

THE JESUIT

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649390205

The Jesuit by Felicia Buttz Clark

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FELICIA BUTTZ CLARK

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BY
FELICIA BUTTZ CLARK



New York: EATON & MAINS
Cincinnati: JENNINGS & GRAHAM

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CHAPTER I

It was the time of the vintage in Rome. Grapes hung in full purple clusters in the vineyards around the villas on the Roman Campagna, where clouds chased each other to and fro, tossed by the light breezes of late September, and cast fitful shadows on the withered grass of the wide fields.

In a garden belonging to a monastery on one of the Seven Hills from which Rome surveyed the world long years ago, and proclaimed herself mistress, the terraced rows of grapevines were laden with luscious fruit. A Franciscan monk, in coarse, brown garb, was perched on the top of a ladder in the middle of one of the straight avenues, covered by trellises through which the afternoon sun sifted gaily. Leaning comfortably against the wooden railing, the monk cut off the clusters of fruit with his long scissors, and dropped them into a basket fastened to his ladder. This he did with the utmost care, so that he should not mar their beauty nor injure their symmetry. Being a lover of the lovely in nature or art, Brother Antonio detested imperfection in anything. He lifted an especially fine cluster and held it out into a broad band of sunlight, that he might thoroughly enjoy its rich purple color, the faint down upon the grapes, and the regular form of the fruit.

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"Fit for the gods!" he exclaimed aloud. "On this very spot, two thousand years ago, Pan would have plucked thee and eaten thee, while his pipe lay idle yonder against the gnarled trunk of some gray tree."

"You old heathen! Talking about the ancient gods of Rome here in the heart of modern civilization," interrupted a fresh, clear voice.

As calmly as if he had not been startled by this sudden interruption to his train of thought, Fra Antonio gently laid the bunch of grapes in the basket beside its fellows, and, parting the large leaves of the vine which so closely covered the trellises, looked down into the eager young face which was upturned toward him.

"What dost thou want?" he asked, gruffly, though his eyes twinkled. "Is not this thine hour in the infirmary?"

"As I am so soon to leave the Monastery, I am released from that duty. Brother Anselmo takes my place, at his own request. Throw me down a bunch of grapes, please, good Brother Antonio."

"'Good Brother Antonio!'" mocked the old monk. Apparently moved by the appeal, Fra Antonio selected the smallest of the clusters still left hanging on the vine and dropped it into the slender white hands extended to receive it.

"Um-m!" responded the voice below. "If you cannot do better for me than this, I shall help myself."

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So saying, he stretched his strongly built figure higher and broke off the fruit which he desired, remaining deaf to the remonstrances of the monk on the ladder, who had now thrown back his hood and stood plainly disclosed to view. His scant hair, around the shaven crown, was quite gray; his features were rugged, browned from exposure to the sunshine of the south. His eyes were brown and singularly lustrous, and his mouth was wide, thin-lipped, yet kindly.

"The baby of the Monastery!" he remarked, satirically.

"Precisely so. The grapes are excellent, thank you, Brother Antonio." He drew nearer to the ladder. "Do you know when Padre Veroni will return?"

The question was put in a half-whisper, and the old monk replied with the same caution, and with a total change of expression, as he leaned down from his perch.

"In a few days, I believe. Personally, I have not heard anything from him since he left Rome. Fra Antonio is too humble a being for him to remember. But this morning, as I was passing through the long corridor, I heard our Superior say, 'Yes, Padre Veroni is due at Naples today and will soon come to Rome.'"

"Today!"

"Precisely."

There was a leer of curiosity on Fra Antonio's