

A SPIRIT IN  
PRISON



"LOOK!" SHE CRIED SHRILLY. "LOOK, SIGNORINA! LOOK, SIGNORE!"  
*Frontispiece.*

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# A SPIRIT IN PRISON

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etc.

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## CHAPTER I

SOMEWHERE, not far off on the still sea that held the tiny islet in a warm embrace, a boy's voice was singing "Napoli Bella."

Vere heard the song as she sat in the sun with her face set towards Nisida and the distant peak of Ischia; and instinctively she shifted her position, and turned her head, looking towards the calm and untroubled water that stretched between her and Naples. For the voice that sang of the beautiful City was coming towards her from the beautiful City, hymning the siren it had left perhaps but two hours ago.

On his pedestal set upon rock San Francesco seemed to be attentive to the voice. He stood beyond the sheltered pool of the sea that divided the islet from the mainland, staring across at Vere as if he envied her; he who was rooted in Italy and deprived of her exquisite freedom. His beard hung down to his waist, his cross protruded over his left shoulder, and his robe of dusty greyish brown touched his feet, which had never wandered one step since he was made, and set there to keep watch over the fishermen who come to sleep under the lee of the island by night.

Now it was brilliant daylight. The sun shone vividly over the Bay of Naples, over the great and vital city, over Vesuvius, the long line of the land towards Sorrento, over Capri with its shadowy mountain, and Posilipo with its tree-guarded villas. And in the sharp radiance of May the careless voice of the fisher-boy sang the familiar song that Vere had always known and seldom heeded.

To-day, why she did not know, Vere listened to it attentively. Something in the sound of the voice caught her attention, roused within her a sense of sympathy.

Carelessness and happiness make a swift appeal to young hearts, and this voice was careless, and sounded very happy. There was a deliberate gruffness in it, a determination to be

manly, which proved the vocalist to be no man. Vere knew at once that a boy was singing, and she felt that she must see him.

She got up, went into the little garden at the edge of the cliff, and looked over the wall.

There was a boat moving slowly towards her, not very far away. In it were three figures, all stripped for diving, and wearing white cotton drawers. Two were sitting on the gunwale with their knees drawn up nearly to their chins. The third was standing, and with a languid, but strong and regular movement, was propelling the boat forward with big-bladed oars. This was the singer, and as the boat drew nearer Vere could see that he had the young, lithe form of a boy.

While she watched, leaning down from her eyrie, the boat and the song stopped, and the singer let go his oars and turned to the men behind him. The boat had reached a place near the rocks that was good ground for *frutti di mare*.

Vere had often seen the divers in the Bay of Naples at their curious toil. Yet it never ceased to interest her. She had a passion for the sea, and for all things connected with it. Now she leaned a little lower over the wall, with her eyes fixed on the boat and its occupants.

Upon the water she saw corks floating, and presently one of the men swung himself round and sat facing the sea, with his back to the boat and his bare legs dipping into the water. The boy had dropped down to the bottom of the craft. His hands were busy arranging clothes, or tackle, and his lusty voice again rang out to the glory of "Napoli, bella Napoli." There was something infectious in his happy-go-lucky light-heartedness. Vere smiled as she listened, but there was a wistfulness in her heart. At that moment a very common desire of young and vigorous girls assailed her—the desire to be a boy; not a boy born of rich parents, destined to the idle, aimless life of aristocratic young Neapolitans, but a brown, badly dressed, or scarcely dressed at all boy of the people.

She was often light-hearted, careless. But was she ever as light-hearted and careless as that singing boy? She supposed herself to be free. But was she, could she ever be at liberty as he was?

The man who had been dipping his feet in the sea rested one hand on the gunwale, let his body droop forward, dropped into the water, paddled for a moment, reached one of the floating corks, turned over head downwards, describing a circle which showed his chocolate-coloured back arched, kicked up his feet and disappeared. The second man lounged

lazily from the boat into the sea and imitated him. The boy sat still and went on singing. Vere felt disappointed. Was not he going to dive too? She wanted him to dive. If she were that boy she would go in, she felt sure of it, before the men. It must be lovely to sink down into the underworld of the sea, to rifle from the rocks their fruit, that grew thick as fruit on the trees. But the boy—he was lazy, good for nothing but singing. She was half ashamed of him. Whimsically, and laughing to herself at her own absurdity, she lifted her two hands, brown with the sun, to her lips, and cried with all her might:

"Va dentro, pigro! Va dentro!"

As her voice died away, the boy stopped singing, sprang into the sea, kicked up his feet and disappeared.

Vere was conscious of a thrill that was like a thrill of triumph.

"He obeyed me!" she thought.

A pleasant feeling of power came to her. From her eyrie on the rock she was directing these strange sea doings. She was ruling over the men of the sea.

The empty boat swayed softly on the water, but its three former occupants were all hidden by the sea. It seemed as if they would never come up again. Vere began to hold her breath as they were holding theirs. At last a dark head rose above the surface, then another. The two men paddled for a minute, drawing the air into their lungs. But the boy did not reappear.

As the seconds passed, Vere began to feel proud of him. He was doing that which she would have tried to do had she been a boy. He was rivalling the men.

Another second slipped away—and another. He was more than rivalling, he was beating the men.

They dived once more. She saw the sun gleam on their backs, which looked polished as they turned slowly over, almost like brown porpoises.

But the boy remained hidden beneath the veil of water.

Vere began to feel anxious. What if some accident had happened? What if he had been caught by the seaweed, or if his groping hand had been retained by some crevice of the rock? There was a pain at her heart. Her quick imagination was at work. It seemed to her as if she felt his agony, took part in his struggle to regain his freedom. She clenched her small hands and set her teeth. She held her breath, trying to feel exactly as he was feeling. And then suddenly she lifted her hands up to her face, covering her nostrils. What a horrible sensation it was, this suffocation, this pressing of the life out of the body, almost as one may push a person