THE TREASURE TOWER.

## A STORY OF MALTA.

VIRGINIA W. JOHNSON.

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CHAPTER I.—(Continued.)

The fragment of conversation, audible to the new comers, appeared to disturb the old man. He abandoned his hold on the stalwart arm which had served him on the path, and groped for the gate. His features twitched convulsively, and the look of furtive distrust deepened in his restless eyes.

"Rich!" he repeated, as if speaking to himself. "Why should Dolores wish for wealth? Ah! Poor child!" He stared at his companion abstractedly for a moment, and then pushed open the door in the wall.

Under ordinary circumstances the officer would have pursued his way, thus evading all expressions of gratitude on the part of the old man's family, but the laugh of the girl Dolores, floating on the sunny air, had bewitched his ear. The sailor on shore wished to see her. Accordingly, he followed his recently helpless charge, who appeared to be more disconcerted than gratified by the measure.

A girl, small, slender, and very young, stood beside a fountain in the middle of the space of garden, with the branches of an orange tree, laden with blossoms and fruit, brushing her shoulder.

A young man lingered opposite, gazing intently at her. The garden was full of flowers, untrained and luxuriant in growth, yet such life, bloom and sweetness as the spot could boast belonged to Dolores, glowing on her flimsy red and yellow gown, adjusted with a certain grace by means of a crimson sash confining the little waist, the rose fastened in her black hair above one tiny ear, and the softly rounded brown face, with two large and limpid eyes. At the moment she was a presence full of vivacity and gaiety.

And the young man, tall, olive-hued, grave in bearing and indolent of movement—who was he? Was he not a lover? Did not the masculine instinct of hostility, ever ready to flame in the breast of man under similar circumstances, swiftly supplement in that of Lieut. Curzon—rival?

The house differed from those mansions of modest dimensions often to be found in the locality, built of stone, with an occasional balcony, and even some curious effect of Barocco ornamentation in the heads of Nereids and Centaurs carved on the cornice. This habitation was an ancient square tower, resembling an old Norman keep the base of roughly-hewn stone, and filled in with rubble. Above the door was an armorial shield sculptured in stone, with the nearly effaced design of a crane bearing a blade of wheat in his beak. Like the cases of similar spots, a lack of repair and the ravages of years were clearly discernible in the structure, which had not attained any height, as if an original project of building had been checked before the completion of parapet. Who had designed the tower—Moor, Spaniard, Sicilian or French conqueror? Why had the task been abandoned? The girl Dolores lived here, as a rose blooms where grim sentinels should keep watch for an invading foe.

A dog, resembling a ball of white floss silk, and scarcely larger than the toy animals mounted on wheels of shop windows, announced the new arrivals with shrill barking, then prudently retreated behind his mistress, and peered forth from the folds of her dress with a miniature countenance full of canine wisdom and absurdly shaved in the semblance of a military mustache.

Dolores turned her head quickly, with a rapid change of expression to one of surprise, and sprang to the side of the old man.

"Grandpa! How pale you are! Has an accident happened?" she inquired in English, and speaking with affectionate concern.

Lieut. Curzon lifted his cap courteously, thereby revealing his golden curls, and apologized for the intrusion of his presence.

Dolores regarded him with her dark eyes dilating, and her color ebbing and deepening with rapid pulsations of emotion.

She reminded the sailor of a pomegranate blossom, such as he had seen ripening to perfection on the terraces of Grenada and Seville.

He accepted her faltering thanks with the more complacency that the opportunity was afforded him of studying the purity of her profile, the piquant curves of red lips and dimpled chin, the symmetry of slender hands and feet. He asked himself with awakening interest how this Spanish maiden happened to be dwelling with an English grandfather in the mixed population of Malta.

Dolores urged the stranger to accept a chair and be served with fruit and wine. Was the girl inspired by the innate instincts of gratitude and hospitality, or mere coquetry! At the same

time she bade Dr. Busatti, with a little inflection of authority in her tone, test her grandfather's pulse and ascertain if he were stronger once more.

The doctor, whose aquiline features had darkened ominously since the unexpected intrusion of the handsome officer, found means of speedy reprisal.

"The fainting fit was nothing," he said, touching the wrist of the old man lightly with his long and fallow fingers.

"Nothing at all!" echoed the patient, pettishly.

"You must show the young man yonder some of your treasures," added the Maltese, lowering his voice. "He doubtless has a sufficiently heavy purse to pay a just price for a Cinerary urn, a good specimen of Tharros glass, or—"

"Or a Greco-Phoenician medal," added the old man, eagerly.

His eyes began to glisten with a greedy light; he raised his head and looked at the visitor with an expression of kindling animation.

"Eh! I know!" he ejaculated suddenly, and shuffled into the house.

Dr. Busatti observed the effect of his words, while plucking a leaf from the orange tree.

The thin and acid vintage proffered by Hebe on this occasion may have been true nectar of the gods to the recipient.

"You have lived here for some time?" Lieut. Curzon ventured to inquire, sipping his wine and continuing to look at Dolores.

"Malta is my home," she replied, with one of those sudden and dazzling smiles peculiar to the Latin races, which revealed pearly teeth. "Our island is the flower of the world, Forio del Mondo."

"I begin to believe it," he said, meditatively.

"You have not always believed so?" she questioned archly.

"Not until this hour," was the decisive response.

The rosy glow deepened in the girl's cheek.

Dr. Busatti thrust the orange leaf between his thin lips, and flicked the surface of the fountain basin gently with a twig.

Lieut. Curzon was conscious that his heart throbbed more quickly beneath his uniform.

Dolores stood between these two young men, her brown face softening to a dreamy expression, the full lips losing their provoking curves, the gaze of the limpid eyes straying wistfully beyond her companions toward space, the infinite and vague. What were her thoughts?

Alas! At this moment the grandfather approached, prompted by the wily suggestion of Dr. Busatti, and placed on the table some specimens of the relics of the locality, a vase in which the Maltese kept the Fungo Maltese; several bronze and copper statuettes of idols; and a number of clay or jasper talismans, inscribed with sacred Phoenician characters on one surface.

These objects, much worn, cracked, and dilapidated, evidently inspired the possessor with an interest he would fain impart to the visitor.

Lieut. Curzon examined the relics.

The mobile countenance of Dolores clouded, and she frowned.

Lieut. Curzon examined the relics, and listened attentively to the garulous speech of the old man. The reveries of the previous moment were rudely dispelled.

Dolores caught up her little dog Florio, placed him on her shoulder, and whispered treasonable confidences to the woolly pate pressed closely against her cheek. Youthful indignation and mortification at the course pursued by her venerable relative lent an additional brilliancy to her beauty.

Doctor Busatti smiled faintly, and gazed into the stagnant depths of the fountain. Cupid is apt to take wing when prosaic barter intrudes on the scene as an unwelcome third presence. He had thus his revenge.

"Your collection is interesting, only I am awfully ignorant about such matters," said the officer, with easy good humor. "Perhaps you will kindly teach me something more of the Greeks and Phoenicians—another day."

He stole a glance at the granddaughter as he uttered these words.

The old man blinked. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

"Here is a rare medallion, if you wish to secure such a souvenir," he rejoined, curtly. "It is worth a great deal of money, but you may have it—humpf!—under the circumstances, for, say, a couple of sovereigns."

"Grandpapa!" implored Dolores, in an undertone.

The warm blood mounted to the girl's temples and she stamped one lit-

tle foot on the ground with an irrepresible movement of anger. Dr. Busatti became absorbingly interested in the orange tree, and touched a golden ball pendant among the glossy leaves without plucking the fruit.

Lieut. Curzon's lip curled involuntarily. He took the medal, which was bronze, representing Astarte on one side and three sprigs of grain on the reverse, emblematic of the fertility of the island of Malta.

"I should like to send this medallion to England," he asserted, after a pause, with assumed fervor of enthusiasm.

"And this gold Lamina!" added the grandfather, eagerly receiving the coin of payment in his shriveled palm. "I found it myself near the Grand Port."

"I hope the gentleman does not consider us too ungrateful," interposed Dolores, with a sorrowful and deprecating dignity, which was not unbecoming to her dimpled youth. "We do not forget the service he has done us in helping grandpapa home from the temple."

The old man looked at her with an irascible impatience, resenting frivolous interruption.

"Your grandpapa must be very clever," said the officer, thrusting the medal into his pocket, with every appearance of rejoicing in its possession, and rising to depart.

"Either the old beggar is poor, or he is fond of money," was his mental addition of decision.

"Would you accept Florio?" suggested the girl, holding the little bundle of canine life toward him, with a graceful gesture of deprecating submission.

Lieut. Curzon shook his head, caressed the tiny animal, without accepting the gift, and replied—

"Thanks. Florio would be sorry to exchange masters and knock about on sloopboard."

Forio covered back in the arms of Dolores, inexpressibly relieved by the decision.

"I should like a Maltese rose," supplemented the visitor, glancing at the bud in the girl's black tresses. "No flower is sweeter."

She detached the rose and gave it to him. Her face had cleared once more, and gratitude beamed on her stormy brow.

"Farewell!" said the blue eyes of the young Englishman.

"Farewell!" replied the dark eyes of Dolores, a flash of mockery gleaming in their liquid depths.

Lieut. Curzon had scarcely quitted the boundary limit of the garden when he was joined by Dr. Busatti.

"You are returning to Valletta?" he inquired, bowing courteously. "Permit me to show you a better path."

"Thanks," assented the officer in a somewhat dry tone.

The two young men walked on together. The Englishman, with an inherent sentiment of national superiority, found the Maltese tall, thin and slightly cadaverous, with a certain resemblance to plants which have grown up in the shade of a damp palace wall, or in a church cloister.

The bearing of Dr. Busatti was offensive, even ingratiating. His tenacious pride in his native island became speedily apparent in the desultory conversation which ensued. He spoke of historical sites with enthusiasm. He dwelt not less warmly on the delicious oranges and apricots ripened here to send all over Europe; the cauliflower, so superior in size and flavor to those of Italy, Holland, or the Island of Cyprus; the delicacy of the artichoke, pea, and bean, in perpetual supply for the need of man.

Lieut. Curzon, in rueful remembrance of tough beef and mutton, as well as of months of sirocco, lent an abstracted ear and monosyllabic assent.

Then the other adroitly mentioned the persons just quitted, the eccentric grandfather and the maiden Dolores. The old man, long a resident of Malta, was afflicted with a malady of the heart of which he was ignorant, and should therefore avoid all excitement, while he appeared to be consumed by a restless fever of agitation, wearing alike to mind and body. A similarity of tastes in study had led to an acquaintance between the father of Dr. Busatti and the Englishman, whose name was Jacob Deatry. Under the circumstances, it was to be expected that all means of selling the little objects (for the most part worthless) which he picked up should be eagerly embraced. Jacob Deatry was poor, and possibly a struggle for mere existence induced the restlessness of temperament characteristic of him.

Such was the volunteered explanation of Giovanni Battista Busatti.

The town gained, the young men separated, with mutual coolness of civility.

Dr. Busatti was convinced that the officer had placed the rose given to him by Dolores in his pocketbook, as he did not wear it in his button-hole.

"May San Gregorio confound all Englishmen!" muttered the Maltese as he pursued his way.

As for Lieut. Curzon, dislike of the native, whose thin lips, in smiling, revealed long teeth, unpleasantly discolored by the use of tobacco, led to the reflection—

"Dolores, poor girl, may be left alone in the world at any time. She would be quite thrown away on this fellow. The cad! I am sure he is in love with her."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

A Search for Treasure.

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After much expostulation the citizen was led out into the cool air.—Pittsburg Chronicle.

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