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Giacinta Marescotti

R.H. Busk

There was a Prince Marescotti who had two daughters: Cecilia, who was gentle and quietly devout, and Giacinta, who was proud, handsome, and easily inflamed. Everyone who knew Cecilia said she would one day be a nun. Everyone who knew Giacinta said she would lead Roman society and woe betide whoever crossed her.

Their father knew them both rather better than anyone else did. One day he announced his arrangements: for Cecilia, a great lord arriving from abroad would make her his wife; for Giacinta—the convent.

Each was thrown into consternation by the wrong assignment. Cecilia, who loved quietness, begged her father not to make her head a great household. Giacinta made such a tremendous scene at the idea of burying her talents in a nun's cell that the servants could hear her three rooms away. But in those days, daughters did as they were told. Cecilia married, and proved herself an exemplary wife and mother, a discreet presence for good wherever she went.

Giacinta entered a convent near Viterbo—and brought her whole world with her. Her cell was furnished like the drawing room of a palace. Her personal maids attended her. The other sisters she barely spoke to, and treated, when she did, as though they were rather beneath her notice. It was, she considered, simply the appropriate way for a woman of her standing to conduct herself, even behind convent walls.

Years passed in this comfortable arrangement. Then one day the bishop came to inspect the house. As he passed the door of Giacinta's cell, he stopped and wrinkled his nose.

"What a smell!" he said.

Giacinta was outraged. Her cell was the finest, most fragrant room in the whole convent—the only one properly fit to enter. "What do you mean," she demanded, "'a smell'?"

"A smell of sin," replied the bishop—and moved on.

For once in her life, Giacinta had nothing to say in return.



That night she sat alone in her perfumed cell, and the bishop's two words would not leave her. She turned them over and over. She had always pursued the finest things—refinement, distinction, the very best of everything. And now it seemed there was a still finer path she had somehow overlooked. Those who could afford to despise distinction were, in some way she was only beginning to understand, grander than those who were enslaved to it. Those who aspired to something beyond earthly elegance were nobler than those who surrounded themselves with the most exquisite things of this world.

The change that followed was slow and entirely honest. Little by little, Giacinta's cell was transformed. The mirror and the cosmetics were put away. The easy couch gave way to a harder one. The crucifix and the penitential chain took the places formerly occupied by ornaments. She who had once been the scandal of the convent—the sister who lived like a countess—became, almost imperceptibly, the one the others turned to as a model of humility. And when disease struck the city of Viterbo some years later, it was she who organized relief for the sick and the newly destitute, founding two societies of charitable oblates that were still active more than a century after her death.

She was later declared a saint.

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