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# *Loveless Love*



# THE WAVE



GIULIO ACCURZI was what is known in society as a fine young man: thirty-three, well-to-do, smartly dressed, not unintelligent. He had moreover, in the opinion of his friends, one speciality: he was always falling in love with his tenants.

His house had two floors. He let the lower floor, which included a terrace overlooking a pleasant little garden. This garden could only be entered by means of a narrow staircase which ran from inside the upper floor, where he lived with his paralysed mother, who had been confined to a chair for some years.

From time to time his friends failed to see anything of him, and then they could be quite certain that Giulio Accurzi had started making himself amiable to the *filia hospitalis* on the floor below.

For him these flirtations were one of the comforts of his property. The tenant, the father, was gratified to note the charming manners and the delicate attentions of the owner of the house, while the daughter could never tell for sure whether these attentions were really a consequence of the charming manners, as her father argued, or of love, as at times it seemed she had been led to believe.

Giulio Accurzi showed considerable talent in this.

During the first months of the lease he would flirt from his balcony down onto the terrace. That was the first stage, known as “loving below”. Then he went on to the second stage. This was “loving above”, that is from the garden to the terrace, and it normally happened at the start of spring. This was when he would send the old gardener again and again to the lower floor with presents of bunches of flowers – violets, geraniums, lilies... Sometimes he went so far as to allow himself to cast up from the garden, with the utmost courtesy, some magnificent *alba plena* into the two rosy hands held out in expectation above.



And the moon was a witness from on high to these scenes, as Giulio Accurzi playfully bent down to caress the girl's shadow, which was projected from the terrace onto the golden sand of the garden. The girl, from the marble balustrade, would laugh softly and shake her head, or else she would suddenly draw back so that her shadow might elude the innocent caress. But that was as far as it must go. And if it went any further, there was a ready way out. He would tell the father that he was sorry but "with the new year he had to raise the rent". His contracts with his tenants were always for one year.

Before his mother had become so gravely ill, Giulio Accurzi had never thought seriously about taking a wife.

"And yet you would be an ideal husband!" his friends used to say to him. "You are someone who likes ease and comfort in love. Just turn your two floors into one floor!"

## 2

WHEN SIGNORA SARNI came with her daughter to live on the lower floor, Agata had been engaged for three years to Mario Corvaja, who was at that time in Germany completing his studies in philology. The engagement had had its ups and downs, and it seemed as though the date for the wedding was being obscured once more by clouds of uncertainty. It was true that Mario Corvaja would soon be returning from Germany, but who knows how long he would have to wait for a vacancy for a chair of philology at the university.

Giulio Accurzi knew nothing of all this, and so he could think of no reason for Signorina Sarni's mournful countenance. It was only rarely that he saw her on the terrace, in the evening – wan, with a pale rose-pink shawl over her shoulders and a black dress.

From the balcony he observed every little act of hers. She liked to stop and look at two canaries in a cage hanging from a pole on the terrace – two little creatures that sang happily all the day – or she would pause to study the vases of flowers

lined up on the marble balustrade, of which her mother, Donna Amalia Sarni, took extraordinary care. The girl gathered two or three violets, then she withdrew, as though possessed by other thoughts, without casting a glance at the garden below or raising her eyes, even momentarily, to the balcony where Giulio Accurzi, coughing slightly from time to time, or deliberately moving his chair about, was consumed with rage and irritation at her indifference.

These poor violets, sealed up in a letter and squashed from being stamped so many times in the post, had to cover much ground, and go far, far away – as far as Heidelberg on the Rhine, up there in the north... What did Giulio Accurzi know about that?

He was enchanted by the gentle air of peace which reigned on the lower floor of that house, full of fresh flowers and light, an almost conventual peace and silence. Donna Amalia, tall and grand, with a face that was calm and still beautiful despite her sixty years, with a steady tread, and never discomposed, looked after the affairs of the house; then, towards evening, she attended to the flowers, just as in the morning she had attended to her religious duties, for she was very devout.

The daughter led a different life. She got up late, played the piano for a while, more as a distraction than as a pleasure; then, after breakfast, she would read or embroider; in the evening, she either went out for a while with her mother or stayed at home and read or played the piano: she never went to church or dealt with household matters, ever. Nevertheless, there was between the mother and the daughter perfect harmony, a silent understanding, always.

Every now and then the silence of the house was broken by the arrival of Signora Amalia's other daughter, married to Cesare Corvaja, Mario's brother. She always brought along her two toddlers, and their auntie was delighted to see them.

Only then, without knowing why, did Giulio Accurzi, shut up all day in the house, feel his heart fill with joy: from his balcony he saw the children and Signorina Sarni burst out onto the

terrace; he sensed their smiles, and he heard the tender sound of her voice; he saw her bend down towards her nephew and niece, who coaxed her, flinging their arms around her neck; and as he watched all this, he smiled happily, blissfully.

“Where’s Daddy, Rorò?”

“A long way away... A long way away...” replied Rorò, closing his eyes and dragging the words out, with his little face thrust forward.

Cesare Corvaja was the first engineer on steamers belonging to the General Italian Shipping Company, and he went on voyages to America.

“What will Daddy bring you, Mimì, when he comes back?”

“Lots of things...” replied Mimì placidly.

Meanwhile, inside the house, the mother and her elder daughter were talking about Agata, about how she had changed after the promise of marriage, and particularly after the deadly illness from which she had only with difficulty recovered, thanks to the care she had received from Mario Corvaja’s parents.

“Obstinate!” sighed her mother. “She won’t listen to reason. She doesn’t want to understand... And yet she realizes that he doesn’t love her any more! Some nights I can hear her weeping quietly... It’s breaking my heart, believe me, but I don’t know what to say to her. I’m always afraid that horrible illness will return...”

“What madness! How unfortunate!” exclaimed the sister for her part: she had been against the idea of the marriage right from the beginning.

What could Giulio Accurzi know of all this, intent as he was on enjoying from his balcony the caresses Agata gave to the children and the children’s coaxing of their auntie?

### 3

**T**OWARDS THE END OF SUMMER Agata fell seriously ill. The slightest thing tired her out. Her hidden suffering, her hidden melancholy had gradually turned into boredom.

She stayed in bed longer, awake, with a vacant mind; she had completely lost her appetite, and no longer listened to any of the words of encouragement or comfort, or any of the complaints of her mother and sister.

Giulio Accurzi, alarmed one day by the grave news brought to him by his old gardener, went so far as to question the doctor on his way out. The latter's reply disturbed him in two ways: he gathered on that occasion only that Signorina Sarni was engaged to be married, and that her fiancé was expected to arrive within days, now that her illness had taken such a bad turn.

"Ah! So she's engaged!"

From that day he was no longer at peace. He made every effort to convince himself that it was really foolish to take so much interest "in the health of one of his tenants". He forced himself to go out, but it took him two hours to get dressed, because every now and then he had to go onto the balcony to see if anyone had appeared on the terrace below. Why? He did not himself know why! Certainly not to ask after her: that would not have seemed to him the right thing to do. Perhaps in order to discover the seriousness of the illness from the expression on someone's face. And every time, to put an end to his expectations, which even he saw were childish, he took refuge in another childish action: he started to count to a hundred.

"If in the mean time no one appears, I will go away."

And he began slowly:

"One... two... three..."

Then, as he counted, his mind would wander, and only his lips went on murmuring the numbers. Sometimes, with his hat on his head, ready to go out, he managed to count to thirty; in the end he got tired and slipped through the door. He had to force himself not to pause to eavesdrop on the ground-floor landing. Once outside, he avoided his friends, and could not distract himself. He walked round a little, without any object, and was very bored. And in the end, as though struck by a sudden thought, he hurriedly retraced his steps.

"Perhaps by now he will have arrived!"

He waited anxiously for Agata's fiancé. He was consumed by the longing to see him, to make his acquaintance, without really knowing the reason for his curiosity.

His mother, although by now she no longer took any interest in anything, being tired of everything, even of waiting and calling for death, had become aware of the change that had come over her son, and one morning she said:

"Giulio, don't act like an idiot!"

"What do you mean 'an idiot', Mama?" replied Giulio Accurzi, in whom by now his mother's way of speaking, the tone of her voice and the movement of her head inspired more irritation than sympathy.

And yet he had perhaps done something silly. Yes, he realized that himself and was disturbed by it. He had stopped Agata's sister, Erminia, on the staircase, and from the way in which he had spoken to her he was afraid that she might have suspected that he was so foolish as to entertain ideas in relation to her sister, although she was engaged to another.

"Who knows what she may have thought of me! Stupid..."

Deep down he did not want to admit to himself that he had fallen in love with Signorina Sarni.

"There has never been anything between her and me..."

And then he did his best to think of Agata as of anyone for whom he might feel some sympathy, knowing that her health was in a bad state.

"Poor young woman!" he said to himself. "Such a nice person!... And that imbecile who doesn't come back! If he delays much longer, he will not see her..."

## 4

THE COMINGS AND GOINGS on the stairs became more and more frequent. From the upper landing Giulio, leaning over the banisters, observed who came and went. Other doctors had rushed to the sickbed, and two Sisters of Charity, and then a tall

old man with a long white beard, Don Giacomo Corvaja, who had come in from the country expressly. Giulio gathered that the acute stage of the illness had passed, but that nevertheless the sick woman, overcome by extreme weakness, was subject to hysterical frenzies which drove her almost mad...

"They've cut off her hair and spoiled it!... You can hardly recognize her any more..." the serving maid had told him. "She keeps asking for her fiancé... It looks as though he doesn't want to come back any more... If you only saw how things are down below..."

"He doesn't want to come back any more? What? He would leave her to die like this?" wondered Giulio, eating his heart out.

From time to time the door on the floor below opened noisily, and someone went out, rushing down the stairs. Then Giulio would rouse suddenly from his daydreams and grow pale...

"What can have happened?... Is she dying?..."

Then there are other people on the landing down there – Donna Amalia, Erminia, with drawn faces... Who are they expecting? A carriage has stopped in front of the main entrance. Look, it's him, Mario Corvaja, the fiancé! He is with the tall old man with the long white beard, his father. At long last he has come back!

"Well, how is she?" asked Mario anxiously of her mother. He is pale, and his brows are knitted. Then they all go back in, and the door is shut again.

Now where had Giulio heard that voice before? Yes, he knew Mario Corvaja by sight. Was he then Agata's fiancé? And what was going on down there, at that moment, in the sick woman's bedroom? Giulio tried hard to imagine the scene of their meeting. After an hour or so he saw Mario Corvaja leaving with his father. Giulio's eyes followed him from the balcony along the sunlit road. Where was he taking himself off to? Why was he gesticulating so animatedly as he spoke to his father? And he had left the sick woman so soon? In what sort of state was she?

Towards evening Giulio saw Don Giacomo Corvaja returning without his son. He learnt later that Mario had set off again

for Rome on the very day of his arrival. And so his return had been like a ghostly apparition. The next day Agata left for the country with her mother and Don Giacomo Corvaja.

Giulio Accurzi guessed that the marriage plans of Mario Corvaja and Agata Sarni had come to nothing. What had happened? She had fallen sick because of him, and he had abandoned her! But why? What more could the idiot want? How could he fail to love a creature who to him, Giulio Accurzi, seemed so worthy of love? And she perhaps was lamenting his loss.

As these thoughts ran through his head, he felt a sort of jealousy, a muffled regret, almost rancour... Could he himself do nothing about this? It was almost as though he would have liked to intervene in the matter – he felt so irritated by the actions of that idiot... Intervene! But how?

“And they have carried her off to his country house! Idiots! And why should they do that? How can they get her mind off it over there?” So he thought in the midst of his agitation. “It would be much better if she were to die there...”

## 5

**I**T SO HAPPENED HOWEVER, about a month later, that he found himself descending the stairs when the carriage, on its return from the Corvajas' place in the country, stopped in front of the main entrance of his house. Giulio Accurzi could not refrain from starting and exclaiming his surprise at the sight of Agata, who was getting out of the carriage, supported by her mother. Upset, and with his hands trembling, he ran to give some help to the two ladies; he offered his arm to the convalescent, and he supported her up the difficult climb, repeating at every step: “Gently... like this... Lean on me, Signorina! Gently!”

At the door she thanked him shyly, with her eyes cast down, and lowering her head. In his confusion he reddened and, as soon as the door had closed, murmured:

“How weak she is!”

And immediately after:

“How she loved him!”

He forgot that he had been about to go out, and went on slowly climbing the steps, slapping his legs with the gloves which he held in his hand.

“How weak she is!” he repeated under his breath, pausing indecisively at the door of the house. Automatically he took the key out of his pocket and went in.

Then he heard his mother calling him, and he immediately ran to her, surprised to find himself in his own house.

“What have you forgotten?” his mother asked him in her nasal voice, wearily, with her head leaning to one side, swathed as always in a black woollen headscarf.

“No... nothing... I got bored... You know what? Our tenants from the floor below have come back...”

“I see!” sighed his mother wearily, bending her head to the other side, and she closed her eyes.

That exclamation and that movement irritated Giulio.

“The young lady has been very poorly, and she is still sick,” he said hurriedly, in a resentful tone of voice.

“She’s young, never fear, she’ll get better!” responded the invalid in the same voice as before and without opening her eyes.

Giulio went back into his room and sat down in an armchair, without thinking of taking off his hat or putting down his gloves and stick.

“How she loved him!” he murmured once more to himself, shaking his head slowly for a long while, with staring eyes. “And that imbecile...”

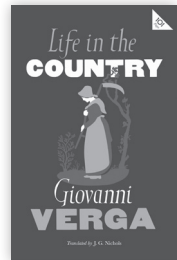
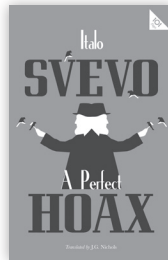
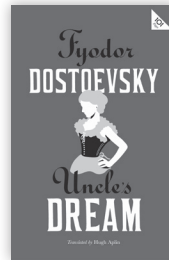
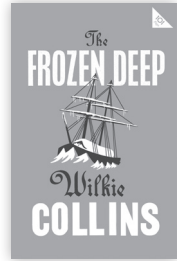
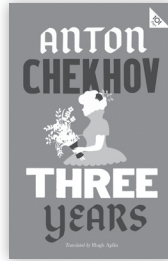
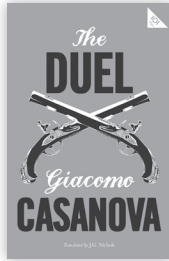
He rose from the chair and walked up and down the room with his head bent...

He had seen her again; he had offered her his arm, he had felt the pleasant weight of that passion-worn body, and he would have liked to carry her in his arms to spare her the bother of that ascent... In her pallor and weariness she had seemed to him even more beautiful!

And she had thanked him...



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