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Giotto's Hand

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An Art History Mystery

GIOTTO'S HAND

Iain Pears

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CHAPTER 1

General Taddeo Bottando's triumphantly successful campaign towards the unmasking of the shadowy English art dealer, Geoffrey Forster, as the most extraordinary thief of his generation began with a letter, postmarked Rome, that turned up on his desk on the third floor of the Art Theft Department on a particularly fine morning in late July.

Initially, this small hand grenade of sticky-taped and stamped information lay there until the General—a stickler for routine in the morning until he was sufficiently wide awake to improvise—completed his morning rounds of watering his pot-plants, studying the pages of the newspapers and having a cup of the coffee which came up in regular shipments from the bar across the Piazza San Ignazio.

Then, item by item, he dug his way through the mail put in the in-tray by his secretary, slowly excavating the pile of miscellaneous messages until, eventually, at

about 8:45 A.M., he picked up the thin, inexpensive paper envelope and slit it open with his paper knife.

He wasn't wildly excited; the address had been handwritten, in what was very much the weak and spidery manner of old age, and so it seemed likely that it would be a waste of time. All institutions have their little collection of nutters who gather round and try to attract attention, and the Art Theft Department was no exception. Everybody in the squad had their own personal favourite among this motley, but generally harmless, crew. Bottando's own was the man in Trento who claimed to be the reincarnation of Michelangelo and wanted the Florence David back on the grounds that the Medicis had never paid him enough for it. Flavia di Stefano—who sometimes exhibited signs of a peculiar sense of humour which might have had something to do with living with an Englishman—had a weakness for the man who, concerned about the plight of the Apulian vole, kept on threatening to smear jam over the Vittorio Emanuele monument in Rome to draw the attention of the world's press. In Flavia's view, such gastronomic terrorism would probably greatly improve the horrible monstrosity, and she had to be restrained from writing back to encourage him in his project. As she said, in some parts of the world you get government art grants for that sort of thing.

Not exactly burning with anticipation, therefore, Bottando leant back in his chair, unfolded the letter, and skimmed through it. Then, frowning in the fashion of someone trying to remember a dream that is just out of reach, he went back to the beginning and read it again, this time more carefully.

Then he picked up the phone and called Flavia so she could have a look as well.

Esteemed and honourable sir, the letter began in that opulently respectful way which the Italian language still preserves for formal correspondence, *I am writing to confess that I am a criminal, having been involved in the theft of a painting which was once the property of the Palazzo Straga in Florence. This crime, which I freely confess, took place in July 1963. May God forgive me, for I know I cannot forgive myself.*

With my most obedient respects,

Maria Fancelli.

Flavia, when she came into the office, read it through with only minimal attention and double-checked she wasn't missing anything. Then she brushed her long fair hair back into place, rubbed her nose meditatively with the flat of her palm, and delivered her final and considered verdict.

"Pouf!" she said. "So what?"

Bottando shook his head in a thoughtful fashion. "So something. Maybe."

"What makes you think that?"

"Age has its virtues," he said pompously. "And one of them is fragments of primeval memory which young snips like you do not possess."

"Thirty-three last week."

"Middle-aged snips like you, then, if that makes you feel any better. The Palazzo Straga has a familiar ring to it, somehow."

Bottando tapped his pen against his teeth, frowned, and looked up at the ceiling. "Um," he said.

"Straga. Florence. 1963. Picture. Um."

And he sat there, staring dreamily out of the window, with Flavia sitting patiently opposite, wondering if he was going to tell her what was on his mind.

"Ha!" he said with a relieved smile as his memory began behaving itself after a few more minutes. "Got it. If you would be so kind as to look in the extinct box, my dear?"

The extinct box was a misnomer for the small broom cupboard that was the last resting place for hopeless causes—those crimes which had an almost minimal chance of ever being resolved. It was very full.

Flavia got up to obey orders. "I must say," she said sceptically as she opened the door, "your memory amazes me. Are you sure about this?"

Bottando waved his hand airily. "See what you can find," he said confidently. "My memory never lets me down, you know. We old elephants . . ."

So off she went, down the stairs into the basement, where she burrowed into the dust piles, ruining her clothes for half an hour, before emerging, triumphant but extremely discontented.

Her complaints to her boss were temporarily delayed by a sneezing fit when she got back to his office bearing a large and bulky file.

"Bless you, my dear," Bottando said sympathetically as she roared away.

"It's all your fault," she said in between interruptions. "It's a complete shambles down there. If an entire pile of stuff hadn't collapsed and spilled over the floor, I would never have found it."

"But you did."

"I did. Stored, completely out of sequence, in a vast file called 'Giotto'. What in God's name is that?"

"Oh," Bottando said, realization dawning. "Giotto. That's why I remember."

"So?"

"One of the great geniuses of his age," the General said with a slight twitch of a smile.

Flavia scowled again.

"I don't mean that Giotto," Bottando explained. "I mean a gentleman of superhuman skill, breathtaking audacity, almost total invisibility. So clever, so astute, that, alas, he doesn't exist."

Flavia gave him the sort of reproving look that such enigmatic comments deserved.

"A fit of whimsy that came out of a quiet summer a couple of years back," he went on. "Just after that Velásquez vanished from Milan. When was it? That's right. 1992."

Flavia looked at him curiously. "The portrait? From the Calleone collection?"

He nodded. "That's the one. Convenient burglar alarm failure, someone went in, took it, left and vanished. Quick and neat. A portrait of a girl called Francesca Arunta. It was never seen again, and two years is a long time for it to be gone. Lovely picture, too, it seems, although there was no photograph."

"What?"

"No. No photograph. Amazing, isn't it? Some people. Although in fact that's quite common. That's what gave me the idea. Lots of pictures in the house, and the only one taken was the only one which had never been photographed. In this case, there was at least a print made

in the nineteenth century. On the board over there."

He pointed to a noticeboard on the far side of his office, covered with what had been called the devil's list: photographs of paintings, sculpture and other oddments that had vanished without trace. Half obscured by a gold, fourteenth-century chalice which had presumably long since been melted down into ingots, Flavia saw a dog-eared photocopy of a print of a painting. Not the sort of thing you could easily take into court for the purposes of identification. But it was just about clear enough to give you an idea.

"Anyway," he went on, "it was embarrassing, not least because old Calleone was in a position to make a stink, and did. And we got nowhere; all the usual channels of enquiry went dead on us; not a regular customer, not organized crime, but obviously a real pro. So, in desperation, I started looking through all the back cases for a hint of someone who might have done it. And came up with a list of unphotographed paintings that had vanished in a similar fashion. I got quite carried away, hence the rather bulky file. Even made a few enquiries. But eventually I stepped back, had a long hard look and realized the whole thing was a total waste of time."

"It sounds quite a good idea to me," she said, settling herself on the sofa and placing the file by her side. "Are you sure you were wrong?"

"Oh, in theory there was nothing wrong with it at all. Which just shows what's wrong with theory. The trouble was, once I began to think about it, I realized I now had one man, who I dubbed Giotto . . ."

"Why?"

Bottando smiled. "Because my imaginary character was a real master at his trade, of great importance, but we knew virtually nothing about him. No personality or anything. A bit like Giotto. But, as I say, I had made this creation of mine responsible for more than two dozen thefts from at least 1963 onwards. Encompassing four different countries, in each case taking unphotographed pictures which were never seen again. Without anyone in a dozen or more specialized police units even suspecting his existence. Without a single fence or buyer ever breaking ranks and offering information. Without a single work ever being recovered."

"Hmm."

"And then, of course, the whole thing blew up when I came across a note from the Carabinieri saying they'd arrested someone six months previously for another job which I'd nominally pencilled in as being by Giotto's hand. Giacomo Sandano. Remember him?"

"The world's worst thief?"

"That's the one. He nicked a Fra Angelico from Padua. Got caught, of course. According to my calculations, he would have been three and a half when he committed the Straga raid, and is far too stupid ever to get away with anything for long. This is why I put the whole lot in the extinct box. It was the best proof imaginable that I was wrong. So Giotto has been gathering dust for a couple of years and, in my opinion, should return there . . ."

"Good morning, General."

The door opened and the voice entered before the small and compact body from which it emerged. A moment later, a man who looked surprisingly like a well-

fed Siamese cat entered the room, with a look of superior amusement on his face. Bottando smiled back genially, with an expression that connoisseurs like Flavia knew to be entirely false.

"Good morning, dottore," he said. "How nice to see you."

Dottore Corrado Argan was one of those people that large-scale organizations periodically create for the sole purpose of making the lives of its several members virtually intolerable. He had started off as an art historian—thus giving himself somewhat dubious intellectual credentials which he played on mercilessly—then, finding the Italian and international university system far too sensible to give him a post, had gravitated into the bureaucracy, specifically the *beni artistici,* the amorphous body which keeps its eye on the national heritage.

After successfully creating chaos in several areas of that fine organization's activities, he had become suffused with indignation over the way bits of the national heritage kept on going missing, and decided that what the fight against crime really needed to make it effective was the stimulus of his own powerful intellect to focus its activities.

He was not the first to imagine he might make a difference and, to give him very grudging credit, he was certainly enthusiastic. That, of course, mainly had the effect of making him more tiresome. Bottando was well-practised in dealing with periodic memoranda from outsiders demanding action, suggesting campaigns and recommending policies. Long experience had taught him the best way of agreeing profoundly with all interven-

tions, thanking their authors and then ignoring them totally.

What he was not capable of dealing with too well was the outsider moving in, taking over office space and settling down for an extended stay to write reports based on a day-to-day monitoring of activities. Which was what the loathsome Argan had done. For six months now he had read his way through files, sat in on meetings, pipe in mouth, supercilious smile on face, making notes that no one was allowed to see and muttering things about how the department did not conceptualize its policies in a sufficiently holistic fashion.

Bottando, for once, had been rather slow off the mark in meeting the threat, and was now paying the price. Because Argan was so ludicrous, he had not taken the man seriously. Only when his secretary had undertaken a do-it-yourself espionage operation late one evening, and handed over photocopies of the innumerable reports and memoranda the man had been sending off to those in high places, did the magnitude of the problem become clear.

In brief, Argan wanted Bottando's job, and was trying very hard to get it. His line was that, in these days of international crime, old-fashioned policing (for which read old-fashioned policemen, as personified by General Taddeo Bottando) was no longer sufficient. What was needed was an efficient organization (i.e. a cheaper one) headed up by an executive skilled in man-management and resource allocation (i.e. himself). No mention in any of this of catching criminals or recovering lost works of art.

War had broken out, in a quiet and civilized fashion.

Bottando found that his tardiness had blocked off the obvious response: it was too late now to chuck the man out for fear of being accused of wanting to hide something. As much as possible, he fed him false information, so that he could be made to look a fool. Unfortunately, Argan, as an art historian, didn't think facts were so important anyway and carried on regardless.

On his side, Bottando had the policing establishment, who quite rightly saw enthusiastic amateurs as a threat to them all. On the other, Argan had the bureaucracy, which believed firmly that the quality of an organization depended solely on how many jobs it provided for administrators. And they, as Bottando was aware, were the ones with the cheque books.

For the past month, Bottando's counter-offensive had run into the sand. Argan had taken full possession of all the right words, like efficiency and results and cost-effectiveness, and Bottando had not worked out a way of opposing the man without seeming old, fusty and hidebound. He was reduced, therefore, to grumbling ferociously and hoping Argan would make a mistake. So far, patience had not been rewarded, mainly because Argan didn't actually do anything except watch other people and say, with the benefit of hindsight, how it should have been done better.

"And how are we this morning?" said this walking insult to all the traditions of good policing. "Still solving those crimes, I hear. I couldn't help overhearing your fascinating discourse on criminal detection."

Bottando scowled at him. "I hope you found it instructive."

"Very helpful, yes. An important Etruscan site robbed *overnight, I see?*"

That was the other trouble with him. He always had a quick look through the overnight reports so that he had this vague patina of being on top of things. Bottando had been diverted by Giotto and hadn't got around to it yet.

"I know," he replied steadily nonetheless. "But there's not much we can do until we have a full report on what was stolen." Always a safe remark, that.

"Oh, *I think we should get involved a bit earlier than* that. Nice case like this, looks very good. We have to keep up the department profile, after all. And the destruction of our heritage through the spoliation of sites of immense historical significance . . ."

And off he went, talking away as though he were instructing a class of five-year-olds. That was another problem with him, Bottando had once explained gloomily to a sympathetic colleague in Corruption one evening. Quite apart from the fact that he could never resist an opportunity to be didactic, Argan was more of a marketing executive than a policeman. He didn't care how effective the department was as long as it looked good.

"Not our case yet," Bottando repeated firmly as Argan was getting into his stride. "Unless you want to get a reputation for poaching. If you like I could telephone the Carabinieri and say you personally want to take over . . ."

"Oh, no. Of course, I bow to your experience in these matters," Argan said. Much too smart to be caught out by an obvious ploy like that.

"So," he went on, "what's this conference with the lovely signorina about, then?"

The lovely signorina ground her teeth, and Bottando smiled. Argan was trying to charm his staff over on to his side. He was not really adopting the right approach with Flavia. Some of the others, however . . .

"The lovely signorina and I were planning our day," said Bottando.

"This?" Argan said, picking up the letter disdainfully.

"I really must ask you not to read my mail without my permission."

"Sorry," Argan said, putting it down with an unapologetic smile and sitting beside Flavia on the sofa. She got up. "I imagine you won't be doing anything with it. A thirty-year-old crime is hardly a high priority."

"All crimes are a high priority," Bottando said pompously.

"But some are more so than others, surely? And to concern yourself with an ancient affair and turn a blind eye to a robbery only last night . . ."

It was like talking to a brick wall, Bottando thought.

"How often do I have to explain that our main brief is to recover works of art?" he said testily. "Criminals are secondary. If a painting can be recovered, it doesn't matter whether it vanished last night or thirty years or a century ago. And to miss an opportunity because we don't make elementary checks would be a gross dereliction of our duty."

"Of course," Argan purred, giving way with suspicious grace. "You're in charge, General. You're in charge."

And on that ambiguous note he left. Only afterwards

did Bottando calm down enough to realize that much of the Giotto file had vanished with him.

"No," said Jonathan Argyll with suitable concern that evening, as they sat companionably on the balcony of their apartment and felt the sun go down at long last. "It doesn't sound good. You'll have to nobble him."

Flavia had spent much of their meal talking about the iniquities of Corrado Argan. It's difficult to avoid a degree of obsession if you've spent the better part of the morning calming your boss down and persuading him that sober reason would be a better response than foot-stamping fury.

"What was this picture, anyway?" Argyll asked, considering then postponing a decision about doing the washing up. "Is it really worth going to investigate?"

She shook her head. "Not a clue. It's meant to be by Uccello, a Madonna and child. Whether it is or not I couldn't tell you. There's no photograph of it and the descriptions aren't very good."

"It's very diligent of you to take all this trouble."

"No, it's not. It's politics. Argan doesn't want Bottando to look into this, and so Bottando, to show he's in charge, will have to do just that. Having gone on about leaving no stone unturned to recover paintings, he has to go and peek under some pebbles. Otherwise he seems slack even by his own standards."

Argyll nodded, then stood up and gathered the dirty plates. Too many flies around this evening. "It'll land him in trouble one day, you know," he said sagely. "Does he have to be so pugnacious?"

Flavia smiled knowingly. "It's easy to tell you've

never worked in a large organization. Argan's a fool, but he has such boundless self-confidence that he convinces people who don't know any better. Which means that he is constantly being put in positions of authority. So everybody else has to spend a great deal of time tripping him up. It's all part of the job."

"I'm glad I'm self-employed, then."

"But unlike you, we get our salaries even if we don't do anything. In fact, in Argan's case, the less he does, the more he gets."

A sore point. Argyll remained convinced that, somewhere out there, an individual existed who desperately wanted to buy at least one of his pictures. Finding this person was proving massively difficult at the moment. So much so that he was seriously having to consider what he gloomily called alternatives. A full-blown crisis had been precipitated by the arrival of a letter from an international university in Rome which processed eager young things anxious to learn about art and culture. One of its art historians had absconded to a better job at the last moment, and they had in desperation written to Argyll. Did he want a job for a couple of years teaching from the Caracci to Canova?

Flavia had seen this as a solution to all his problems, but Argyll wasn't so sure. He'd worked hard to set up as a dealer; giving up now would seem very much like failure. And he hated the thought of being forced to give up. Besides which, teaching looked like hard work to him.

Deeply depressing. He had enough money to trickle along, but so far had failed to make a breakthrough into the next division up. He needed to buy better pictures.