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The Munificence of Prince Borghese

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In Rome it was said that nobody who ever entered the service of the Borghese family chose to leave it. The family was known throughout the city for their generous treatment of those who worked for them, and a servant who had once lived under their roof found himself rather spoiled for any other household.

There was one man-servant, however, who gave the Prince an insolent answer and found himself dismissed. He was not a bad man at heart—only proud, which can amount to the same thing when it tips into folly. He went looking for work, but wherever he presented himself, the same question followed: "Where have you lived?" And when he answered, "In the house of Borghese," the door closed in his face.

"If you couldn't live with Borghese," they said, "I certainly have nothing better to offer you."

It was not one place, nor two—it was everywhere, for the Borghese name was that well known in Rome. Weeks became months. Every article of furniture went to the pawnbroker, and then every article of clothing. His wife and six children were nearly in rags, and hunger looked them all in the face without flinching. The man grew desperate in the way that only a decent man can grow desperate, which is the most frightening kind.

One night he went out with a knife and waited in a dark, lonely street. When Prince Borghese came along, the man stepped out and said: "Your purse."

The Prince, thinking there might be others lurking nearby, handed it over without a word. But the man took out only three small coins—three pauls—and handed the purse back. And even in the darkness, Borghese could see how thin and haggard the man looked.



"That is not a thief," the Prince said quietly to his servant. "That is some poor fellow who needed help. Follow him, and see what he does—but take care he doesn't see you."

In less than half an hour the servant returned. He had seen the man spend the three coins at a food stall. He had followed him home through dark streets to a room stripped bare of everything—no furniture, no proper clothing—where a woman and six children crouched together in the cold. He had heard the man place the food on the table and say, almost to himself: "Here is what will keep you alive for one more day. And tomorrow I die in sin, for I had to steal it."

The Prince called his steward.

"Go to that house tonight," he said. "Find out who the man is, and leave them what they need for the evening—but say nothing about who sent you."

The steward went, and discovered what the Prince had half expected: the haggard man with the knife was the very servant who had been dismissed for insolence, all those months ago.

He brought back that news the next morning. And the same morning, Prince Borghese clothed the whole family from head to foot—the man, his wife, all six children. He furnished their apartment again. He put each of the children into a proper school. And he settled on the parents ten scudi a month for as long as they both lived.

He would not take the man back into service. He had a rule: once dismissed, never returned. But a rule can be held without cruelty, and a pension for life is not a bad thing to receive from the hand of the man you once robbed at knifepoint.

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