

The Ring

By T. G. Jackson

Two Englishmen were sitting one autumn evening in the garden of the inn at Corneto. The sun had just set over the sea, and the short Italian twilight had begun. The plain down below was already in shadow, but hues of purple and violet still tinged the hills, and invested them with all the ineffable charm of a Tuscan landscape at eventide. The elder of the two men was an Oxford Don, a well-known antiquary and student of ethnology. The younger had been a Fellow of the same College, but had settled in London and taken to literary pursuits, in which he had already made his mark. They had spent the morning in the museum, examining with the help of the courteous curator the rich collection of Etruscan antiquities, and in the afternoon had visited the famous necropolis on the plateau behind the town, and penetrated into a score or more of the painted tombs. They finished the day by crossing the valley to the bare plateau on the opposite hill, where once stood the proud city of Tarquinii, which gave kings to Rome, when Rome itself was but a thing of yesterday, sprung from an upstart settlement of outlaws and robbers. As they sat and sipped their coffee in the gathering dusk, their minds were full of what they had seen; of the mystery of that strange people who came to Italy from nobody knows where, whose written language nobody had ever interpreted, whose gloomy religion coloured the whole ritual of the Romans, and of whom the best record is to be found in their graves.

“I can imagine nothing more delightful,” said the younger man at last, “than to penetrate into an untouched Etruscan tomb, another Regulini-Galassi discovery; where, though the body may have turned to dust—though, for the matter of that, glimpses have been seen of one before it fell to pieces—the ornaments that had fallen off show how the man lay amid the votive offerings to his gods, with his cherished possessions and trinkets all standing around him or hanging on the walls just as they had been left by his relatives three thousand years ago. But I fear there is no chance of such a piece of luck nowadays. The tombs everywhere seem either to have been rifled in bygone ages, or stripped in modern times, to enrich museums and collections.”

“Well, I don’t know,” said Dr. Morton, the elder man; “it may be, as you say, too late for discovery, and yet— But, at all events, I agree with you that nothing could be more interesting.”

“You were here some weeks before I joined you,” said Archie Bryant. “I think you came mainly to study the folk-lore of Tuscan peasantry. How have you been rewarded?”

“Fairly well. It is not easy to get below the surface with the Italian peasant when you try to fathom his beliefs. But it is curious how much has survived of something older than the Catholic faith he shows to his priest.”

“Indeed,” said Bryant. “Do you mean he has not forgotten Tinia, Fafluns, and Teramo, and the other Etruscan deities whom we have been looking at on vases, and in the tombs?”

“So far from having forgotten them,” said Morton, “many of the old peasants, though they are Catholics outwardly, have much more real faith in *la vecchia religione*, the outworn creed, as you would think it, of Etruscan mythology. There are still many women *streghe*, witches, who know and practise incantations, but of course all that is under the ban of the Church, and though luckily the Holy Office can no longer burn them, they are very timid and afraid of attracting notice. However, I have managed to get into the confidence of some of them, and have learned a good deal that would surprise you, as it certainly did me. It is even said that it is usual for a

family to have one of their number brought up in the old religion, in order that they may have friends in all quarters.”

Bryant laughed, and said it was like the way families in the time of the Wars of the Roses took care to have some of their relatives in each camp, so as to have a friend on either side in case of accidents.

“But to return to what you said just now,” said Morton, “about visiting an untouched Etruscan tomb, do you know that I have great hopes we may really manage it. One of the women into whose confidence I have got, and who has given me a host of spells and incantations which I hope some day to publish, is a *strega*, or witch, and my belief is that she knows of such a tomb. She says, however, it is dangerous to visit it, no doubt from some superstitious views about the old gods—Tinia, the god of thunder, and the rest. But we shall know more to-morrow, and I have no doubt we shall manage to open the tomb with the aid of a golden key.”

They laughed, and rose from their seats, and, after a turn or two in the alleys of the garden, went to bed.

The next morning was spent partly in the museum, and partly in the communal library. Bryant’s interest was excited by the subject of Etruscan mythology, which was new to him, and under Morton’s guidance he dipped into the ample stores of literature that bore upon it. As they walked away in the evening Bryant said:

“And you really mean to tell me that Tinia and other members of the old Etruscan Olympus still have their followers among the descendants of the people whose tombs we have visited. I can hardly believe it.”

“I don’t wonder you should be incredulous,” replied Morton. “They do not have it all to themselves, for the saints have their share of popular favour; but, besides the prayers that they offer to the saints, many of the peasants believe in the *folletti* or spirits of the past; charms and incantations are addressed to them, and legends are preserved of their potent aid. But in a few minutes I will convince you beyond all doubt. We are going to visit an acquaintance I have made—the woman of whom I told you last night; and there she is waiting for me. I doubt, by the way, whether she is actually one of the *streghe*, or witches, but she knows most of their lore.”

Bryant saw a peasant woman seated at her door, spinning with distaff and spindle as her ancestors had done before her from time immemorial. She rose at their approach, pushed the end of the distaff through her belt, and greeted them with the dignified courtesy that sits naturally on the Italian of the humblest degree, his heritage from an ancient civilisation. She seemed to Bryant a woman of sixty years, or perhaps rather younger, for women age more rapidly in Italy than with us, and she retained much of the classic beauty of her youth.

“Antonietta,” said Morton, “I have brought a compatriot, a lover of your country and people.”

“The Signore is welcome,” said Antonietta, with a smile and a slight inclination, and she invited them to enter her house. A young girl who was sitting there rose as they entered, whom Antonietta presented as her daughter Chiarina. She was a Tuscan beauty, with blue eyes and a rich complexion burned by the sun to a tint like the bloom on an apricot, set off by the bright-coloured handkerchief thrown over her head and fastened with silver pins.

“I have been telling my friend,” said Morton, “what you told me the other day of a tomb which—”

“Ah!” said Antonietta, interrupting him. “*Scusi, Signore*. These things must not be spoken of lightly,” and she looked furtively round and shut the door carefully. Returning to Morton’s side, she continued in a low voice:

“And is the Signore really bent on what he proposed? Is he not afraid of disturbing those we dare not speak of?”

“We should make no disturbance, Antonietta,” said he. “I only want to see a tomb of one of the old people just as it was finished and left by those who made it. I think you said you knew of one that had never been disturbed.”

“There is such a tomb, Signore, and Chiarina knows it as well as I. No one else does. But it is dangerous for strangers to visit it, as I have warned you, Signore.”

“But you and Chiarina go there safely,” said Morton.

“Yes, but that is different. There are reasons,” and she nodded her head sagely. “We are known. They would not harm us.”

“Is that why you wear a guard against evil spirits?” said Bryant, pointing to the silver cross that hung on her bosom. “They cannot touch a good Catholic, I suppose.”

“*Si, si, sicuro; sono buona Cattolica,*” replied Antonietta. “I am a good Catholic, though I do not believe all the priests tell me.” And then in a lower voice to Morton, “*You know* what I believe.”

“*La vecchia religione,* the old religion?” said Morton. She nodded two or three times, but said nothing.

“But now about this tomb,” said Morton, returning to the object of his visit.

“Signore, be advised. Think no more about it. There are those there who would not welcome you. It would not be wholesome for you to go. I speak for your good.”

“But I will be careful to give no offence,” said Morton. “I am bent on going, and trust to you to help me,” and as he spoke he slipped two gold pieces into her hand. Antonietta looked at them for a minute, and then said:

“Well, if the Signore is resolved, I can certainly guide him, but, no! I will not be paid for it,” and she laid the money down on the table and pushed it towards him. “Neither dare I take you myself. Chiarina knows the way, and she is not bound like me. She shall take you, but it must be by night and secretly, and there must be no more than you two.”

Morton faithfully promised to obey her conditions, and it was arranged that Chiarina should meet them after dark at the town gate which gave on to the necropolis.

They were punctual at the rendezvous, and found Chiarina waiting for them. She was dressed in black, and had a black shawl or hood over her head which concealed her features. She made a sign of recognition, and preceded them without a word.

It was a lovely starlit night, without a moon. Not a breath of air stirred the trees, and the silence was unbroken save by the silver tone of the bell in the Palazzo Comunale, tolling the hour of twenty-three. A few belated wanderers returning to the city passed them on the high road, but as their footsteps died away in the distance, the dead silence settled down again. When they had proceeded about a mile Chiarina turned off by a by-path, that led across the solitary waste. Around them lay the unseen city of the dead; the ground was honeycombed with tombs, where, amid pictured scenes of dancing and revelry, a mockery as it were of mortality, lay the dust of Lucomos and warriors, people of that mysterious race whose history and language are alike forgotten.

“And yet,” said Morton, “one may believe that they are the same people still; mixed, no doubt, with Goths and Lombards, but mainly derived from the old stock that worshipped Tinia here before the days of Romulus.”

“I like the idea,” said Bryant, “and, according to you, they still pay him a divided homage, though he has many rivals in Catholic hagiology. But I like to think that Chiarina’s ancestors followed Lars Porsena of Clusium to the siege of Rome—”

Their guide caught the mention of her name, and looked round with her finger on her lip to enjoin silence. They were traversing a thick wood of undergrowth by a path obscurely marked, which might easily be overlooked by one who was not familiar with the route, but Chiarina never faltered or hesitated on her way. They now descended slightly into a thicker grove; the trees met overhead, and it was with difficulty they saw their guide before them. At last she stopped and turned to her companions. Taking Morton by the hand and signing to Bryant to follow, she drew them through a thicket and then, striking a match, lighted one of the earthen lamps that the peasants still use, exactly like those found in the tombs of their ancestors and placed there three thousand years ago. They found themselves facing a ledge of rocks, about ten feet high, that had evidently been scarped by the band of man to a smooth face.

Here Chiarina turned to them, and in a whisper warned them to be silent.

“The Signori will be so good,” she said, “as not to speak while we are here. There are those whom we must not disturb, or they will be angry. But I will do what is wanted to appease them.”

They promised to do as she bid them, Bryant much interested in her seriousness and her unfeigned alarm, and amused at the idea of two prosaic Englishmen in the twentieth century assisting in a religious function of thirty centuries ago.

Pulling away a bundle of brushwood, Chiarina showed by the feeble light of her lamp a descent of steep steps leading to a doorway at the foot of the rock, and following her they entered an excavation imperfectly visible till their eyes had become more accustomed to the darkness. They then found themselves in a vaulted chamber, cut in the rock, with a square pier left in the middle to support the roof. On this pillar, as Chiarina held her lamp high above her head, they saw a huge figure of Typhon, with twisted serpents for legs, and outstretched wings, grasping a thunderbolt as if to hurl it at an intruder. The walls presented to their delighted eyes a series of paintings as perfect as when the artist had given them his last touches. On one side were rural scenes, harvest and vintage, with jocund peasants and oxen. On another were pictures of banquet and revelry, youths piping and maidens dancing. All spoke of the joy of life, of nature, and contentment. On another wall were scenes more appropriate to the place: there sat Hades black and gloomy, and beside him Persephone with snakes bound in her hair, while Charon, *con occhi di bra gia*, with his bark stood awaiting his freight of souls. All this, however, was like what the visitors had seen in other tombs during the preceding day, though nowhere so brilliantly preserved as here.

But what was their wonder to see around them the treasury of the dead, untouched by the hand of man since the last inmate of the tomb had been laid to rest. His golden collar and breastplate and other ornaments lay on a bier of bronze, though the body that wore them had melted away from within them into dust. On the wall hung his weapons, and around were arranged painted vases, such as form the priceless treasures of countless museums. Morton and Bryant had indeed their wish satisfied to the full.

As they stood in the death-like silence of the tomb, the mystery of the ages weighed upon their senses; the unknown occupant whose dust undisturbed no doubt lay still on the floor: the things he had used in life, that had hung idly beside his bier for countless centuries; the inscriptions on the walls intended to tell who and what he had been, which could be read but which no one could understand, all combined to make an indescribable impression on the imagination. Pictures of the gods of the outworn creed of ancient Etruria surrounded them—outworn, but no! What was

Chiarina doing? At the far end of the cell she had lighted a little flame on a bronze tripod, and while dropping on it pinches of incense, was muttering some charm or incantation of which only a few words reached them. The ancient deities, then, still had their worshippers.

As Bryant looked on in amazement, a strange sense of unreality clouded his mind: he was for the moment as it were transported back to ancient days, the present was confused with the past, and the intervening centuries vanished as a dream. Before he recovered himself something fell on his foot. He stooped to pick it up. It was a ring, and he half-unconsciously put it on his finger. As he rose he met the gaze of the Typhon painted on the central pillar. In the flickering light of the lamp it seemed instinct with life; its expression seemed changed, and it appeared to regard him with malevolence and deadly hate. Its gaze fascinated him, and he could not remove his eyes till the touch of Morton on his elbow recalled him to himself, and he saw that Chiarina had finished her divinations and was anxiously urging them to depart. As they mounted the steps that led to the upper world, a vivid flash of lightning was followed almost instantaneously by the crash of thunder. Chiarina clung to them in terror.

“Go, go, Signori,” cried she. “It is Tinia. He is angry. I must go back to appease him.” and she pushed them through the thicket into the pathway and then disappeared into the darkness. Left without a guide, they scrambled as best they could through the wood and into the open country, and with some trouble found the high road. A few lights of the town twinkled in the distance to direct them, and they hurried onward with a strange sense of insecurity. The heavens were black with clouds, the lightning was incessant, a deluge of rain caught them while they were still in the open, and they arrived at the inn drenched to the skin.

“A strange adventure,” muttered Morton as they parted for the night. “A trifle uncanny, eh? One might almost imagine there was after all something in their creed, were it not too absurd. But what is that on your finger?”

Bryant looked at his hand. He had forgotten the ring he picked up, and he now examined it with curiosity. It was a curious piece of Etruscan goldsmith’s work with some letters inscribed round the rim which he could not decipher.

“Oh! the ring,” said he. “It fell at my feet from somewhere or other. I suppose I brushed against one of the bronze tables and knocked it off, and I picked it up and slipped it on my linger, and then forgot all about it.”

“H’m! well, you know best,” said Morton, “but I think you would have done better to have left it there. However, good-night, I am longing to get dry again.”

* * *

Bryant was of an imaginative turn of mind, as befitted his literary vocation, and the adventure of the night made an impression on him that kept him for some time awake. The whole scene presented itself to his memory; the silent walk, the wood, the mysterious tomb with its contents, and above all the countenance of the Typhon with its scowl of concentrated hate. This last pursued him into dreamland, and caused him to pass a troubled night.

Next morning they thought it right to go and see whether their young guide had got safely back, and had not suffered from the storm. Chiarina, however, it appeared had fared better than they, for the storm ceased about the time they reached Corneto. But Antonietta was anxious and troubled. Something she said was wrong, and the storm showed displeasure on the part of the powers on whom they had intruded. As they were leaving Corneto that afternoon, Morton shook

her by the hand, and said, "You see, Antonietta, no harm but a wetting has come of our visit, which you thought so dangerous."

Antonietta said nothing, but when Bryant offered his hand her eye caught sight of the ring. Dropping his hand she made an exclamation of horror.

"Signore," she cried, "do you know what you have done, you have brought a curse upon you; restore the ring at once, or mischief will befall you."

"But we are leaving Corneto to-day," said Morton, "and have no time for another visit. And what harm can come of the ring."

"Besides," said Bryant, "on further looking at it, I think it is a very curious piece of work; and I mean to give it to the Museum when I get home."

"If you keep it," said Antonietta in great excitement, "perhaps you will not get home. And you will never give it to the Museum, for it will not leave you till you restore it to the place you took it from. The hand that took must be the hand to restore."

"But that is impossible," said they both. There was no time to go back to the tomb. And besides Bryant had taken a fancy to it, and looked forward to presenting the Museum with a genuine antique, of whose authenticity there could be no question. He even declined to give it to Antonietta who said she herself would take it back, and that would suffice. At last she threw up her hands in despair, and retreating into her cottage slammed the door behind her.

Early in the afternoon they parted; Morton for Rome, and Bryant for Viterbo, by way of Toscanella where he meant to stay a day or two to see the two fine churches, and the Etruscan tombs. His conveyance was a primitive car little better than a costermonger's cart, drawn by a weedy little horse, and driven by a hobbledehoy of a lad, the son of the proprietor. The road at first lay along the high plateau where the tombs were. In the country beyond there were no houses or villages to be seen, though the land was well cultivated, for the farmers and their men go in and out daily in carts from the town. The desolate country had been the scene of brigandage not long before, and the memory of Tiburzi and his nephew was not yet extinct. Giovanni amused Bryant with tales of this sordid hero, and of his escapes, and final capture, till their conversation was suddenly stopped by a lurch of the vehicle which threw them both into the ditch. On getting to their feet they found that beyond a few bruises and scratches, neither of them was hurt, but the cart had one wheel off, and the shaft broken. They were at least seven miles from Corneto, and more from Toscanella; there was no place nearer where help could be had, and they were in a bad case. At last they decided the only thing was to get back to Corneto. The ruined car they pulled into the ditch, and with cords from the harness secured Bryant's slender luggage on the back of the horse, and set off on foot to retrace their way to Corneto.

Their return caused no little surprise. It was too late to make a fresh start that day, and Bryant returned to his old quarters. As he was undressing his eye caught the ring. Well, thought he, "if Antonietta knew of this accident it would give her a fine argument for her theory that the ring would bring me bad luck."

The loss of a day made Toscanella and Viterbo out of the question, for Bryant had to hurry back to London to complete a magazine article which was wanted by a certain date. Next day therefore, he took the train to Pisa and Genoa on his way home to England. He was curiously unlucky. His luggage was delayed at the frontier, and he arrived in Paris with nothing but a hand bag. This kept him three days more, till the missing portmanteau arrived, and he reached London nearly a week later than he had intended. Other little accidents of less consequence happened, and combined to cause him some uneasiness. His nights, moreover, were disturbed by dreams. He seemed always to be drawn towards that silent tomb, and to be face to face with the scowling

monster on the pillar. A morbid feeling of terror slowly mastered him. He could not shake it off, and gradually the evil countenance began to intrude itself into his thoughts by day. It interrupted his work, and his writing which had been his greatest pleasure became a labour and a burden.

One day it occurred to him that he had not sent that Etruscan ring to the Museum, and he carefully packed it and sent it to the curator with a letter to say he had been fortunate enough to pick up a genuine piece of Etruscan goldsmith's work in Tuscany, and he would be glad if the Museum authorities would accept it for their collection. He took the packet to the post office himself, and on his return found a parcel on his table from his publisher. On opening it, he found it contained the manuscript of the article he had sent since his return from abroad, the one in fact for the sake of dispatching which, he had been so anxious to get home. A letter from the publisher accompanied it. It ran as follows:

“Dear Sir,—I regret to say I am obliged to return your article which in its present shape is quite unsuitable for our pages. The subject on which we invited you to write was one on which we had reason to believe you were an authority, but what you send us seems unequal and largely irrelevant. In particular we fail to understand the allusions in which it abounds to Etruscan mythology.

“I am, Sir,
“Your obedient servant,
“The Editor.”

“What on earth does this mean,” said Bryant to himself. “The man must have got hold of another paper, and confused it with mine.”

The paper, however, was his, and on glancing over it he was aghast. “Is it possible I wrote this balderdash,” thought he. “I must be going mad,” and he pressed his hand to his brow. But there was no mistake about it being his writing, full of literary faults and widely incoherent as it was. The colour rushed to his cheeks as he tore the shameful pages up and tossed them into the paper basket. Etruscan mythology, too, what on earth could have made him drag that into an article on the “History of the Colony of New Zealand.” Was he never to get out of his head the memory of that ill-omened visit? And as his mind reverted to the events of the night the scowling visage of the Typhon presented itself to his mental vision. “Is it possible,” he thought, “that that ring has some potent force for evil. Well, anyhow, I am rid of it now; and no further harm can come of it.”

He slept better that night, and next day decided to go for a long walk in the country in the hope of steadying his shaken nerves. He found an old college friend disposed for an outing, and they took the train to Clandon, and walked over Newlands Corner to St. Martha's chapel, down to Shamley Green, Wondersh, and Bramley, and so home by rail. They dined together at the Oxford and Cambridge Club, and then parted, Bryant to his chambers in the Temple. On his table, he found a packet by registered post. It contained a letter from the Director of the museum, and a small parcel in cotton wool of which he guessed too well the contents. The letter ran thus:

“Dear Sir,—We are much obliged to you for your kind offer of the enclosed ring, which we return with our thanks. It appears to us to be one of the clever copies made in Germany of Etruscan antiquities, by which many collectors have been taken in. We venture to express our hope that you were not too heavily mulcted in the purchase.

“Your obedient servant,
“—, Director.”

“Much they know about it,” said Bryant bitterly, as he unfolded the packet, and looked at his fatal possession with dismay. The window was open, and in a sudden rage he flung it far and wide into the court, and went to bed.

He felt better next morning, and after breakfast settled down to some literary work that had come in the day before. But it would not do. His mind was confused, and all power of clear expression seemed to have left him. As he was sitting in despair with his head on his hands there was a knock at the door, and Mrs. Filcher, the laundress, entered with something in her hand.

“Begging your pardon, Mr. Bryant,” she began, “I picked up this ’ere little ring in the court, and seeing as I have noticed it on your finger, I know’d it to be yourn, and so I have brought it up. Thank you, sir, good-morning, sir.

And the good woman sidled out a shilling the richer, but leaving Bryant in an agony of despair. “Can I never shake off this strange oppression?” thought he, as he gazed on the fatal circlet of gold that lay on the table before him. The words of Antonietta came back to his memory: “it will never leave you till you restore it to the place you took it from.” It seemed as if it were true. Twice he had tried in vain to get rid of it, and twice it had been restored; that night he would make sure of a riddance. He remained in his rooms till evening in a sort of mental torpor. He could neither eat nor drink. A creeping horror took possession of him; as he cast his eyes about in the dusk, innocent book-shelves seemed to resolve themselves into sepulchral forms, and in the midst appeared the scowling visage of the Typhon. At last when night fell he took the ring, descended his staircase, and found his way to the Embankment. The tide was up; with all his might he flung the ring into the river, and then sank down on one of the seats. Famished and exhausted he felt more dead than alive, and half fainting, and half asleep, he lost consciousness.

“Now then, wake up,” said a gruff voice in his ear, some hours later, while a heavy hand on his shoulder gave him a good shake, and he woke to find the morning breaking, and a burly policeman standing over him. He roused himself, and stood up. “Beg pardon, sir,” said the policeman, seeing he was a gentleman, “bit overcome, sir, was you? Hadn’t you better get to your home, sir, ’stead o’ lying here? Let me lend you a hand till you’ve steadied yourself.”

Bryant thanked the man who went off contented with half-a-crown, and then tottered back to his chambers, and threw himself on his bed in a fever. As he sank on the pillow he happened to raise his hand. On his finger was the fatal ring. Was it then only a dream that he had flung it into the river? He could not tell. His brain was in a whirl; one thought only beat upon his mind, “it will never leave you till you restore it to the place you took it from.” He rose from his bed resolved to act on the warning. Every attempt to part with it had failed; the Museum would not have it; and it came back mysteriously twice when he had hurled it away in desperation. Antonietta must be right. He would go to Corneto and find her, and she should guide him again to the fatal place which he now wished to heaven he had never seen.

In half an hour he had put up a small bag of his things, and was on his way to Cook’s to secure a sleeping-berth in the St. Gothard express. The excitement he had gone through, his fasting the day before, and his sleepless night began to tell on him. He scarcely noticed anything on the journey, and lived as in a dream. At the frontiers he roused himself to pass the customs, and then sank again into a sort of stupor. At Chiasso he felt a thrill at the thought he was again in Italy, and nearing his point. At Milan there was a delay of some hours which put him in a fever of impatience. Another night in the train, and then, thank Heaven, in the early morning he alighted at Corneto. He was so weak he could hardly stand, but he managed to reach the omnibus, in which he climbed the hill to the city which is some two miles or so from the station.

He was greeted as an old acquaintance by the *padrone* of the inn where he and Morton had stayed before, to whom he had telegraphed for a room. Breakfast and a bath restored him a little, and then he set off to find Antonietta. He found his way to her house without difficulty, and saw the familiar figure standing at the door and spinning with distaff and spindle as of old.

“Antonietta,” he cried, “I am here again, and want your help.”

The woman turned and faced him. It was not Antonietta.

Bryant stood amazed and confounded; the disappointment was too great.

“The Signore asked for Antonietta,” said she. “Perhaps the Signore knew Antonietta.”

“Yes, yes,” stammered he, “I knew her. Where is she? I am come from England expressly to see her.”

“Ah! Signore, you have not heard. *La povera Antonietta è morta*. She is dead.”

Bryant reeled as if he had been shot. His last hope was struck from under him. He staggered and would have fallen had not the *contadina* caught him, and put him into her seat.

“*Prego! S’accomodi?* the Signore seems ill. I will fetch a glass of water.”

Bryant recovered himself a little, and said:

“And her daughter, Chiarina, is she dead too?”

“Oh, no! la Chiarina is well, but she is not here. She is with her friends at Montefiascone. I can give you her address if you like.”

Bryant seized on this suggestion with the eagerness of a drowning man grasping at a floating spar, and after resting a little longer at the invitation of the good woman, he rose and managed to regain his hotel. He wrote at once to the address that had been given him, but he could not wait for the answer, and ill as he was he sallied forth to try and find that fatal tomb. All that afternoon he wandered like an unhappy spirit over the ground. He knew they had gone two miles or more from the town, and that they penetrated a wood. He searched every copse and thicket he could see, but in vain. He found nothing like the scene of their midnight adventure, and returned dispirited in the evening to his hotel. The next day he again sallied out and wandered to and fro in his quest, wearying himself in vain, for he could find nothing like the place Ire was looking for. A carabinieri saw him, and watched his devious movements with suspicion.

“The Signore seems to be seeking something,” said he.

“I am looking for a tomb,” said Bryant. “The Signore should apply to the *custode* who will guide him. All the tombs are closed, and visits are not permitted without the *custode*.”

Bryant murmured something in reply, and wandered on while the carabinieri kept the eye of suspicion upon him. In the evening he staggered home. No news had come from Chiarina, and in despair, utterly worn out, and broken down, he threw himself on his bed, and gave himself up for lost.

* * *

Dr. Morton was sitting in his rooms at Oxford after breakfast, smoking his morning pipe, and casting an eye occasionally at the notes of a lecture he was to give that morning on folk-lore. In writing it he had made use of his experiences in Tuscany during the late holiday. The thought of this brought Bryant to his recollection, and he drew from his pocket a letter received from him a few days back, which had puzzled him a good deal. It was very short, and consisted of a few broken sentences to which he could not attach much meaning. It said: “I am being bothered and pestered beyond all endurance in a way that drives me mad. I cannot part with that ring. You do not know what I am suffering. One thing is certain, I must obey Antonietta, and go back.”

“But why,” thought Morton, “does he bother himself about his ring? Why *should* he part with it, if he does not like to do so, and why does he let people pester him about it? Some dealer or other I expect who wants to buy it. But who’s there? Come in,” he said in reply to a knock at the door.

The new-comer was one of the Fellows who was a great friend of Bryant, and Morton after a few words on general matters asked him if he had heard anything of Bryant lately.

“Well, as you ask me,” said Williamson, “I have, and I am uneasy about him. You know he wrote a great deal for the *Piccadilly* magazine, and in fact was one of their principal contributors. Well, I met Henderson, the editor, at the Athenæum the other day, and he said to me, ‘What is the matter with your man, Bryant?’ ‘Nothing that I know of,’ said I. ‘Why do you ask?’ ‘I ask,’ said he, ‘because he sent us an article the other day for the *Piccadilly* that he could only have written if he were drunk or mad. It was rambling and illiterate, and of course, useless to us. But the curious thing was that it dragged in head and shoulders a lot about Etruscan tombs, and a fatal ring, that had nothing whatever to do with the subject.’”

“A ring you say,” said Morton. “Now that is curious, for I was just reading when you came in, a letter from him that I received a few days ago, about a ring. I remember he did pick up a ring in an old Etruscan tomb we visited together, and one of those half necromantic women of the place prophesied it would bring him no good. He talks also of going back there. I remember the inn where we stayed, and I have a mind to wire out to find out if he is there.”

Morton accordingly telegraphed to the *padrone* of the Stella d’Oro at Corneto to ask whether Signor Bryant was there, and he prepaid the answer. The answer did not come till the next day. It said:

“The Signore is here. Very ill. Prays you to come.”

Morton was much concerned, for he had a great regard for Bryant. Something was evidently wrong, and the ring seemed to be at the bottom of it. Morton remembered saying to Bryant that he would have done better to leave it behind. His researches in folk-lore had revealed to him the superstitious belief of the peasantry in the old Etruscan mythology, and it had sometimes occurred to him, though he always dismissed the idea as absurd, that they might have some ground for their faith. And now here was Bryant evidently in some mysterious way or other in trouble about the ring he had picked up. Well, at all events, Morton resolved to go at once in answer to his friend’s appeal.

In due time he arrived at the Stella d’Oro, and the *padrone* met him with a serious face. “I am glad you are come, Signore,” said he. “Your poor friend has been raving and calling for you. He keeps crying out about a ring and a tomb, and we cannot tell what he means. The doctor shakes his head, and will not say what he thinks.”

Morton was much concerned, and asked for particulars of his illness. The landlord said Signore Bryant had been very strange, very unlike what he was when Morton had been there with nm; that he spent his days wandering about the country as if in search of something, so that the police had noticed it, and had been inquiring about him, as if they suspected him of some mischief. But that at last he had completely worn himself out, and had now been lying a week in a raging fever and delirium.

“You had better come and see him, Signore, though I doubt he will not know you.”

They mounted the stair silently, and stole quietly into the darkened room.

“He is very still now,” said the *padrone*, as they approached the bed. “I hope he is sleeping; sleep will do him good.”

But as Morton bent over his friend and called him by his name he realised that poor Bryant's troubles were over. He was dead.

* * *

Morton was excessively shocked, and quite overcome. Bryant had been his most intimate and congenial friend; he had watched with interest his literary career, which promised great things, and he grieved to think a life that had, opened so well should be so prematurely cut short. He sat by his poor friend's bedside in sincere distress.

A message was brought to him a little later that a young woman, a *contadina*, was below, and asked for the English gentleman. Morton

descended, and found himself face to face with Chiarina, who remembered him at once. She explained that she had come in reply to a letter from the English Signore, and would have come sooner had it been possible, but she had been from home for some days.

"And now, Chiarina," said Morton, "you come too late to see him. The poor Signore is no more." Chiarina expressed her regret and sympathy, and asked what the poor Signore died of.

"He wore himself out," said Morton, "looking I imagine, for the tomb you showed us that night."

"Oh! Dio! Surely he did not venture to go there by himself," said Chiarina. "Is it that which has brought this illness on him?"

"No, I think not. He seems to have failed to find it. But he has been in trouble about a ring. You remember he picked one up in the tomb, and your mother told him it would bring him bad luck. What can you tell me about it?"

"Ah! Now I understand," said Chiarina. "Signore, that ring has killed him. Those you know of never forgive. You will remember my mother said 'the hand that took must be the hand to restore.' Till he restored it, he would have no peace, and now it has brought him to his death."

Now, thought Morton to himself, I understand his return to Corneto, Iris wild rambling about the place, and his anxiety to find Antonietta and Chiarina. He wanted, of course, to get them to guide him to the tomb and return the ring.

He stood a little while in thought, and then asking Chiarina to await his return, he went back to the chamber of death, and stood by the dead man's bedside. He took the cold hand in Iris; on the finger was the fatal ring.

"Humph!" said Morton, "There is no knowing what mischief it may do. Perhaps after all the ring had nothing to do with it, and poor Bryant's sufferings may have been imaginary so far as it was concerned. But anyhow, it seems to have plagued him in life, and I should be sorry to think it plagued him in death. On the whole, I had better draw it off from his finger, and give it to Chiarina to take it back to the place it came from."