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The Boy on the Spanish Steps

by Philip Dell-Creed

In the centre of Rome is the Piazza di Spagna. A flight of stone steps runs up from the middle of it and they are called the Spanish Steps. At the top stands the old church of Trinità dei Monti, the yellow walls of the Villa Medici just beyond and behind it the wooded seclusion of the Pincio. In the centre of the cobbled piazza is a small fountain shaped like a sinking boat. It is one of the most beautiful spots in Rome.

In the summer tourists come and sit on the steps. Artists go there to paint the time-worn stairway, the mellow buff and yellow buildings around it and the twin towers of the Trinità dei Monti at the top. Bright splashes of colour show where the flower-sellers are. Italians sit there, too, mostly students and the poor who have nothing else to do. It is easy to tell the tourists from the Italians because the tourists sit in the sun and the Italians in the shade watching them and whistling and calling after the pretty girls and trying to flirt with them. Some of the Italians are there every day as if it is their office. They come and go at fixed times. It is difficult to understand at first but after awhile it is clear they are there for a purpose. One of them was the boy.

He came every day but at different times. He usually sat in the same place unless someone else was there, and he always sat on the side with the tourists. He was short but well-built and he had fair hair and blue-grey eyes which was unusual because he said he came from Sicily. His face was small and well-shaped and his eyes clear and fine and his nose small and delicate like that of a girl. His mouth was soft and moist, yet there was nothing effeminate about him. He was a handsome boy and sometimes he could be described as beautiful. He said he was eighteen but he could have been older because he had an air of maturity about him. He was generally quiet but sometimes he sang. He had a very bad voice. He sang when he was happy. He was usually happiest at night when everyone came to the steps for a purpose.

One night he was sitting with an Englishman. It was quite late and the steps were deserted. Occasionally a couple would walk down the steps, stop at the bottom and look back at the quiet beauty of the place and then wander away. It was late in the year and most of the tourists had left. The boy and the Englishman sat and did not speak.

They had met there on the steps a week earlier and had become friends although the Englishman spoke little Italian and the boy knew nothing of English except «yes» and «thank you». He considered they were the only words he needed to know.

The Englishman was in his middle twenties, had red-brown hair and soft, dark eyes and usually looked sad. He was taller than the boy. He had been lonely in Rome until he met the boy on the steps. Now he was happy to be in his company although they could not speak much. With the boy at his side the loneliness had gone.

They had been to the cinema together that night and then to eat pizza and drink beer. After they had eaten the boy said he would go home with the Englishman for awhile.

As they walked through the cobbled streets the Englishman asked the boy where he would sleep that night. The boy had no home and sometimes he slept with a friend but often the friend had a visitor and he could not go there and then he slept in the Pincio. It was getting too cold for that now and the Englishman was sorry for the boy. The boy had no work and consequently no money. When he did have any money he spent it on food or on a room for the night when his friend had a visitor.

The Englishman glanced at the boy. «Accompany me», he said in bad Italian. «Can you accompany with me tonight?»

«Yes», said the boy and he smiled. He put his arm through that of his friend and then they held hands and walked quietly together.

«It's difficult if the padrone is awake», said the Englishman. «We must be careful. We had better wait until midnight and go then. In the morning you must wake early and go before he is awake. Alright?»

«Yes, that's alright. I can do it. I can go without a sound.»

Then they came to the Spanish Steps and the Englishman said. «We sit here until midnight», and the boy nodded.

After they had sat for awhile some young Italians came on motorcycles and stopped at the foot of the steps. They left their cycles and walked up the steps. When they saw the young Englishman and the boy they stopped. One of them spoke to the Englishman but the boy answered.

«He doesn't understand you. He is *inglese*. He doesn't know what *finocchio* means, or *frogio* or *checca*.

«Oh, *inglese*», said the Italians smiling. And they crowded closer.

«Is he your friend?», one of them asked.

«Yes, he is my friend. He is a good man. I love him very much. We go to the cinema together and to eat.»

«Does he give you money?»

«Sometimes a little. Not much. He hasn't much money. He is a teacher. But he buys me food and cigarettes, coffee and ice-cream and he is my friend and I do not charge him. He gave me this shirt too», the boy said proudly. It was a soft blue-grey wool shirt that matched his eyes. He looked beautiful when he wore it.

The young Italians grinned. «Do you sleep with him?», they asked.

«Sometimes», said the boy. «Tonight I shall. I have nowhere else to sleep.»

One of the Italians could speak a little English and he said to the Englishman. «The boy loves you. We love you too. You are beautiful. Do you want to sleep with us.»

«All?», said the Englishman with a laugh. Then he added. «I am sleeping with Enzo.»

«He is very nice», said one of the boys and he leant forward and ran his hand over the boy's chest. The Englishman knocked his hand down.

«Jealous!», they all cried. «See, the *inglese* is jealous.»

While they were talking a man with long blond hair came along with a ruck-sack on his back. He stood on the steps a little above the group and watched them. Then one of the group wandered over and spoke to him. He called the others, and they left the Englishman and the boy alone.

«Is it time?», asked the boy. He was tired.

«Not yet, Enzo. In a little. Are you cold?»

«A little.»

The Englishman put his arm around the boy and they sat close together.

«Hi!», cried one of the Italians who spoke a little English. «Here is a neighbour of yours. He is German. Come and meet him.»

The Englishman didn't like Germans very much so he remained seated, but he said. «Does he speak English?»

«I do», answered the German. And he walked down the few steps to where they were sitting. «Also I speak Italian and French.»

Then they all came over and began talking and the Italians told the German about the boy.

«There are many like him here», they said. «Many since the Americans and the tourists came to Rome. Is it like that in Germany?»

«A little but not so much», said the German, and he was looking at the boy.

«Are you like that?», they asked.

The German laughed. «No, of course I am not like that.»

Then he asked the boy, «what does the Englishman pay you?»

«Little. He has little money. But he is my friend. He buys me food and takes me to the cinema. He gave me this beautiful shirt.»

«Why don't you go to the Via Veneto», said the German. «You can get at least 3,000 lire a time there. You won't get much here. That's where you make the money. You need to make as much as you can in the season so you can save something for the winter.» The German was very methodical.

«I know», said the boy. «But I can't dress well enough for the Via Veneto and the police watch you if you aren't well dressed.»

The Italians were restless and prepared to go. The one who spoke a little English said to the Englishman, «will you come with me now?»

«I am with my friend.»

«Tomorrow? Can I see you tomorrow?»

«I may see you if you come here. I come every evening.»

«I like you», said the young Italian. «I like you very much.»

«Thank you», said the Englishman, «but you see I have my friend.»

And he put his arm around the boy.

«Don't you like me?», asked the other.

«Yes, of course I like you. I like you all.»

«But you love your friend?»

«Yes, I love my friend.»

«Alright, we go now», he said. All the Italians stood up and shook hands with the Englishman, the German and the boy.

«Goodnight then. Have a good night with your friend. Perhaps I will see you tomorrow.» And they all ran off down the steps, jumped on their motorcycles in pairs and rode away.

The German was still talking to the boy.

«Where will you sleep to night?», he asked.

«I... I don't know,» said the boy. He glanced quickly at the Englishman. «I have nowhere to sleep.»

«Where do you usually sleep?»

The boy shrugged. «It depends. But mostly in the Galoppatoio.»

«The what?»

«Galoppatoio. You know, up there in the Pincio», he pointed to the top of the steps. «Where they ride the horses.»

«Oh, yes. Of course.»

«In the centre is a field and a few trees. Many of us sleep there. It's alright in the summer. It's cool and you can smell the pines. But now...» He shivered.

«Well, tonight you can sleep with me. I, too, sleep in the open. I am camping. You can share my blankets with me.»

The boy did not answer. He glanced at the Englishman again. After a little while the German said again:

«You can share my blanket with me. It is better than sleeping alone.»

The Englishman understood but he could not say anything in Italian. He was too angry and could not think of the words. He glanced at his watch. It was close on midnight.

«We go», he said to the boy. The boy nodded, and they got up and then the boy said to the German, quite calmly as if it was of no importance:

«Wait for me for half-an-hour. Will you? Wait for half-an-hour.»

«I'll wait», said the German.

They went off down the steps together and the German sat and watched the boy. He watched the way he walked and he said in German, «My God, what beauty!»

The Englishman was angry and at the bottom of the steps he turned to the boy and spoke rapidly in bad Italian.

«Why do you speak to these people about yourself? Why you tell your business? They are strangers and you talk like they were old friends. You discuss yourself like something to be bought in shops. If you want all the public to know why do you not put a notice on yourself? Tell everyone what you are and how much you charge and for how long.»

«Be quiet», said the boy. Then he said, «The German wants me.»

The Englishman didn't answer. He clenched his fists and his mouth trembled. He looked at the boy. His small face looked very innocent in the lamplight, and he smiled sweetly. He took the hand of the Englishman and squeezed it tightly.

«Don't worry», he said softly. «I shall go with you.»

Then they came to the house where the Englishman had a room, and they climbed the stone steps to the third floor. When they came to the door of the flat the Englishman said:

«Be quiet. Be very quiet.»

He put the key in the lock and turned it. It made a loud click and the Englishman cursed. The hall inside was dark. A light showed under the door of the *padrone's* room. The boy tip-toed down the dark hall after the Englishman and they entered the room quickly. When the door was closed the Englishman put on the light.

«There!», he said with relief.

The boy sat on the chair by the bed and began to take off his shoes. Then he removed his shirt. He shivered a little. The room was cold. His

body was white and sturdy. The Englishman looked at him, and he went across and closed the window. Then he whispered to the boy:

«I must go to the toilet.»

«Wait a moment,» said the boy. «I want a cigarette.»

He lit a cigarette from the packet the Englishman had given him. The sound of the match was surprisingly loud in the quiet room.

«Alright,» he said and the Englishman went silently out of the room.

When he returned the room smelled warm with tobacco smoke. The boy had taken off his socks and was wriggling his bare toes in the soft carpet. He looked up at the Englishman and his eyes were very blue but they had a distant look. Suddenly he held out his hand.

«How much?», he asked.

«How much what?»

«How much to sleep with you?»

«Nothing,» said the Englishman. «I gave you dinner and cinema. I bought you cigarettes and ice-cream. It cost me 600 lire. You agreed to come here for that.»

«Yes, but not to sleep.»

«Yoy have nowhere to sleep. It will cost you 350 lire in a cheap hotel.» His voice trembled as he spoke. He had been very happy and now he suddenly felt alone again.

«No», said the boy. «I want 2,000 lire.»

«Impossible. You know I have not much money now.»

«You changed a 10,000 lire note tonight. You have a lot of money.»

It had been a mistake to let the boy see that. He could not understand that it was money for 10 days' food. To the boy who lived from day to day it was a lot of money. It would make all the difference to him if he had 10,000 lire. He would be quite rich and buy new clothes and go on the Via Veneto and make more money from the wealthy tourists there.

«I can give you a couple of hundred, that's all.»

The boy shrugged and picked up his socks. «I will go», he said.

The Englishman caught his hand. «No! No, please don't go.»

«Then give me 1,000 lire.»

«It is impossible. I spent 600 lire on you tonight. What do I get for that — nothing?»

«I will come some other time for an hour or two.»

«But where will you sleep?»

The boy looked at the Englishman. «With the German», he said. «He is waiting for me. He will give me 2,000 lire.»

The Englishman trembled. «Enzio», he said. «I thought you my friend. I love you, Enzio. Tay with me tonight. Don't go away like this.»

The boy put on his shoes and began to lace them. His hair fell across his forehead. It looked golden in the lamplight.

«1,000 lire for you», he said. «The German would give me more but for you, 1,000 lire.»

«I can't.»

The boy stood up and looked at the man's watch. «I must go», he said. «It is twenty five minutes after midnight.»

He put on his shirt — the one the man had given him. He moved to the door. The Englishman caught his arm but the boy pushed him

away. His blue eyes were very hard and cold.

«1,000 lire», he said, holding out his hand.

The man shook his head. The boy turned to the door. «Unlock it».

«No», said the Englishman.

The boy spoke loudly. «Unlock the door or I shall leave by force.»

The man winced and quickly opened the door. He was afraid the *padrone* would hear.

The boy tip-toed back down the dark hall. He was very quiet. When the Englishman opened the front door he slipped through and started down the stairs without a word. The man followed, pulling the door shut behind him.

«Enzio! Please — a moment.»

At the turn of the stairs the boy stopped and looked back. He held out his hand again, like a beggar.

«1,000 lire — not less,» he said in a whisper.

The Englishman stared at the boy as if he could hardly believe what had happened. Then he slowly shook his head and the boy shrugged and disappeared around the bend in the stairs.

The man went back to his room and sat on the bed. He was trembling.

«Money», he said. «Always bloody money.»

He could still smell the cigarette the boy had smoked and the stub of it lay cold in the silver ashtray on the little table by the bed. As the man looked at it he noticed the lid of the small trinket box next to it was open and he bent forward to close it. Then it occurred to him that he had left the boy alone in the room and he did seem to go off suddenly as if there was some definite purpose. The man quickly looked in the box to see if anything was missing. He tipped the contents out on the bed — the studs, the cufflinks, buttons and tie-clips and then he knew that the ring had gone. It was an old silver ring fashioned like the head of the sphinx. He left the things lying scattered on the bed and ran from the room, out of the house and down the stairs that lead to the street.

There was no sign of the boy in the street but he ran in the direction of the piazza. He was certain he would go back there again for the German.

«The little swine», he thought as he ran. «The rotten little swine.»

He passed a policeman who was trying the doors of the locked shops to see they were secure and the policeman watched the young man and wondered why he was running down the street at this late hour.

When he was near the piazza the man saw the boy. He was walking slowly and the man caught him as he was beginning to cross the piazza towards the steps.

«My ring», said the Englishman. He was too excited to try and think of the words in Italian. «Give me my ring.»

«Come?», said the boy. «Non capito.»

«You capito alright», said the man and then he made signs and the boy stood pretending he didn't know about it and the man saw him put his hands behind his back. He knew he had the ring and was trying to take it off. The man caught his arm and jerked it forward. The boy had the ring on his little finger. He muttered something inaudible and began to take it off. It was too small for him and he could not get it off. It

wouldn't go over his finger-joint. He wet his finger and pulled and then suddenly the ring came away and it was broken. The fine old silver had snapped and a piece fell to the ground and was lost.

«There», said the boy angrily. «There, take your ring. Now it's broken. Here take your broken ring.» And he swore at the Englishman.

«Why, Enzo?», said the man as he took the ring. «Why did you rob me? Am I not your friend? Was I not good to you? Why, Enzo, tell me why?»

His voice was pleading and tears glistened in his eyes. The boy looked at the man coldly and started to walk away. The Englishman followed him calling his name. They crossed the deserted piazza, past the little fountain like a sinking ship and the boy started to climb the steps.

«Please, Enzo, don't go. Come back with me.»

Just beyond the empty kiosks of the flower-sellers the boy turned.

«1,000 lire», he said. «Just 1,000 lire.»

«Enzo, please.....»

The boy turned away and looked for the German. There was no one there.

«See», the Englishman cried triumphantly. «He isn't here.»

The boy looked to the top of the steps, and below the Trinità dei Monti a few faint white blurred faces showed in the lamplight. The boy started to run up the steps. The German may be up there waiting.

The Englishman called after the boy: «Enzo, don't go.»

The boy stopped and faced him and came down a few steps towards him. His face was white, his eyes blazed with anger. He raised his arm as if to strike the Englishman.

«What do you want of me?», he cried. «This is my business. Somehow I must live. Tell me, what do you want?»

The man stared at the boy, shocked, unbelieving. This was not Enzo, his friend. This was a stranger — a boy on the steps he did not know. He couldn't think of anything to say. Then finally he whispered:

«Nothing.»

The boy swore at him and ran up the steps two at a time. The Englishman stood and watched him go up and up the wide flight of steps and then behind the first balustrade and across the terrace and then up the last flight that curved around and up towards the Trinità dei Monti. Before he reached the top his figure has disappeared in the shadows and the man couldn't see him anymore.

The Spanish Steps were deserted. A chill wind blew down from the Pincio. It smelt of woodsmoke and damp leaves. The steps looked cold and bare. The man shivered and turned away. He walked past the empty kiosks of the flowersellers, and down the few steps that led to the piazza. He crossed the empty piazza and past the dark, closed shops. The policeman who had seen him running earlier was standing in one of the doorways. He saw the young man walk past and he frowned. He stepped out onto the cobbled street and watched him for a few moments, then he shrugged and shook his head. The policeman thought it very strange to see a young man crying in the street.

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