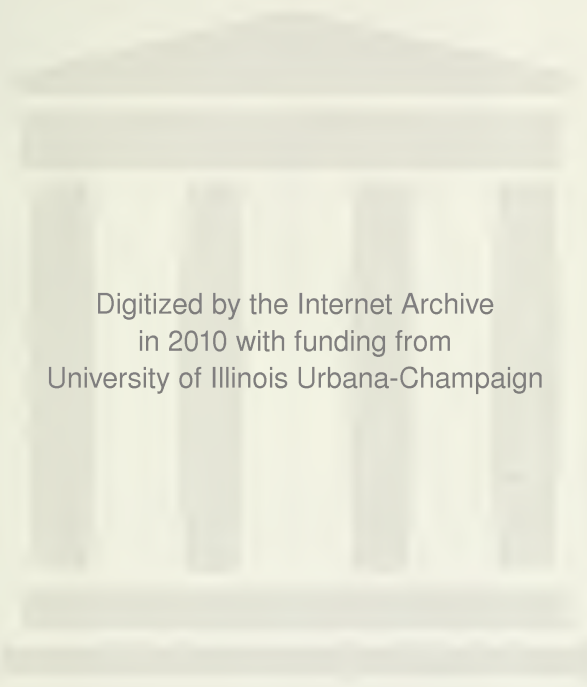


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THE
DREAM NUMBERS.

A Novel.

BY

T. ADOLPHUS TROLLOPE,

AUTHOR OF "LA BEATA," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE DREAM NUMBERS.

(CONTINUATION OF BOOK II.)

CHAPTER V.

THE SALE OF THE CRUCIFIX.

As long as the Signora Barbara was walking through the chestnut woods down the mountain side to Pescia, all was well with her, and she was in no wise tempted to arraign the wisdom of her friend and counsellor, the priest's house-keeper, which had spirited her up to her present task. She walked along down the zig-zag paved path merrily enough, carrying the precious packet in a little covered basket, noting here and there as she went the traces of the recent storm, but mainly occupied with calculations of the amount of prize due on a "terno" on diffe-

rent amounts spent on a ticket. One scudo would bring her somewhere about a thousand ; and as she came down the first part of the mountain that sum was admitted by her to satisfy amply all her possible wants. But by the time she had reached the bottom of the hill, where the little paved path emerges from the woods on to the dusty, white high-road through the valley, she had settled in her own mind that she might as well have ten thousand,—that it would be rather a flying in the face of Providence to take less.

And these meditations and calculations, and the walk through the woods, fresh after their recent drenching, were pleasant enough. But no sooner had the Signora Barbara entered the railway station at Pescia, where there was a considerable crowd awaiting the train about to pass from Lucca to Florence, than she became painfully conscious that all the world, as it seemed to her, turned their eyes on her basket in a very remarkable manner.

The crucifix, wrapped in its napkin, was too long to go altogether into the basket, and the

foot of the cross protruded from under the cover. The napkin wrapping had been so arranged, however, as to make it quite impossible that anybody could form the remotest guess at the nature of the contents of the packet. Besides that, if every soul present had seen that the old lady had a crucifix in her basket, not one would have given so simple a circumstance a second thought. Nay, if they all knew that she was journeying to Florence in the hope of selling her crucifix, that fact would not have attracted any great share of the public attention. But all this was inconceivable to the widow Caroli. She could not divest herself of the feeling that her basket was the cynosure of neighbouring eyes. In vain she again and again poked at the projecting stem of the crucifix, attempting to push it into shelter at the imminent risk of thrusting the head through the bottom of the basket. She could accomplish no further concealment, and had to perform the rest of her journey under the harrowing sensations peculiar to a detected malefactor.

Still, however, the police at the stations, though eyeing her, as she thought, in the severest manner, forbore from any more active interference with her, and she in due time reached the station at Florence in safety. The Signora Caroli had never been in Florence since she had borne that name ; and that was a period of more than five-and-twenty years. She felt very strange there. The place was much altered. There had been no railway when she had been Barbara Trendi. And the neighbourhood of the station was all a new world to her. She did not dare to ask the way to the Ponte Vecchio ; for she felt that to do so would be as good as proclaiming to all Florence what was the nature of her business in the capital. But she thought that if once she were on the river, she should have no difficulty in finding her way along the Lung Arno—or line of quays skirting the river—till she came to the Jewellers' Bridge.

After some meditation and doubt, therefore, she asked a porter to direct her to the Ponte alla Carraia, and having received the necessary

instructions, proceeded to leave the yard of the station by the great iron gates between it and the street. But here there arose a difficulty on which the widow had not calculated. At the open gates stood certain officials of the Octroi, charged with the duty of seeing that no article of consumption is introduced into the city without paying the duty. Whole carriage-loads of luggage were being passed through without let or hindrance, on a mere word from the owner. But an old woman on foot, with a basket in her hand, was a sure mark for the vigilance of the officers.

The widow was quietly walking through the gates when a loud voice imperiously called on her to stop, and in the next instant an official coming up to her, demanded what she had got in her basket.

Here it was at last. Detection had at last overtaken her. Doubtless the police at the stations had allowed her to pass only because they had communicated tidings of her to these officials nearer to the fountain head of justice.

Oh, Sibilla, Sibilla ! this is what your advice has brought your friend to !

Poor Barbara Caroli thought that she should have dropped. To the sharply put question, "What have you got there, signora?" it was wholly impossible to her to make any answer. Her tongue cleaved to the roof of her mouth, and her knees shook under her. It was nothing uncommon, however, to the officer to receive no verbal reply to his demand ; and he put his hand on the protruding part of the crucifix to get an answer to his question by independent research. It was a moment of dreadful agony to the self-convicted culprit.

The fact was that the shape of the protruding parcel seemed to the officer's experience very much to suggest the idea of a bottle of wine—one of the special objects of his vigilance. The closing of his fingers around the concealed object for an instant, together with a rapid dive of his hand into the interior of the basket, sufficed to assure his experienced sense of touch, that the old lady's basket contained

nothing good to eat or to drink, and with other matters than these he had no concern. So with a nod she was allowed to pass.

She reached the Ponte alla Carraia without further adventure, and then walked along the sunny Lung Arno, desolate enough at that hour, for the heat of its unmitigated southern exposure was almost sufficient, late in the year though it was, to bake a loaf laid on its flags.

Arrived at the corner of the Ponte Vecchio, the poor woman's terrors and misgivings began anew. She felt to ascertain that her letter to Signor Stefano Gralli was safe and at hand; and then screwing her courage to the sticking point, turned to walk up the ascent of the bridge.

The Ponte Vecchio at Florence is one of the most remarkable, as well as one of the most picturesque, structures in Europe. It is, I believe, the sole remaining specimen of that fashion once so common in the cities of mediæval Europe, of uniting the functions of a bridge with those of a street bordered by

dwelling. Old London Bridge, as we all know, was another specimen of this mode of economising space—a great object of consideration in the days when a circuit of walls, and the necessities of defence, limited cities, whatever the needs of their inhabitants, to a certain area, and rendered every available inch of that area of great value.

The Ponte Vecchio at Florence in this second half of the nineteenth century, is still a street. The dwellings which make it such are in truth not large, but they are in their quaintness admirably picturesque. They were once upon a time, in the days of the old Republic, occupied exclusively by butchers. They are now tenanted as exclusively by jewellers. And very queer little tenements they are. The small shops, occupying the whole of the ground floor, are entered by little doors barely large enough to allow a single person—not very stout—to pass. The shop fronts, with the exception of two or three of the houses, which have of late years been modernised, are protected by huge shutters

hinged at the top, suspended by iron hooks at right angles to the walls during the day, and let down so as to shut over the window in the shape of a sloping desk during the night. Behind these small shops there are still smaller back shops, or back parlours as the case may be, looking over the river. They are not bad places for the bench of a working jeweller, because the light is good ; better than in the generality of cases can be procured in a city, coming direct and uninterrupted from the sky ; not bad places either for the transaction of some of the other branches of business which it is said are sometimes united to that of a dealer and worker in gold and precious stones, in these little dwellings, for they are very private ! Above these shops and little cells behind them, there are generally two stories, and in a few cases three, reached by stairs contrived in the thickness of the walls, after a most quaint and mediæval fashion.

The crown of the bridge is not occupied by dwellings, an open space being thus left for the

enjoyment of the lovely views up the river to St. Miniato and the city mills, and Vasari's celebrated front to the Uffizi, and the Chianti hills in the distance ; and down the river to the other bridges, the pretty quays, the woods of the Cascine, and the far-away Carrara mountains. On the upper side, however, the space at the crown of the bridge is not wholly open, for above the roofs of the houses, the private passage which leads from the Palazzo Vecchio to the Palazzo Pitti passes, and is supported at this point of its course by three open arches which traverse the space between one house on the bridge and the other. The view up the river is thus framed in these three arches with admirable effect.

Signora Caroli had to cross this crown of the bridge ; for the shop of Signor Stefano Gralli was on the right hand going down the slope of the bridge on the further or southern side of the river. The number "50" which, as I have stated, marked it, must have been the remains of some former numeration of the houses ; for

there are not so many tenements on the bridge.

The widow had no difficulty in finding the shop. It was not one of the brilliant ones, of which there are several on the bridge. But the name "Stefano Gralli" was very plainly inscribed, not in flaunting gold letters as over the door of many of his neighbours, but in large white letters on a black ground, reaching all along the shop-front. There was the same absence of any attempt to shine in the appearance of the shop window. The premises looked as if they had not been painted since the days of the Republic. The interior of the little shop, as seen from the street when the narrow door was opened, seemed a black and dark cavern. There were very few objects exposed in the window; and those were exclusively of an ecclesiastical nature;—one or two monstrances, a pair or two of altar candlesticks, a patina or two, and a chalice. Nor were these costly of their kind. They were of alloyed silver, and very roughly made, to suit the needs and the

means of poor country parishes. The same ecclesiastical connection, apparently, which had made the sister, Sibilla Gralli, a priest's confidential housekeeper, had thrown the brother, Stefano Gralli, into an exclusively ecclesiastical branch of his art.

Signora Caroli was in one sense reassured, and in another sense dismayed, at the appearance of Stefano Gralli's place of business. In the first place, she did not feel so afraid to enter that shabby-looking little den as she would have been to present herself in some of those smarter and grander looking shops. But then, on the other hand, it seemed to her little likely that the master of such a place should give her two hundred francs, or any such sum, for her crucifix.

On entering the narrow glass-door of the shop she saw only a pale, deformed lad, dressed in black serge, sitting at a bench, and working with a glass at his eye, at some description of jewellers' work. He looked up from his task for an instant, sufficient to see that the newcomer was very evidently a woman from the

country, and then, without uttering a syllable, bent him over his work again.

The widow Caroli was, very evidently to any Florentine eye, a woman from the country ; not a *contadina* ; the style and manner of her dress were altogether unlike that of the class so called. She was dressed in a little black poke bonnet, a black silk dress, and a rather scanty red shawl. She was a tall, thin woman, with a thin, freckled face, sandy hair, and a meek, lachrymose expression of countenance, stooping in her gait, and constantly drawing her shawl around her, with an action as though she were shivering, though the weather was very hot.

She paused awhile, meekly waiting to be addressed by the pale, deformed boy stooping over his work. But she waited in vain. He seemed to be perfectly contented that she should stand there looking at him just as long as it might please her to do so.

At last she said : “ Is this the shop of Signor Stefano Gralli, if you please ? ”

“ If you will take the trouble, signora, to

walk out into the street, cross over to the other side, then turn about, look straight before you, and spell the letters you see, till you make out the meaning of them, you will get a satisfactory reply to your question."

Signora Caroli would almost have been inclined to suspect that the pale-faced boy in black serge was disposed to be rude, had it not been that his manner and voice were specially courteous.

After considering the matter for a minute or so in silence, she said : "I *did* see the name of Stefano Gralli over the door," in the tone of one who was making an admission that she was conscious told very much against her.

"Oh! you *did* see the name over 'the door! Well, if that did not convince you, I am afraid I can't help you."

"Well, but is he at home now?" said the widow, after another pause, occupied in deep meditation.

"Ah! that's quite another matter!" said the pale-faced boy, looking up at her with his

magnifying-glass fixed in his eye in a very alarming manner. "Maybe, if I was to ask him if he was at home, he would ask who it was that wanted to see him?"

"Perhaps," returned the widow Caroli, "you would not mind telling him that there is somebody here, as has brought him a letter from his sister at Uzzano."

"Not at all, signora; on the contrary, I shall have much pleasure in telling him your ladyship is here. Pray do Signor Stefano Gralli the honour of sitting down. There is not a chair in the shop, it is true, but you can sit down on my bench while I am gone on your errand," said the boy, with an evident increase of civility in his manner, and yet without altogether abandoning his tone of "chaffing," an accomplishment which adult Tuscans rarely indulge in, but which the Florentine *gamin* excels in and largely practises.

The boy passed through a door still narrower than that leading to the street, and entered the closet overlooking the river behind the shop,

while Signora Caroli sat herself down on the seat which had been recommended to her.

The boy was a long time gone, but Signora Caroli was very patient. A Tuscan required to do nothing else than to sit still and wait is always patient, considering the circumstances which have imposed that necessity on him rather as a godsend than otherwise.

At length, however, the pale-faced, deformed boy in black serge (he must have belonged in some way or other to Mother Church—chorister, acolyte, seminarist, or some such thing, he surely must be or have been ; the peculiar unwholesome look with which Mother Church marks her lay members, in Italy at least, was so strong on him), the pale-faced boy returned, shambling and shuffling, and said that perhaps, if the Signora had a letter for Signor Gralli, she would not mind sending it upstairs to that gentleman by his hands.

The widow at once produced her letter, and delivered it to the pale-faced boy, who again vanished through the narrow door at the back

of the shop. But his absence was less long this time than on the previous occasion. In a very short time he came back, moving far more alertly than before, and begged Signora Caroli to give herself the trouble to step into the back parlour, and Signor Gralli would be down directly.

It did not give the Signora Caroli any great degree of trouble to do as she was told, seeing that she was, as has been stated, a long narrow woman; had she been otherwise, she might, indeed, have found no small difficulty in passing through the passage indicated to her. The back shop, or parlour, as its proprietor preferred to call it, was still smaller than the other little cell, which faced the street. Close to a small window looking out on the Arno there was a little table with a desk in the middle of it, covered with black leather. This was so placed as just to allow room for an arm-chair, also covered with black leather, to stand between it and the wall, at right angles with the window. Between the table and the opposite wall, at right angles with the window, there was not

room for a chair, but just space enough to give access to a large iron safe let into the wall exactly in face of one sitting in the arm-chair. It was closed by a very large and massive-looking door, in which there were no less than three large key-holes. On a shelf above the head of the occupant of the arm-chair were several ledgers. One other chair stood in that part of the little cell which was between the table and the door of entrance ; one only chair save that of the master of the place, suggestive of the reflection that the business transacted there was usually transacted *a quattro occhi*, as the Italians say,—with four eyes, *i. e.*, with two heads only.

The Signora Caroli entered this small apartment, and stood looking about her with much awe. It was certainly not a grand or imposing place in any way ; but it was unlike anything she had ever seen before, and it affected her imagination to be thus standing in a room over the river, which, still swollen by the late heavy rains, was plainly heard rushing beneath her

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feet. Where the Signor Stefano Gralli was to appear from also puzzled her much. She had been in both the rooms, which evidently constituted the entire dwelling, and she had not been able to perceive any sign of a staircase.

While she was still wondering at this, however, a very narrow panel, as it seemed to be, in the woodwork lining of the passage through the thick wall that divided the front shop from the cell behind it, was suddenly pushed open, a momentary vision of a narrow ladder-like stair contrived in the thickness of this wall was apparent, a man stepped out of the opening, and it was instantly closed behind him. Poor Signora Caroli was as much startled by this very unexpected mode of entry as if Signor Stefano Gralli had popped up from a trap in the floor, though she knew that a trap in that floor could only open a passage to the river below.

Signor Stefano Gralli, however, was not altogether a man calculated to inspire fear. He was very diminutive, and feeble-looking. His only visible article of dress was a long black

gown, which reached from his neck to his heels, and was secured around his waist by a black leather belt. His face was thin, and wan, and pale; he had a week's growth of stiff stubbly white beard, long white hair, and nothing at all terrible about him save a pair of piercing, black, glittering eyes, which shone out of the bottom of their deep sockets like hot coals of fire.

He bowed lowly to Signora Caroli, as he entered; and she returned his salutation by as elaborate a curtsy. He grinned a ghastly smile, as he motioned her to sit on the one disposable chair the room contained, and then seating himself in the arm-chair behind the desk, with his feet supported on a stool, he spread out his sister's letter on the desk before him, and read it deliberately for the second time. When he had done this he rose to his feet on the stool, and again bowed to his visitor.

The Signora Caroli, not to be outdone in politeness, rose from her chair, with her basket

containing the crucifix in her hand, and executed a second most elaborately performed curtsy.

“My sister speaks of you, signora, as her very good friend,” said the little man, eyeing her, as the widow thought, very severely.

“She could do no other, signor. Sibilla Gralli and I have been friends any time this dozen years.”

“I am happy to hear it—very happy to hear it. My sister is a very worthy woman.”

“Yes, a good sort of body is Sibilla Gralli, and a kind when one is in trouble.”

“You have been recently in trouble, signora?” said Signor Stefano, looking at her keenly.

“Ah! worse luck; that is what I have!” said the widow, putting her handkerchief to her eyes. “I suppose your sister has told you all about it in her letter.”

“No, Sibilla says nothing upon that head. She mentions that you wish to ascertain the value of an article belonging to you. People often wish that when they are in trouble; and

it often happens that their wish to ascertain the value of what they possess is caused by their desire to sell it. Is that so with you, Signora Caroli ? ”

“ I thought that *la Signora* Sibilla had told you all about it in the letter,” repeated the widow, who felt embarrassed at the examination to which she was subjected.

“ No ; not exactly, signora. She informs me that you wish that I should tell you the value of an article you possess. Very good. For the sake of the regard I bear to my sister, I am willing to do that. But it is desirable that before attempting to do so, I should be informed whether it is perchance your purpose to propose to me the purchase of the property in question. Because if so, you might in your inexperience—pardon me, signora—imagine that I might be induced to become the purchaser at the price I had named to you as the value of the article in question. Now any such expectation as this might lead to disappointment—yes, to disappointment, and perchance even to misunder-

standing between us—which would be regrettable, especially as you come to me from my sister.”

“ Well, Signor Gralli, the long and the short of it is, what will you give me for it ?” said the widow Caroli, puzzled and mystified by the little jeweller’s long-winded phrases.

“ What will I give for it ?” returned the little man, leaning back in his arm-chair, and twirling his thumbs slowly round each other—“ what will I give for it ? Now, that is clear and explicit in one point of view, but at the same time singularly obscure in another and equally important respect. The question is clear, inasmuch as it involves a direct proposition of purchase by me, setting aside all subterfuges—pardon me, signora—as to mere inquiry concerning value. But it is on the other hand altogether deficient in clearness, in that you have not as yet in any wise given me to understand what ‘ *it* ’ is.”

The widow stared at him in a condition of utter amazement and bewilderment.

“ If you please, sir,” she said at length, “ are you disposed to buy it ? ”

“ To buy what ? ” the little man at length condescended to say.

“ Why, my crucifix here ; it *is* mine now, any way. What else have I got to sell, I should like to know ? ”

“ So should I,” said Signor Gralli.

“ Eh ? I don’t understand,” said Signora Caroli, beginning to think that Florentine people talked in quite a different way from what they did in the Valdinievole, and that it was very difficult to know what they meant.

“ I say, I should like to know, too,” replied Signor Stefano Gralli.

“ To know what ? ” said the widow, staring in utter mystification.

“ Whether you have anything else to sell, as you were saying ? ” said the little jeweller.

“ Oh, *misericordia!* ” cried the poor woman, feeling as if she were rapidly losing her senses ; “ didn’t I say that I had nothing in the world but the crucifix ? ”

“No, signora, you did not say so. But we get on gradually—gradually. So it is a crucifix that you wish to dispose of?”

“Of course it is!” said poor Signora Barbara, almost on the point of crying.

“Nay, *signora mia padronissima!* Nay, my most excellent mistress, you must forgive me if I hold that it was not at all of course,—by no manner of means of course.”

The widow was by this time reduced to the verge of that state of despair and idiotcy which it had probably been the object of the little man’s style of treatment to produce. She sat silent for a while, sadly shaking her head; then muttering “*Dio mio! Dio mio!*” slowly proceeded to draw the parcel containing the crucifix from the basket, and to unfold the napkin from around it.

The jeweller watched the process with perfect patience, and impassively, save that his glittering snake-like eye gleamed with an extra brightness as the crucifix was unfolded to his gaze.

The widow, when she had the figure freed from its wrappings in her hands, again shook her head and sighed deeply. Then holding it up between her own face and that of Signor Gralli, she said, with categorical earnestness born of desperation :—

“ Signor Gralli, will you buy this crucifix ? ”

“ Permit me, before answering, to examine it, if you please, signora,” said Signor Gralli, extending his hand towards it with a degree of eagerness in the movement which he would have severely blamed himself for had he been dealing with a customer worthy of a chapman’s skill. In the case of poor Signora Caroli it signified little, except indeed as a matter of art, the value and beauty of which is eternal.

The widow gave the crucifix into the little man’s hand, and he turned with his face to the window, and consequently with his back to her, to examine it in the full light.

His first impression, on a very cursory inspection, was that it was, if not a work of Giovanni Bologna—that Florentine artist of whose glory

transalpine writers are wont to rob the city of flowers by calling him Giovanni *di* Bologna—at least the production of some excellent artist of his epoch and school. His experienced eye was at once convinced that it was at all events a work of high artistic merit, and of great value; and while determining that he would not in any case let the widow carry it out of his shop, he was already calculating how much his dear sister Sibilla would expect for sending him such a chance.

He had not hitherto deemed that the commercial operation about to be proposed to him by the widow Caroli, was likely to be of any great interest or importance; but now he girded up his loins in earnest to the contest which he expected, and congratulated himself heartily, that from the mere force of habit and spirit of system, he had already subjected his customer to that mighty engine of bargaining to which the Italian never fails to resort, as to the most sure and potent of all the arts of dealing—the wearying out of his opponent.

Having slowly and cautiously examined it in every possible way, and gazed at it in every possible light, he said, giving it back into the hands of the widow as he spoke :—

“It is ivory, certainly! I make it a rule, signora, to tell the exact truth to people who bring things here for sale, and they come every day, and mostly sell what they bring, for everybody knows that if they won't take what Stefano Gralli offers them, they are not likely to get more elsewhere ; and then it is no use for 'em to come back to me, for I make it a rule never to buy at any price what has been once carried away from the shop—never! It is ivory, I say, certainly ; what good would it do me to deceive you ? But then, Lord bless you, ivory crucifixes ! you may almost pick 'em up in the streets of Florence—almost, you may indeed ! If it was not that you were recommended to me by my sister, I should not stop to look at it a second time ; but for her sake I wish to do the best I can for you. What might you expect to get for this bit of ivory,

now? You may speak to me in perfect confidence, and I will tell you just as freely what is the value of it; and then, you know, if we can't deal, *amici quanto prima*, we shall part as good friends as ever."

"Well, signore, and what is the value of it?" said the widow, simply.

"Ah! what is the value of it? I know to a soldo what the worth of it is, and I am going to tell you, but we must do things regularly. The proper way in these matters is for you to state what you expect for the article you have to sell."

"Well, according to what I have been told, signore, I think I ought to get four hundred francs for it."

The widow Caroli had hoped from what her friend Sibilla had said, that she might perhaps get two hundred francs for the crucifix. She was a poor, meek, simple-minded body, and was in the hands of Signor Stefano Gralli as clay in the hands of the potter. But she was not so stupid as not to ask for what she

had to sell twice as much as she hoped to get for it.

The jeweller smiled faintly and good-humouredly, and shrugged his little shoulders almost imperceptibly.

“I think what I should advise,” he said, “would be that you should keep this little article. It may be that it might be a comfort to you to have it by you, some of these days. I ought to beg pardon for intruding on you with my advice ; but it is so painful to part with property at more than cent. per cent. under what one values it at, that I don’t feel that I can venture to make you any proposal with a view to purchasing myself.”

“You *said* that you would tell me the value of it when I had named my price,” said the widow, less cast down than Signor Stefano expected she would have been, for she was conscious that if her demand was abated by cent. per cent. there would still be wherewithal to satisfy her utmost hopes.

“Certainly I did, signora, and so I will if

you insist on it, painful as it may be. Oh! I am a man of my word. Certainly I will tell you the value of the crucifix. Let me see! I should say about one hundred and fifty francs was the outside. Not that I think anybody else, in Florence would give you that; and I should be obliged to refuse to deal with you if you were to take the article away to hawk it about, and then bring it back to me. I could not break my rule, even for the sake of my sister. Perhaps I have run a little beyond the mark; but, *che!* what's the good of looking at trifles? I've said the word, and I won't go back from it. I'll give you the hundred and fifty whether I lose by my bargain or not."

"Say two hundred!" returned the widow.

"Why should you wish to wrong me of fifty francs?" said Signor Gralli, with an air of mild reproach. "I have done the utmost I can for you. You had better keep the crucifix."

"I am sure I don't wish to wrong you, Signor Gralli," said the widow, quite cowed,

“far be it ; I will take the hundred and fifty francs for it.”

“Don’t be led to do it by me, mind ! Use your own judgment. That is what I always say to people : use your own judgment. I’d just as lief not buy it ; in fact, if you ask me, I had rather not. Still I am willing to stand to my word, for I always make a point of doing that.”

“Very well, then, Signor Gralli. So be it ! We will say one hundred and fifty francs.”

The jeweller once more examined the crucifix narrowly ; and then, placing it carefully in a drawer beneath his desk, went round to his safe to take the money out of it.

The hundred and fifty francs were duly paid ; a receipt setting forth the whole transaction as minutely as if it were a question of buying and selling an estate, was drawn up at great length, and duly signed ; and the widow came forth from the narrow door of Signor Gralli’s habitation a happy woman.

The jeweller on the contrary, though knowing that he had purchased for a hundred and fifty

francs what he fully expected to sell for at least a thousand, was by no means happy. For he was tormented by the suspicion—a very just one—that he might have had the crucifix for much less if he had played his cards better. He reproached himself with not having taken a due measurement of the widow's simplicity. He ought not to have been led by her demand of four hundred francs into the error of supposing for an instant that she had any idea of the value of the bit of sculpture. It was a piece of careless stupidity, for which he bitterly reproached himself; and as hundreds of francs can be no salve for a wounded conscience, Stefano Gralli was unhappy for the remainder of the day.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PURCHASE OF THE TICKET.

THE widow Caroli knew not a soul in Florence, and on coming away from the jeweller's shop on the Ponte Vecchio, was rather puzzled how to dispose of herself till the hour at which the train started, by which she purposed returning to Pescia. For her sole remaining bit of business was the purchase of the all-important ticket, a transaction which would not occupy more than five minutes. For, longsome and intricate as are all other business matters of any kind to be transacted with Italian officials, a paternal government has neglected nothing which could contribute to the ease and facility with which its subjects might find the means of indulging in their taste for gambling. Signora

Caroli was, it is true, very anxious to look at and count over again her hundred and fifty francs, and divide it into the two portions, the one of which was to be spent on the precious three numbers for the lottery, and the other to be carried home to Uzzano ; but she was at a loss whither to betake herself for this purpose.

Strolling away from the Ponte Vecchio she passed by the river front of the Uffizi, and looking down the long arcades of Vasari's celebrated architecture, it struck her that one of the wide-flagged steps under the cool and quiet arches, would be just the place for her to rest in and count her money.

The counting was soon done. Signor Stefano Gralli's scudi were not devil's money ; they had not turned to ashes in her pocket, or vanished away. There they were, hard, gingling, and bright ; and the sum of them was unmistakably one hundred and fifty francs, represented by twenty-seven broad dollars.

But the apportionment of the sum into the two parts, into which it was destined to be divided

was not so easy a matter. The widow Caroli knew that she should win a terno ; and she had only to consider, therefore, how large a sum of money she would take from the victimised government. And yet she grudged paying away the hard cash which she held in her hand. She had thought that she would spend ten dollars on a ticket, an immensely large venture, which would bring her a prize on a terno of ten thousand!—an amount of wealth which it almost took her breath away to contemplate. She now, however, began to consider whether it would not do to allow the odd seven dollars to the lottery-ticket, so as to keep the even twenty to carry home with her. It seemed needless for one who was shortly about to possess ten thousand dollars to be so careful of twenty. But then, “*segnius irritant animos ;*” you know the rest ; and Barbara Caroli saw the twenty shining dollars, and did *not* SEE the ten thousand !

After much pondering, however, much dividing of the dollars into two heaps, much alternate

subtraction and addition, to the detriment and to the increase of either portion in succession, La Caroli finally determined that she would adhere to her first determination, spend ten dollars on her ticket, and content herself with a prize of ten thousand.

Having at length decided on this, the widow carefully tied up the seventeen crowns in her handkerchief, and keeping the other ten in her hand, arose from her seat on the step under the Uffizi arches, and went to look for a lottery office. She knew that it could not be that she would have to look far. The paternal Grand-ducal government took too much fatherly care to bring the pleasures of gambling within the readiest access of all classes of its subjects, for there to be any difficulty even for a stranger to find the means of staking his money on the next drawing at hand.

The lottery-shops were numerous in every part of the city. Like other things and places too solidly good to need the attractions of outward show, these offices, it must be owned, did

not tempt the passer-by to enter by anything agreeable in their appearance. They were, and alas! are, generally long narrow dens opening on the street, and not much wider than the door of entrance. A long high counter, or desk rather, runs the whole length of the place, leaving between it and the dirty fly-blown wall just room enough for the seats of some four or five clerks. The shape of the den being narrow and long, and lighted only by the entrance door and probably a window over it, to enter one of these temples of fortune from the bright street, is like plunging into the cavern of Trophonius. All within is squalid, and filthy, and sordid in no common degree.

On a Friday, that being the last day before the drawing, these dens are generally crowded, and almost entirely by the lowest classes of the population. This is not the case to the same degree now, because the lowest stake which can be played for is a much larger sum than was the case under the Grand-ducal government. But at the time in question the net was framed

to catch the minnows as well as the fish of larger growth—and was, indeed, mainly filled by them. There came the half-starved wretch to stake the two crazie (three half-pence) which he had saved out of the price of the dry bread that barely kept body and soul together. There came the servant fresh from pawning some article stolen from the house of master or mistress, for the express purpose of feeding the lottery. The stakes were mostly very low, and the general aspect of the crowd spoke clearly and eloquently enough of the manifold and terrible evils of this iniquitous means of fleecing the children of a paternal government.

Around the door, on Fridays especially, was to be seen also a lot of squalid, ragamuffin touters, with strips of coarse blue paper in their hands,—tickets bearing numbers specially recommended on various grounds, mainly on the fact that the combination offered had not come up for the last ten or twenty years; for registers of all the weekly drawings are kept by the enthusiasts of the lottery, showing the numbers

which have come out of the wheel for many years past. Frequently the touters limit their speculation to the mere recommending of numbers to those about to enter. But the trade in tickets already taken is most brisk during the hours which intervene between the closing of the offices on the Friday night and the time of drawing on the Saturday, in those cases in which the drawing takes place in the same city in which the operations are being carried on, or until the time when the result can be known by telegraph when the drawing takes place in any distant city. In the old days, when electric telegraphs were not, all kinds of dodges have been practised, sometimes on a large and highly lucrative scale, by the means of carrier pigeons, etc. The walls of the city, and even the pavements, in the mean time may be seen scrawled over with numbers in sets of five by the active industry of these same touters. The object of this is, that somebody, intent on trying his or her fortune, or capable of being tempted to do so by a sudden heaven-sent suggestion, but who

is at a loss to choose his numbers, may cast his eye on the figures thus presented to it, and may at once recognise the hand of destiny in the suggestion. Then, especially if it be too late to profit by the divine warning by taking a ticket in the regular way at the office, the *deus ex machiná* touter chances to be at hand with, lo ! a ticket for the very numbers in question !

“ *E poi, quando avevo pregato la Madonna tutta la notte passata di far-mi avere degli buoni numeri !* ”

“ When I had been praying, too, to the Madonna all night to give me some lucky numbers ! ”

Of course so undeniable, so visible an answer to the prayer can be neither doubted nor rejected, and the ticket is bought.

The tide of custom was not yet at its height in the lottery offices when la Signora Caroli entered to make her investment, for it was yet early in the afternoon. The time when they would be overflowing with an eager crowd would be some hours later, when the day's work

was over. She entered a dark, dirty hole, where the two of the four dirty, pimply-faced, unwholesome-looking young men who were nearest the door and the light were lazily serving a couple of customers. The desk in front of them was mottled with ink and grimy with the spilling of large quantities of the sand used instead of blotting-paper, of which an abundant provision was visible in wooden bowls all along the counter. The clerks wore sleeves of blue calico over their coat sleeves, to protect the latter from the filth among which they were writing in huge ledgers, made of very coarse blue paper ruled into semi-printed forms, to be filled by the pen, and then cut from the matrix as they were delivered to the applicants.

On a narrow bench placed against the wall opposite to the long counter there were placidly sitting three or four ragged and very seedy individuals. Who they were, or why there, it would have been difficult to say. Whether they were friends of the clerks, or intending customers, or utterly penniless would-be customers,

gazing at the fountain-head of tickets, as hungry little boys gaze at the window of a cook-shop. There they sat in that utterly purposeless way in which southern men will sit, whenever sitting is practicable. There was the narrow bench, there was shelter from the sun, there was apparently unlimited time for droning chat ; no man turned them out, and they seemed happy.

The other two clerks in the sombre twilight at the further end of the cave were enjoying a profound *far niente*, which assuredly could only be rendered *dolce*, like a painful act of virtue, by its own intrinsic and inalienable excellence.

To one of these the widow Caroli applied herself ; and he slowly and lazily brought himself into an upright sitting posture to attend to her. Dipping his pen in the ink he paused with it over the blue paper register, while he looked up inquiringly to be told the numbers that the applicant desired.

“ Give me, if you please, 19, 26, 87, 63, and 78,” said the widow.

It will be remembered, perhaps, that the

dream numbers were 19, 26, and 87. But it is usual always to take five numbers — neither more nor less than five being always extracted from the wheel—and to make up the quantity the Signora Caroli had added the number of the years of her own age and those of the age of her deceased husband. If any three of the five thus named come up, the terno is won, unless the player specifies otherwise. Then of course the prize is much increased. But this is rarely done.

“ 19, 26, 87, 63, and 78,” repeated the clerk, writing. “ What amount ? ”

“ Ten dollars,” said the widow.

“ No, that is not it. Tell me the amount you want to stake, will you ? ”

“ Ten dollars, if you please,” returned the widow, meekly.

The clerk looked up sharply and scanned the old woman from head to foot, but made no further remark.

“ Ten dollars on a terno, eh ? Is that it, signora ? ” he said.

“Yes, signor ; ten dollars on a terno,” the widow repeated, very humbly, laying down the money on the counter as she spoke.

“There it is, signora,” said the clerk, handing her a little printed strip of the coarse blue paper, duly filled up and signed ; “that will be all right, and I wish you good luck with it.”

“There goes the price of a whole year’s eggs and butter,” he muttered to the clerk who sat next to him, as the old woman turned to leave the office. “Plucky old girl, isn’t she ?”

La Signora Caroli had now completed her business in Florence, and had nothing more to do but to find her way back to the railway station, and wait till the time came at which the train was to start for Pescia. She got to the station more than an hour before the time, and sat herself down very patiently to wait. Had she not plenty of thoughts to employ her leisure ? She had not broken bread, save a crust which she had put in her pocket on leaving home, since that morning. But though she was the possessor of seventeen crowns in

hand, and of ten thousand in a shortly-to-be-realised future, it never for an instant occurred to her to be guilty of the extravagance of entering any place of refreshment. If it had been a man he would have taken a roll and a cup of black coffee ; but a Tuscan country-woman does not commit such intemperance and extravagance.

As for the ten thousand dollars, no sooner had she parted with her hard shining cash, than the certainty of winning them began to seem much less clear. She thought of the beauty of them, of the length of the roll which the seventeen made when united with them, of the diminished size of the heap as it now appeared, and she feared that she had acted like a fool. Curiously enough, too, together with these doubts, a misgiving began to arise in her mind as to the sinfulness of the mode by which she had acquired this hundred and fifty francs. Doubts of the kind had already suggested themselves to her, and had been over-ridden by the superior energy and will, and by the

less tender conscience of the Signora Sibilla Gralli. Now, when it was no longer possible to undo the action which had prompted these misgivings, they returned with redoubled force. The general tone of Italian moral feeling is very far indeed from suggesting that there is or can be anything wrong, or contrary to the dictates of religion, in playing in the lottery. It is scarcely possible that the clergy can reprobate a line of conduct which is not only sanctioned but practised by the papal government itself. Nevertheless there were some notions at the bottom of the Signora Caroli's heart which prompted her to feel that it would have been less unbecoming to sell her husband's crucifix the moment he was dead, for the purpose of buying bread, or even of buying a house or a field, than for that of playing in the lottery. There *were* people who much objected to the lottery at all. Her son was one of these; and she had often heard him speak strongly his disapprobation of it. She did not like the feeling that she had sold her

husband's property thus secretly, for the purpose which she knew his and her son would greatly dislike. She strove to tranquillise herself by reflecting how very clearly a voice from the other world—probably her husband's own voice—had invited her to play in the lottery.

And it must have been known to the saints, certainly at least to her late husband, that she possessed no available means of doing so.

Nevertheless, conscience when once awakened, is, as we all know, apt to be very persistently importunate ; and when the railway bell rung, which warned her that it was time to take her ticket, the Signora Caroli had almost fretted herself into repenting that she had ever made this journey to Florence for such a purpose.

She arrived in due course at the Pescia station, fancying however all the way in the railway carriage that everybody would observe that she was returning without the packet she had carried with her in the morning, just as on her previous journey she had imagined that every eye was scrutinising the basket she had

on her arm. The little Valdinievole city, however, was reached without accident; and the tired widow, still fasting, addressed herself to the task of walking up through the woods to her mountain home..

At the entrance to the little town she found her friend Sibilla on the look-out for her.

“Well, I see you have not brought it back. What did he give you for it? Have you got the ticket?” cried the priest’s housekeeper.

“Come in a minute, Sibilla, there’s a good soul. I am pretty near beat with weariness and want of a morsel to eat. Come in a minute, and I will tell you all about it. No, I have not brought it back, sure enough!”

When they had reached the widow’s house, and she had taken a crust of bread and an onion, and a morsel of a cold omelet, which she had purposely left in the cupboard, “Now then, Signora Caroli,” said Sibilla, “that you have the strength to speak, I hope you are going to tell me all about it.”

“Well, I went to Signor Stefano’s on the

bridge, and he bid me, after a deal of talking—oh, he is a rare one to talk words like words out of a book—one hundred and fifty francs. And of course I took it, and thankful; and he paid me seven-and-twenty hard dollars, out of a great safe, as is in the wall.”

“Ah! I knew it was worth money! and Stefano, he is a man you can trust—one as wouldn’t rob a widow woman, though I say it as shouldn’t.”

“And then I went to the office and put ten dollars on a ticket; and that’s all about it.”

“Then you have brought back seventeen dollars, Barbara?” said Sibilla with greedy eyes.

“Yes! I have seventeen dollars here!” said Barbara with almost a discontented air.

“And ten for the ticket? Let me see it. Ah! yes; all right, these are the blessed numbers!” said Sibilla, eagerly examining the little bit of paper.

“*Are* they blessed numbers, Sibilla? That’s the question!” said the widow, shaking her head and looking wistfully into her friend’s face.

“Are they blessed numbers? Why of course they are, Barbara Caroli! How should they be other than blessed numbers, and they given to you the way they was! It is a sin to doubt it, and I tell you so,” said the priest’s housekeeper severely, and with the air of a high and undoubted authority.

“Well, I hope all is for the best,” returned the widow with a sigh; “but I seem to wish it hadn’t been his crucifix. Anything else I should not have minded.”

“And where was you to find anything else that would have fetched the money, I should like to know?” retorted Sibilla, victoriously. “But it’s your mind as is irreligious, Signora Barbara, that’s where it is. You haven’t got faith, no, no more almost than a heathen! And what is to be my commission,” she added, after a pause, “for recommending you to my brother?”

“Well, I suppose you will expect to have something,” said the widow, prepared for a haggles.

“Of course I do. *Diamine!* How would you have sold your crucifix without me—and for such a price too! Of course I must have my regular commission.”

“Well, Sibilla, I did not deny that. And I am sure if it will gratify you to have a dollar for your pains, I shall not begrudge it to you.”

“A dollar! *Misericordia!* Come now, Signora Barbara, you may not have been in the way of much business of this kind, but you must know better than that. A dollar indeed! Don’t talk nonsense!”

“But that seems to me handsome enough, Sibilla, for all the pains you had in the matter. If a dollar won’t do, what is it you expect?”

“I expect my commission regular; of course I do. Why not? The price paid was a hundred and fifty francs. Ten per cent. on that would come to fifteen francs, if I am not mistaken. At least, that is what I make it.”

“Fifteen francs! *Misericordia! Santa Madonna!* Ten per cent!—fifteen francs!

Who ever heard of such a thing?" cried poor Barbara Caroli, in a voice of utter dismay.

"Just you ask any of them as has ever bought or sold such matters, and you will soon learn who has heard of such a thing. I wish you had asked Stefano Gralli. He would have told you fast enough. Ten per cent. commission for the *mezzano* (middle-man) is as regular as the price of a loaf of bread! Come, Signora Caroli, don't go for to disgrace yourself for a matter of fifteen francs. You never could have got that hundred and fifty francs without my help. You know that very well. And I am only asking for my due . . . and I mean to have it too!"

The last words were spoken very much as if the Signora Sibilla were entirely in earnest; and after a little more utterly vain striving and lamentation, on the part of the widow, her dear friend's commission was paid.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LOTTERY IS DRAWN.

IT was quite true that without the assistance, the advice, and the co-operation of the arch-priest's housekeeper, the widow Barbara Caroli would never have succeeded in turning her departed husband's crucifix into cash, or in raising in any way the funds necessary for the taking advantage of the lucky dream numbers, which the signal favour of the celestial powers had so kindly suggested to her. It was also true that, according to Tuscan ways and habits in affairs of the sort, the *mezzano*, or go-between, who introduces a seller to a buyer, is considered entitled, in contracts of such a nature as that between Signora Caroli and Signor Stefano Gralli, to as large a percentage as that claimed by the Signora Sibilla.

Nevertheless it was not, upon the whole, a transaction which the priest's housekeeper would have cared to have talked of in Uzzano. Possibly the arch-priest her master might have taken it into his head to cry halves in the profits. Possibly some of the gossips might have said ill-natured things about the sale of the crucifix. At all events it was better to say nothing about the matter. Italians are habitually, and in obedience to the wisdom which long generations of a government by spies has taught them, exceedingly secretive. No people are fonder of gossip and chattering. But the chatter is invariably directed to the investigation into the secrets and affairs of their neighbours, and never into the needless disclosures of their own.

As for the Signora Caroli herself, it was, of course, not likely that she should admit anyone to her confidence as to the great venture she had made. She was already ill-at-ease respecting it. Her conscience misgave her as to the sale of the crucifix ; and her worldly prudence

was not altogether satisfied with the use to which she had devoted so large a part of the proceeds. Besides, it was very necessary to her that the whole transaction should be kept from the ears of her son. It was not that she had the slightest notion that she was wronging him in the disposal of the crucifix, looking at it as a mere matter of property. But she dreaded that he might think it wrong to have sold the one article of value to which his father had clung ; and she was sure that he would very seriously disapprove the use to which she had put the money. If the ticket should come up a prize, then indeed it would of course be necessary to tell Carlo all about it, if only to account for her possession of so large a sum of money. But then, she thought her triumphant position would place her far above all carping censure. Success, the great gilder and the great absolver, would make all right. Who should say that anybody had done otherwise than well and wisely, who came with ten thousand crowns of lawfully gained money in their hand ?

But if—*if* the venture should result in failure, then the widow felt that she would not for a great deal that her son should ever know anything about the matter at all. In the meantime, therefore, the widow Caroli was fully minded to keep her own counsel, and the whole matter remained a profound secret between her and her friend Sibilla.

The state of almost agonised suspense, however, in which poor Barbara Caroli was doomed to remain for awhile was not destined to be of very long duration. It was necessarily somewhat longer than it would have been if the lottery for that week had been to be drawn in Tuscany. But it so happened that it was to be drawn at Rome. This locality of the ceremony of drawing, it must be understood, was merely a matter of arrangement between the administration of the lottery, under the different governments, for their mutual convenience and the saving of expense and trouble. Though the lottery might be drawn at Rome the Tuscan government took the money of its own subjects,

and paid the prizes. When the drawing took place at Florence or Leghorn, his Holiness the Pope none the less fleeced his own flock, and stood to the losses that might accrue in paying them their prizes.

But those were days when there were neither railroads nor telegraphs between Rome and Florence ; and nothing could be known of the drawing in Rome till the shambling, ramshackle, old, miscalled "diligence," which carried the mail between the Eternal City and the City of Flowers, should bring the news waited for with such anxiety by the Tuscan devotees of fortune.

The drawing was to take place at mid-day on the Saturday, in Rome. The mail would not leave the city till that evening, and in the state of the roads, which had resulted from the recent floods, could hardly be expected in Florence before the morning of the Monday. Then, with as little delay as possible, the five fortunate numbers would be posted up at every lottery-office in Tuscany, and the holders of

them would hurry to present themselves and their winning tickets at the offices at which they had purchased them.

Thus it would only be necessary for Signora Caroli to walk down into Pescia in order to learn her fate ; but if that fate should be laden with fortune, it would be needful for her to make a second journey to Florence to touch the golden fruit of her venture,—*golden* in no metaphorical sense, but literally and veritably golden. For though silver was in those days the universal current medium in almost all other cases, it was the time-honoured and still-observed practice to pay the prizes of the lottery in *rusponi*, the old broad gold pieces of Florence,—whenever, that is to say, the amount reached to that value.

A long debate had been held between Signora Barbara and her friend and confidante as to the propriety of going down to Pescia on the Sunday night. Poor Barbara could rest neither by night nor by day. She could not eat, and she could not sleep. She could do nothing but

count over and over again the value of her *terno*, if the saints should be as good as their so clearly-pledged word, and send her one, and recite innumerable litanies with a view of keeping them up to the mark. Her mind was rapidly working itself into a state which if prolonged much further would probably have resulted in a fever of the nerves.

Nevertheless it had been decided that it was of no use to go down to Pescia on the Sunday. Of course in this, as in every other stage of the business, the stronger spirit of the Signora Sibilla had been the ruling one.

“Where is the use of going down the hill for nothing?” she had urged. “You must know, Barbara, that it can’t have come yet. Why the very earliest that it could get to Florence would be on Sunday night, and then it has got to be brought from Florence to Pescia, and that will take a good three hours.”

“Two hours and a quarter, Sibilla. That I *do* know, for I marked the time myself the other day.”

“ Well, two hours and a quarter, say. But there will be no train after the coach comes in from Rome on Sunday night. And it won't come in after such weather as we have had. Be ruled, Barbara. You keep yourself quiet till to-morrow evening, and——”

“ To-morrow evening ! Why, everybody in Pescia will know the numbers come mid-day to-morrow ! ” urged the widow.

“ I say to-morrow evening ; they'll come none earlier, you may be sure. And do keep yourself quiet. Say half a score of *Aves* and *Paters*, to keep your mind easy. Come, I'll say a rosary with you. It will take your mind off, and do you good.”

“ I should like to go down and know the truth,” pleaded the widow, whiningly.

“ What is the good, I ask you, Signora Barbara ? Just to make the folks stare, and wonder what in the world brings you down to Pescia once and again for nothing, for it will be for nothing. No, no ; you be ruled by me, and just go down quiet and easy to-morrow evening.”

All that the priest's housekeeper urged was perfectly true ; and of course poor Signora Barbara *was* ruled, and had to wait in a state bordering on distraction till mid-day on the Monday. Then Sibilla allowed her to start on her journey down the mountain, after long and repeated instructions as to the manner in which she was to behave herself when she reached the city.

“Don't go a running up to the office with your heart in your mouth, and staring at the numbers, so as to let everybody see what you are looking after. Just walk quiet like by, and take a look by chance like. Stand a bit, and look into a shop window, and then give a look up at the numbers. And mind, whatever you do, you don't go for to cry out, or seem to care about what you see there.”

“Oh, *Jesu, Maria!* Sibilla, if the numbers ain't there, I shall drop, let alone crying out,” exclaimed the schooled widow.

“But they *will* be there !” replied her friend, magisterially.

“And if they are, it will be worse still. No, not worse ; I don’t mean that, the saints forgive me ! But I shall never be able to just keep quiet, as if the numbers was no concern of mine.”

“But you must do just that. If, as is like enough, you should see anybody you know a looking out for the numbers at the office, you might say a word ; ask ’em what their numbers are, and stop with them to see *their* luck, don’t you understand ? For I make no doubt you will have to wait. You will get to Pescia before they have come.”

“Oh, no, Sibilla ! I can’t wait any longer. I shall be a long time getting down the hill. I can’t walk like I could once. I shan’t be there much before three o’clock.”

“Well, you mind what I have been a saying. Speak to them as you find in front of the office. That’ll be the best way.”

Thus schooled, the widow set out on her momentous expedition. Her friend would fain have accompanied her, if it had been in her

power to do so. But it was impossible for her to make such an expedition as a journey to Pescia without giving the arch-priest some valid reason for such an absence. The poor widow was in a really pitiable state of nervous excitement, as she walked down the long paved way through the chestnut woods to the city. As long as she was among the chestnut woods it was more endurable, for she had them all to herself. There was little chance of her meeting any one on the road to Uzzano at that time of the four-and-twenty hours. But when she emerged from the forest at the foot of the hill, and stepped out upon the white road, now blazing in the sunshine, along which she had to walk a couple of miles or so before reaching the city, the sense of having to conceal her agitation and the nature of the errand on which she was bound, became exceedingly painful. There were plenty of travellers passing along the road, and the widow thought that they all looked at her with curiosity.

She said to herself again and again that she

had no cause to hurry, and that she *would* take her time and not heat herself ; but the spirit within her that goaded her on was too much for her, and she could not refrain from pressing onwards at a pace that brought her to the city streaming with perspiration.

She had never meddled with the lottery before, and did not at all know where she should find a lottery office ; but she was sure that she should not have to go very far without seeing one. One half of the little city of Pescia stands on one side of the little stream of the same name, and the other half on the opposite bank, and they are united by a handsome bridge. The widow's road brought her to a gate of the city on the left-hand bank of the river,—a gate opening on a long street which forms nearly the whole of that portion of the city which stands on the left bank.

About half way up this long street there was, and probably still is, a “ Banco del Lotto,” or lottery office ; such a place as has been described in a previous chapter. Conspicuously

on the front of all such offices there is a long board, divided into five spaces and fitted with slides, so that cards or small panels of wood bearing the number intended to be shown may fit into them. After each drawing these remain thus exposed for two or three days, and are then removed, and the spaces remain vacant till the winning numbers of the next drawing come to take their places.

As soon as the Signora Barbara caught the first glimpse of this "Banco del Lotto," very recognisable by any Italian eye from its general appearance, her heart beat so violently that she felt as if she should drop. She absolutely could not raise her eyes to the fateful board. She stopped and pressed her hand to her side, as one seized with a sudden spasm—as seized she really was.

After a few seconds, with a great effort she forced herself to look up, and saw the spaces of board . . . empty.

The more practical Signora Sibilla had been right. The widow had come too soon. The

news of the winning numbers had not yet reached Pescia, and poor old Barbara had to make up her mind to wait yet a little longer with such patience as she might.

It was very hard, very difficult, especially as she could not venture to ask anything or to say a word to anybody on the subject that was agitating her. She knew, however, that a train was due from Florence before long, and as she was altogether at a loss what to do with herself, she determined to walk towards the railway station, which at Pescia is a little way out of the town. She seemed to be thus going to meet the much dreaded news that she was waiting for. She would at all events in this manner get the earliest intelligence of the arrival of the train. She walked more deliberately this time in the direction of the station, and reached it before there was any sign of the arrival of the train. It was late. When did an anxious watcher ever await the arrival of a train that it was *not* late? Poor Signora Barbara thought that gods, men, and railways

were in a conspiracy to keep the longed-for intelligence from her. She kept on miserably sauntering backwards and forwards between the outer gate of the station, and the entrance to the platform ; and at last, when she had begun to think that on that special day no train would arrive, she heard the whistle and the station bell, which announced its close vicinity. She started forwards to the platform, and watched the approaching engine with wide eyes, as if she had expected to see the winning numbers emblazoned on the front of the machine. And it was not till the train had come up to the platform, that she bethought her that nobody in all that crowd knew anything of what she was so anxious to learn—that the tidings of the numbers would of course be sent in an official letter to the administrator of the lottery ; and that now this fateful letter would probably be at Pescia before she could, for the station to which she had wandered out is a good mile from the main part of the city.

So it behoved the old lady to make the best

of her way back again to Pescia. Heedless of the fatigue which she began to be sensible of, of the heat which was scorching the white dusty road, of the prospect of the laborious walk up the mountain to her home, which lay before her, she hurried along, and was making for the same office at which she had been disappointed when first she entered the town. But as she was about to pass the bridge, with its little open piazza at the foot of it, totally unaware that there was situated the principal lottery office of the city, she saw suddenly before her eyes in large figures on a board extending all across the frontage of a small house, the three wondrous numbers.

Yes, there they were, there could be no mistake. There they were in the plainest possible figures, 19, 26, 87, and two other numbers, it mattered not what.*

The Signora Barbara had expected to win. She *thought* she expected it! And yet, her first

* It is a fact that three numbers dreamed, as here related, came up in a lottery not long ago.

sensation was one of immense astonishment ! Was it all real ? Or was this too a part of her dream ? It was really and truly the fact, then, that her departed husband, or some saint with whom he had been able to make interest, had directed her to these numbers. A great and terrible feeling of awe came over the widow Caroli. She—she in her own person had been in communication with the unseen world. For a few seconds she stood like one transfixed, gazing at the painted numbers, and half expecting to see them dissolve away before her eyes. But there they stood the brunt of her severest scrutiny. And they told her that she was the possessor of some ten thousand crowns !

At last, shaking all over, she turned away and made her way as well as she could for the mist, in which every thing before her eyes seemed to be wrapped, to the open door of a neighbouring church.

She entered and sat down on a bench at the end of the aisle. The little church was empty, and very nearly dark ; and Signora Barbara

was very thankful to find there the privacy and quietude so necessary for her at that moment.

Being in a church, it seemed to be the least she could do to give thanks to the unknown saint, who had been thus beneficent to her. And she tried to apply her mind to the task of muttering some form of thanksgiving accordingly; but she was not very successful. Though still shaking and trembling from head to foot with the violence of the emotion she had passed through, she could not keep her mind from trying to gauge the unknown infinity of TEN THOUSAND CROWNS! There was a sense of awe even in the immensity of the sum that heaven had awarded to her.

She sat a long while in the little silent church, while her mind wandered to and fro between speculations on the vastitude of her wealth, and the manner in which to bestow it, and the desultory attempts to lull the misgivings of her conscience, anent the manner in which the means of obtaining all this wealth had been

procured, by testifications of gratitude to the saints who had helped her to it.

At the further end of the church, which in the early autumn sunset was now nearly quite dark, there was a little lamp burning before a shrine, which glimmered like a star seen through a fog. The widow was sitting with her eyes fixed on this distant light, as she attempted to form a supplication to the Virgin, before whose altar it was doubtless burning. It was all she could see in the darkness ; and it is necessary to the southern mind that its attempts to communicate with the invisible should be aided by the present sight of some symbol of an unseen presence. So for the nonce the far-glimmering little lamp was to the widow Caroli the outward and visible manifestation of the invisible world with which she was striving to set herself right.

And lo! suddenly while she was thus intently occupied in the dead silence of the deserted church, a sudden clap as of sharp and angry thunder was heard, and at the same moment

the little lamp, heaven's beacon light, was extinguished.

Reduced to the proportion of simple fact, all that had happened was merely this. The open door of a sacristy close at hand had been slammed to by a passing breath of wind, and the displacement of air thus caused had blown the lamp out.

But to the excited and troubled mind of the widow these startling phenomena were fraught with a very terrible significance. Assuredly there was no mistaking in these awful signs the expressed displeasure of heaven. Her conscience then had been right, when it first whispered to her that the sale of her husband's crucifix was not a mode of raising money on which heaven could look with approbation. It might be very true that the saints had beneficently revealed to her the numbers which were to win in the lottery; but it did not follow that *that* was the mode in which their goodness was to be turned to account. Even while she was in the act of offering thanksgiving

to heaven for the benefit vouchsafed to her, the Mother of God had withdrawn herself from her gratitude with miraculous manifestations of displeasure. And did it not follow that this money would be a curse to her instead of a blessing? What should she do? What should she do?

The only available help in her trouble that presented itself to her mind, was to seek the counsel and help of her friend Sibilla. It was she who had confidently recommended the selling of the crucifix; and certainly it was reasonable to suppose that the opinion of a person so closely connected with the church as she was, must be entitled to much authority. But what would Sibilla say *now*? At all events the first thing to be done was to call her to counsel. In short, the weaker mind felt the usual need of support from the stronger one; or at least the stronger will, which often comes to the same thing.

So the widow Caroli, unnerved and very unhappy, rose from her seat in the dark church,

and coming out into the quickly fading evening twilight, addressed herself to the laborious task of regaining her mountain home.

It was dark night long before she reached Uzzano ; but for that she cared little. The woods and their shadows, the white paved path, and every zig-zag of it, were familiar to her ; but she was very weary, as well she might be, and she carried a very heavy heart. Never had she traversed that well-known path in so great unhappiness as now when she stepped the undoubted possessor of the fabulous sum of ten thousand crowns.

CHAPTER VIII.

FEMALE FRIENDSHIP.

AT the foot of the wall supporting the little terrace piazza, in front of the church at Uzzano, the widow Barbara found her friend on the look out for her.

“At last! I was beginning to give you up for to-night,” cried the Signora Sibilla, as the stooping figure of the worn and weary widow came in sight, emerging out of the double darkness of the forest and the ruined gateway of the town. “Who was right now, eh?” she went on; “did I not tell you, you would have to wait. . . . Well, why don’t you speak?—What is it? . . . Can’t you say the truth at once? . . . I see . . . I see. A mishap! No luck for you this time! Well, you *would* put such a large

sum on the chance. It never does to offend the saints by being over-greedy !”

And all this time the poor widow had not uttered a word. She was fairly beaten. What with exhaustion, fatigue, and mental distress, it had been as much as ever she could do to crawl up the hill, and she felt now utterly unable to reply to the rapid and impatient greeting of her gossip.

So, putting her hand on the Signora Sibilla's arm for support, she fairly began to cry.

“Well,” said the priest's housekeeper, “I can't stay here all night. I must go and see if his reverence has not done his supper. He'll be wanting the *trabiccolo** put into his bed. You had better go home, Signora Barbara. If you have thrown away ten crowns on a venture, you have nobody to blame but yourself.”

“It isn't that, Sibilla,” said the widow, faintly, and sobbing as she spoke ; “the numbers is come up true enough, but . . .”

* A light wooden frame used in Tuscany for hanging an earthenware pot of braise inside a bed to warm it.

“What! what! The numbers is come up?” almost shrieked the Signora Sibilla. “What! the real numbers—19, 26, 87? You don’t tell me that? Barbara Caroli, are you sure?” asked she with intense solemnity.

“Yes, Sibilla, I am sure enough—quite certain sure: 19, 26, 87. There’s no mistake about it.”

“And you have won the *terno*!”

“Yes, Sibilla, I have won the *terno*!” replied the widow, faintly.

“Gracious heaven! Barbara, my dear, dear friend! Ten thousand crowns if it is a penny! *Ave Maria, gratiá plena, libera nos nunc et in horá mortis nostræ!*” said the priest’s house-keeper, pouring forth with infinite volubility the first incantation which came into her head, and which she considered needed, under the circumstances, to show her ecclesiastical breeding and attainments.

“That’s about it,” said the widow, shaking her head mournfully.

The Signora Sibilla looked into her face fixedly for a minute, and began to doubt

whether the gift of fortune had not been too much for her dear friend's brain. A very different tone of manner, however, was proper towards the winner of an immense *terno* in the lottery to that which would have been desirable towards a loser.

“My poor, poor dear!” said the Signora Sibilla, caressingly, and taking both the hands of the widow in her own as she spoke; “my poor dear! you are over-tired—just dead-beat, Barbara *mia*; that's what it is. I reckon you have not had bit nor sup since you went away from here at noon.”

“No, I have tasted nothing,” said the utterly exhausted old woman.

“Poor dear soul, come, come along. I must go home with you, and see to getting you a bit of supper. Stop, stay you here a minute. Sit down on this step here, while I run into the house and get a flask of good *aleatico*. I am sure his reverence would not grudge it. Not that you have any call to be beholden to anybody for a glass of wine, Signora Barbara, but

it is too late to get anything in the town to-night ; and I will bring a nice bit of ham that his reverence supped off this very night. Just you wait here a minute."

"Won't the *arciprete* want you, Sibilla, to put the *trabiccolo* in his bed?" said the widow, without a thought of malice or satire in her simple mind.

"Oh, drat the *arciprete*! he may wait for the *trabiccolo*, or put it in himself, or go to bed without it if he likes. I am not going to desert you, dearest Barbara, when you have need of me!"

And so saying the housekeeper bustled actively into the priest's house, close at hand, while Signora Barbara did as she was bid, and sat down wearily enough on the last of the steps that led from the roadway below up to the piazza in front of the church.

In a minute or two the Signora Sibilla returned, bringing with her the promised creature-comforts, and taking the widow's hand in hers, proceeded to help her to her desolate home.

Not a word was spoken between them during the short walk. When they had entered the Palazzo Trendi, by simply lifting the latch, the housekeeper set to work with practised activity; got together some logs and brush-wood on the cold hearth, and had soon a comfortable blaze; moved the widow's old arm-chair to the chimney-corner; spread a cloth with bread, ham, plate, and glass upon it.

“There, Signora Barbara,” she said, pouring from the flask a glassful of the rich sweet aleatico wine; “just you drink that before ever you speak another word; and see if it don't do you good.”

The widow again did as she was bid; and then the Signora Sibilla made her drink a second glass, and placed food before her; and as the widow ate and drank, the desire and the power of being communicative to her friend began to return to her.

“Now, you feel a bit better, I'll be bound,” said Sibilla, cheerily. “You were just well nigh starved, and you the owner of ten thousand

crowns ! And now, Signora Barbara, I wish you joy with all my heart. It's many a long year that we have been friends, but it's little I ever thought that I should call the owner of ten thousand crowns my own friend ! Ah, Signora Barbara, who was it as put you up to selling the crucifix ? You'll not forget that."

"No, Sibilla, I'll not forget that. And God and the Virgin grant that it was all for the best. But, Sibilla, I have terrible misgivings. My mind is not any way easy about it. If this money, after all, should turn out to be a curse !"

"What ? Ten thousand crowns a curse ! Signora Barbara, what can you mean ?" said her friend, in genuine amazement, and really beginning to think that her old gossip's head was turned by her good fortune.

It had been botheration enough to listen to the widow's scruples of conscience when the result of the deed had been doubtful ; but that she should be tormenting herself and others with them now that success, and such success, had justified the means, was too provoking.

“Wait till you hear all, Sibilla. Wait till you hear what I’m a-going to tell you,” said the widow, shaking her head mournfully.

“Tell? Why, what can there be to tell? You are quite sure the numbers is come up all right?” said her friend, with an anxious, quick glance into her face.

“Oh, yes; quite sure. There is no mistake about that,” returned the widow.

“Well, then, it is all right. What ever is there to tell, I should like to know?” said the practical daughter of the Church.

“Was the selling of the crucifix lawful, Sibilla? That is what is tormenting me. I am afraid, I am terribly afraid, that the saints did not mean me to get the money for the ticket that way.”

“Now, Signora Barbara,” said the house-keeper, with as near an approach to contempt and anger in her voice as it was possible to feel towards the possessor of ten thousand crowns, “how can you go on like that, when it was *I* who told you that it would be a flying in the

face of Providence not to use the means put under your hand. Do you think I don't know more about such things than you can? Don't it stand to reason that I *must* know more, looking to the station in life to which it has pleased heaven to call me? Don't you go for to give yourself no trouble on that score. *I* know what I am talking about. I understand the ways of the saints and their signs and tokens a deal better than you can. You trust to me, and make yourself easy about *that*."

It was a great comfort to the widow Caroli to hear her friend speak on the subject of her fears with this confidence. It was undeniable that the priest's housekeeper must, in the nature of things, be a much better judge of all such matters than a poor simple soul like herself could be. The good aleatico wine, too, had done its kindly office, and the widow was disposed now, more than she had been half an hour previously, to look upon all things in heaven and earth in a less gloomy light. The awful occurrences in the dark church at Pescia were less

vividly present to her mind. Nevertheless, she was very anxious to hear what her confidante would say to those startling manifestations,—as anxious as a much-alarmed patient about to disclose his symptoms to his medical adviser.

“Yes ; but do listen to me, Sibilla. I want to tell you what happened to me down at Pescia, and then you can judge. I have had an awful revelation, Sibilla.”

“A revelation ! What, about the numbers ?” asked her friend, with great interest.

“No, not about the numbers, Sibilla ; but I went into a church, and . . .”

“Oh, never mind about revelations, if the numbers are all right,” cried the Signora Sibilla, lashed into something more nearly approaching irreverence than became a person in her position, by her friend’s ill-timed scruples.

“Oh, Sibilla, not mind revelations !” said the widow in a tone of mild reproach.

“Of course I didn’t mean that, and you know I didn’t, Signora Barbara ; but it is as well to be sure as a revelation *is* a revelation. There’s

the devil can imitate the ways of the saints and of the blessed Virgin herself so natural like, that nobody that hadn't been specially put up to it could tell the difference. What I say is, was your revelation a revelation ?”

“You shall hear, Sibilla. Just you have patience, and you shall hear,” said the widow, not insensible to the pleasure of having a flesh-creeping narrative to relate, notwithstanding the mental distress it had caused, and was still causing her.

“Well, as I was a-saying, after I'd seen the numbers on the board at the office,—I'd no need to look twice, I can tell you, I knew 'em well enough by heart,—after I'd a seen 'em, I felt ready to drop, and I did not know whatever to do. So seeing a church open close by I just stepped in and sat me down near the door. Anyway, you know, I could not do wrong to say an *Ave* and a *Pater* or two, and thank the saints for the good luck as they had sent me.”

“Certainly, you could do no less, Signora Barbara. That was all right so far,” said

the Signora Sibilla, in the tone of superior authority.

“ Well, the church was pretty nigh dark. It was getting on towards evening, and there was not a blessed soul in the place as far as I could see. But up at the further end of the church, near the altar, there was a lamp a-burning afore the altar of the blessed Virgin, as I could see in the darkness ; and it was well-nigh the only thing I could see. So as I sat trying to rest myself a bit, and get over the flusteration of my mind like, thinking over the selling of the crucifix and the *terno*, and the ten thousand crowns, and praying the blessed Virgin not to take it amiss that I had sold my husband’s crucifix ; all of a sudden, Sibilla, as sure as you sit there,” and the widow clutched her friend’s arm as she spoke,—“ all of a sudden there was a clap of thunder, terrible, sharp, and short, and the lamp was put out. I thought I should have fainted where I sat. Now that’s plain enough, I take it. There’s no mistaking that. Isn’t it plain enough to see that the blessed Virgin was

angry at what I had done? Tell me that, Sibilla."

"Certainly," replied her friend, after a very brief moment of consideration, "there can be no doubt about it, that that was a sign from heaven. But then, what was the meaning of it? There isn't a worse sin of presumption, Signora Barbara, than for them to be interpreting signs and wonders as has not been educated to the business. Never you go to think that you can tell what the saints mean to say to you till you have asked somebody as understands their ways. Now, I'll tell you what it was the blessed Virgin wanted. Bless you, I know all the ways of 'em as well as I know my chaplet. The Virgin was a-telling you that the least you could do was to put a light before her altar. You ought to have thought of that the first thing when you heard the blessed news. But you had never thought of that. 'See,' says she, 'here I am all in the dark for want of some pious Christian to put a light before my altar. Barbara Caroli,' says she, 'after the grace you

have had, you might do that much for the Mother of God.' That was the meaning of the revelation, Signora Barbara; and it's a happy thing that you have got me to put you in the way of understanding it."

"And do you really think that was the meaning of it, Sibilla?" said the widow, greatly relieved, but still not altogether satisfied.

"Think!" exclaimed her friend, "I know it. Don't I tell you that I always understand what they mean. You go and put up half a dozen candles to the blessed Virgin first thing to-morrow morning, and you'll make all *that* right."

"I'm sure I'd willingly make it a dozen candles, if you think that the blessed Virgin would like it better, Sibilla. It never lay in my power to do much in that way for the saints; but, thank God, I can afford it now."

"I should think so, too. Make it a dozen, and then you may go and take your money with a safe conscience. And about that," continued the Signora Sibilla, descending rapidly

from the exposition of heavenly matters to the consideration of sublunary affairs,—“talking of that, what do you mean to do about taking your money?”

“Ah! well, I suppose I must go for it,” said the widow.

“Of course you must go for it, Signora Barbara; you must go to Florence for it.”

“Go to Florence!” exclaimed the widow, in a tone of dismay. “Go to Florence again!”

“To be sure; they always pay at the same office where you bought your ticket.” (The Signora Sibilla was not quite accurate in her information; but she had never drawn a prize in the lottery, and she spoke according to her lights.) “You must go to Florence, and show your ticket, and then you will be paid in gold!”

“*Jesu, Maria!* Sibilla! Ten thousand crowns in gold! And I must take that in my hand and bring it away with me!” said the widow, with an expression of genuine imbecility.

“Yes, that is what you must do, or get some-

body to help you to do. Should you like me now, to go with you to Florence?" said her friend, in an insinuating tone.

"Well, there is no denying that it would be a great comfort if you *could* manage it. But I was thinking that now, of course, I must tell Carlo all about it; *he'll* never speak against the lottery again, I should hope; and I thought perhaps that I could write to him about it," said the widow, meditatively.

"Humph! Of course you must tell Signor Carlo; and you must tell a many other people. All the world will know it. And you'll see, Signora Barbara, the respect and good words you'll get from everybody. But if I was you I would not go to say anything to Signor Carlo till I had got the money in my hand. The sight of such a heap of money goes a long way. You get the money safe home here, and then send to Signor Carlo to come to you."

Such was the wisdom dictated by the world experience of the Signora Sibilla; and it was not unacceptable to the widow's feelings. She

still felt as if she were somehow or other a culprit in the business. She seemed to herself to be altogether unexplainably ashamed of the possession of the wealth she had become possessed of. The main object to which she purposed to devote it was the facilitation of her son's marriage with the rich farmer's daughter, and thus the securing of his happiness. And she had no doubt but that these objects would be swiftly and readily attained by it. And yet it was agreeable to her that the moment of communicating this happiness to Carlo should be deferred.

"Perhaps it would be best as you say, Sibilla," she replied to the remarks of her friend; "perhaps it would be best to say nothing about it to Carlo till the money is safe in this house. It is for him I want it, God knows! And you think that you could make it out so as to go with me to Florence? But how would you manage with his reverence? You would not tell him?"

"Not just yet," said Sibilla, with decision;

“of course, he will know like all the rest of the world. And there is no reason against telling him, that I can see. But I wouldn't say a word to anybody, I think, till you have got the money in hand.”

“Then what will you say to him about your going to Florence?” returned the widow.

“Oh, I shall tell him what is very true, that I have long wanted to see my brother, who is an unmarried man, without chick or child belonging to him. His reverence will understand that I ought not to let him forget me; and he will make no difficulty about letting me go.”

“It would be a comfort to me certainly,” said the widow, who remembered all the misery of her last solitary journey to Florence, and who felt that she should surely need the presence of some friend to keep her in countenance, when she should, as she expressed it herself, “go up to the young man in the office, as bold as brass, and bid him hand over ten thousand crowns.”

“ Well, then, I will go. I don’t deny that it is a convenience to have an opportunity of going to Florence without any expense, for of course, dear, in your position you would not think of expecting me to be at charges.”

“ Why, if you *was* wishful to go and see your brother . . . and he’s got a great iron safe full of money in the shop on the Ponte Vecchio, I can tell you . . . but there . . . I’ll not say anything about that. I won’t mind paying your expenses to Florence and back for the sake of having your company : it *will* be a comfort.”

“ Think of what ten thousand crowns is ! Look at that, my dear friend.”

“ Yes, that *is* what I am thinking. When do you think we ought to go, Sibilla ? ”

“ They won’t send after you to come and be paid, if you was to wait ever so long ; that is certain. So the sooner we go the better. Why not to-morrow ? Where is the blessed ticket ? ”

“ Here it is, see ! All safe ! ” replied the widow, drawing the precious scrap of blue paper out of some inmost recess of her garments.

“ Shall I take care of it, for fear you might lose it, Signora Barbara. You are not that accustomed to take care of papers, you know, that I am,” said the priest’s housekeeper, actuated by a vague feeling that some sort of importance would accrue to her from being the depositary of a scrap of printed paper worth ten thousand crowns.

“ No fear, Sibilla, dear ! No, thank you ; I’ll keep the paper myself. I’ll not lose it,” said the widow, restoring the ticket to its former place of safety.

“ Just let me look at it in my own hand for one minute,” said the Signora Sibilla.

“ I’ve put it away now. Never mind getting it out again now, Sibilla ; you shall see it to-morrow,” said the widow.

“ I should like to look at it just for a minute now, to-night. I never did see a winning ticket in the lottery,” persisted Sibilla.

“ Lord, Sibilla ! they look for all the world just like the losing ones,” said the widow, with perfect truth ; “ and we have all seen

plenty of them before now. Don't bother about it, Sibilla. What can it signify to look at it!"

And the housekeeper answered very submissively, "I did not mean to bother you, Barbara, dear."

From all which it may be perceived that both ladies were beginning to feel the difference that had been worked in the relative positions they held towards each other by the widow's good fortune.

And so it was decided that the two friends should start together on the following morning on their all-important journey. The arch-priest's leave of absence for his factotum was obtained after some little grumbling on the part of his reverence. And the housekeeper and Widow Barbara—little guessed by any townsman who saw her walk down the street in her ordinary poor and scant attire, and with her ordinary feeble humility of mien, to be the possessor of wealth, fabulous in its amount in the eyes of the Uzzano world—set out on their walk down

the hill, and in due course took the train to Florence.

Nor is it necessary to say more of their expedition at present, than that they did the errand on which they were bound successfully in all respects. The ticket was presented, duly paid, and the money was—not without considerable trouble and labour, and infinite precautions for the concealment of the nature of the burthen from all prying eyes—safely brought home to the widow's house in Uzzano.

END OF BOOK II.

BOOK III.



THE PRIZE.

CHAPTER I.

A NIGHT VISIT TO LEGHORN.

THE reader will not have forgotten, it is hoped, the events of the evening when Carlo Caroli, returning from Ripalta to the widow Monaldi's house at Sponda Lunga, found there Meo Morini, the lawyer's son, and Andrea Simonetti, the young *strozzino*. However, it may be perhaps as well to recal briefly to his mind some of the circumstances of that occasion. The money—five hundred crowns—which Meo Morini brought to the widow, had been deposited, mainly in accordance with Carlo's advice, in the secret drawer of the *escritoire*, of which he always carried the key, when the latter was suddenly called away to Uzzano, starting on his journey thither that same night. Meo Morini

and his friend Simonetti had left Sponda Lunga at the same time in Morini's *bagarino*; and, on reaching Lucca, Meo had set his friend down near his own home, while he drove to his father's house, and was in time to tell the family the news of Carlo's misfortune before they went to bed. It was mentioned, further, that Andrea Simonetti did not proceed to his own home; but, as soon as his friend's back was turned, sought a neighbouring stables, and hired a *bagarino* with a fast-trotting pony, with which he made the best of his way to Pisa.

It is now necessary to ask the reader to return, in thought, to that evening, and to follow Andrea Simonetti, the usurer's son, in his nocturnal expedition.

A very little more than an hour of sharp driving along the level white road, gleaming in the bright moonlight, brought him under the hoary old walls of the ancient city, whose merchant princes told their eastern friends that the new people of whom they heard, called Florentines, were, as it were, their "Arabs of the

interior!" But it did not appear to be Simo-netti's intention on the present occasion to enter sleeping Pisa. On nearing the gate, he turned down a bye road, which passed round the corner of the city wall, above which that world-won-drous group of buildings, the cathedral, the baptistery, the leaning tower, and the Campo Santo, look out dreamily in the moonlight—dreamily in the sunshine—over the flat country around the city.

But "little recked he of the scene so fair;" as little as did the knight of Deloraine of as lovely a moonlight vision.

Pisa was not his destination. The little road skirting the walls soon brought him into the great road between Pisa and Leghorn, on the further side of the former city; and, pressing on the good little Maremma pony unsparingly, less than another hour brought him close to the gate of Leghorn.

Here he drove up to an obscure little carters' hostelry outside the walls; and, having there stabled his steed, and given orders that it

should be ready for him again in a couple of hours' time, he walked to the city gate, and entered the city on foot.

The population of the city of Leghorn has at no time been a fair specimen of the population of Tuscany. It can hardly be said, indeed, to be any specimen at all of an Italian population, so large and so various is the foreign element in it. There are a great number of Jews ; there are very many Greeks, and Levantines of every variety of race and creed. There are considerable numbers of waifs and strays from other parts of Italy ; not, for the most part, such as the cities and countries from which they came would have willingly chosen to represent them. The gathering together of all these heterogeneous elements, constitutes a state of society well adapted to serve as a cover for those who wish to hide their whereabouts ; and when any of the lawless marauders, who in those days infested the *maremma*, had at length made that wild district too hot for them for the nonce, there was no place so well fitted to afford them shelter and

concealment as the lowest strata of the population of Leghorn.

In fact, the truth is, that Leghorn had a bad name in those days. The fact of its being a free port, led to a vast deal of smuggling. Smuggling but too easily degenerates into far worse lawlessness ; and this furnishes an additional element of a more or less desperately criminal population.

Andrea Simonetti walked on rapidly from the gate, passing through the better parts of the city, with a quick and decided manner, which showed evidently that he was perfectly well acquainted with the localities through which he was passing. He went on till he reached the entrance of a narrow lane, not far from the purlieus of the port, which gives access to what seemed a whole nest of half dilapidated small courts and alleys. There were many signs of trade of various kinds, in a small way, being carried on by some portion of the population of these wretched looking dens ; but there was no sign of manual industry having its home there.

They were evidently a people who sold and bought, but not a people who made or produced anything.

Simonetti entered the intricate labyrinth of this district with as quick and assured a step as that with which he had traversed the better parts of the city. One would have said that he was equally at home there.

After threading two or three narrow lanes, and turning sharp round the corners of them, with the air of one who knew them well, he stopped before a small house, the door of which, approached from the street by a flight of narrow steps some six or eight in number, stood open, despite the dead hour of the night, and although there was no appearance that any of the inmates were stirring. The reason why the door was so high above the level of the street was, that the basement of the building,—the cellar,—might have an opening on the street. This opening was closed by a heavy flap-door, which hung on its hinges in a slanting position, on one side of the stone steps leading to the

main door of the house. There was nothing to mark the occupation of the dwellers in the upper part of the house ; but, over the hinges of the cellar door, was a black board, on which was rudely painted in red, " Michele Landi, Carbonaio." And the blackness of charcoal dust all around testified to the truthfulness of the inscription.

Simonetti ascended the six or eight steps, and entered the narrow door, still with the manner of a man well acquainted with the localities, and then proceeded to climb the equally narrow, and much darker, stair within. He mounted to the *secondo piano*, and then knocked, or rather kicked, with his boot at the door, which led to a room apparently at the back of the house.

" *Chi è !*" cried a woman's cracked voice in reply.

" *Amici !*" returned Simonetti. " Open the door. I want to speak to Pasqualino."

" Wait a minute," returned the voice ; " I'll open the door directly."

And in a minute or so the door was opened ;

not by the woman who had spoken, but by a man, who had apparently just been roused from his sleep. Not that he was altogether undressed; but he stood at the opened door yawning, and stretching his long muscular arms in a manner that indicated as much.

“So, I have caught you napping, Signor Pasqualino. That’s rare for you; is it not?” said Simonetti.

“What! Signor Andrea! Why, what’s in the wind now? Well, a fellow must have a bit of sleep sometimes. Come in, signor. You’ll excuse our poor place.”

“Never mind the place, Pasqualino *mio*,” said Simonetti, entering the room; “any place will do where one can say a few words you understand.”

“*Sì*, signor. We’ll see about that presently. Come in, come in,” replied the man.

The room into which Andrea Simonetti stepped was “a poor place” indeed, though not a very small one. Everything was dirty, everything was in disorder, and bore testimony to

the life of discomfort and irregularity which was the normal condition of its inmates. There was a very large bed on trestles in one corner of the room covered by a huge *coltrone*, or thick quilted covering, which had once been red, but which could now hardly be said to have had any colour at all save the neutral tint of dirt. Under this *coltrone* there lay the woman who had first answered Simonetti, together with three or four children. The man Pasqualino had apparently been sleeping very much "in his habit as he lived" upon a ragged mattress thrown down in another corner. On a large table, in the middle of the room, were such remnants of the last evening's meal as sufficed to show that at all events want of sufficient food, either meat or drink, made no part of the poverty of the place.

"Is Il Moro at home?" asked Simonetti.

"Yes, he's here; at least he was at supper-time last night," replied Pasqualino.

"Well, I want to have a word with you and with him."

“Best go down to his place,” said the man, pointing with a movement of his elbow to the bed on which the woman and children were lying.

“Very good! let us go down,” said Simonetti, turning towards the door by which he had entered the room.

“Not that way, signor!” said Pasqualino; “it would not be anyways convenient at some times if Moro and I had no other way of communication than the public staircase, and I no other way in or out of this rat-hole. They as built this old house knew a better trick than that. Look here!”

So saying, he put out his hand to a large and apparently heavy press, and moved it much more easily than would have seemed possible from its place against the wall. Behind it there was a small door in the stencilled wall of the kind which builders call “sympathetic,” because it is made to look as much as possible like a piece of the adjoining wall.

“Push the *armadio* into its place again,

old woman, as soon as I am gone," he said to the woman on the bed, as he opened the door, which disclosed one of those secret stairs so common in old Italian houses ; and taking up a small brass lamp as he spoke.

"Come along, sir!" he continued, turning to his guest, "the stair is dark enough and narrow enough to be the way to heaven ; but it's all clear, and you'll find one step under the other regular all the way to the bottom."

Simonetti followed him through the door, which the woman, after allowing them to descend into the darkness for a few seconds, closed behind them ; and continued to follow him down, down for a distance, which he judged to be at least twice as far as that from the entrance of the house to the door of Signor Pasqualino's abode. And in fact, when at last the latter opened a door at the bottom of the stair, he found that it gave access to what was evidently a vaulted cellar under the house, communicating with the street by the trap-door, which has been already mentioned. The chamber, however, to which they

were thus admitted was not that into which the trap from the street immediately opened ; but a back cellar, communicating with the front one by means of a door, which, had any one looked for it on the side of the front cellar, would have been found to have been hidden behind a heap of the charcoal, which formed the ostensible stock in trade of Signor Michele Landi, *il Carbonaio*, more generally known in private life as “ *Il Moro*.”

That amiable individual and valuable citizen was not, as far as could be surmised from appearances, burthened with a family, as was his friend Pasqualino. For he was the only occupant of the strangely prison-like chamber, which had all the appearance of being his home.

On the other side of the partition wall between the two cellars,—which other side could be reached, as long as the heap of charcoal occupied its present place, only by ascending the secret stair to Pasqualino’s apartment, passing through it, and descending the public stair into the street,—on the other side of this partition wall

Michele Landi was no doubt a "Carbonaio" as the inscription over his residence declared; and it cannot be denied that he looked the part, for besides the natural swarthinness, which had procured him the friendly sobriquet of *Il Moro*, he was black from head to foot with charcoal dust.

Nevertheless the occupation in which he was engaged, when his friend and Andrea Simonetti entered his abode,—for, unlike the former, he was not sleeping, despite the advanced hour of the night,—his occupation on this the more retired side of the party wall, did not appear to have any immediate reference to that respectable calling. *Il Moro* seemed to be busily occupied in methodically sorting a heap of the most heterogeneous objects—the greater part of them apparently in a phase of their existence which might be thought to have fitted them only for the dust-hole—into various categories. There were old clothes, broken crockery, with a few unbroken pieces amidst it, old iron of every conceivable form and degree of degradation

from its primitive use, a considerable quantity of lead, chiefly fragments of pipes, kitchen utensils, a few books even, and other articles too numerous and various for enumeration.

He did not seem to be at all startled by the sudden entrance of Pasqualino into his den, but continued his work in a very business-like manner.

“Who have you got there?” he asked as soon as he became aware of a second step,—“who have you got there, Qualuccio *mio*, and what brings your sleepy head out of its bed at this time o’ night?”

“If you’ll take the trouble to look up, man, you’ll see! *I* don’t know what’s up. I’ve brought Signor Andrea down to speak to you, and I’ve come to hear what he has to say.”

“What, Signor Andrea Simonetti, of the city of Lucca?” said the man, looking up at last from his work. “Welcome to my palazzo, Signor Andrea. Delighted to see you looking so well. Not a day older—not a day. That’s what it is to have a good conscience! Why

what should Signor Andrea want with me, Qualuccio, but to order a bag or so of charcoal. Must I bring them to the palazzo at San Michele in Lucca, signor ?”

“To the devil with you and your charcoal !” said Simonetti impatiently ; “I have no time for chaff to-night. I’ve a bit of business to propose to you.”

“Hold your tongue, Moro, and let me hear what his excellency has to say to us,” said Pasqualino.

“Very good. Let the signorino speak. *I* shan’t miss aught of what he says, if I do go on with my job here,” rejoined Moro, who seemed to be a scamp of a much higher degree of intelligence than his more ruffian-like friend Pasqualino.

“Well, look here, my men. This is the matter in half-a-dozen words. I can tell you where there is five hundred crowns to be had for the taking, simply for the taking, and no more difficulty in taking them than if they were there under that rag-heap in your own cellar !” said

Simonetti, kicking with the toe of his boot, as he spoke, the heap of rubbish on the floor.

“Truly, that is the sort of job I like,” said Il Moro, without looking up from the business of sorting to which he had again bent himself; “all who know me, know that I can’t abide violence. But I object to having my property depreciated by applying the term ‘rag-heap’ to it.”

“Can’t you keep your tongue from wagging, and listen to what the signorino is saying for *one* minute? He’s worse than a sacristan for chattering, *eccellenza*,” said Pasqualino.

“*My* tongue never did my friends any harm; which is more than all people can say. But I beg pardon for interrupting the signorino. If he will condescend to proceed with his interesting communication, it shall have my very best attention,” said Moro, with a polite bow.

“He ought to have been a play-actor, Moro ought!” grumbled Pasqualino. “And whereabouts may this five hundred crowns be found, signor, if you please?” he added, turning to

Simonetti with a manner in which an attempt at fawning politeness was ludicrously and yet disgustingly blended with the innate savagery of the fellow.

“ And perhaps, also, his excellency would not take it amiss if we were to ask, at the outset, that the object to be gained by each party should be set forth and explained,” said Moro, with the sort of half ironical manner which had characterised him all along.

“ All right, Signor Moro ; I will explain. You know that you can trust me, and I can trust you. I will tell you all the truth of the matter. Now listen. I want no fraction of this five hundred scudi for myself. I don't mean to touch a *quattrino* of it ; and I don't mean to take any part in the business of fingering it. I shall give you all your instructions. The job is as easy as talking. You will get the five hundred scudi with little or no trouble at all. But you naturally want to know what I shall get ; what for I have taken the trouble to come here to-night to tell you of the

chance. I will tell you. A certain man—a cursed interloping upstart beggar, who has dared to come across my path, who has injured me and insulted me—will be ruined by the loss of this five hundred scudi ; not merely by the loss of the money, but very much better than that, by the loss of his damned character and his credit. The thing lies in such a way that it can't fail to be taken for certain that he has made off with the money. And that will suit your book to a T, won't it? No suspicion, no inquiry. Nobody will doubt that he took the money. And I shall be rid of the cursed brute for ever."

"That all sounds very much like a good job, don't it, Pasqualino *mio*?" said Il Moro, now condescending to look up from his occupation, and to manifest a little interest in the matter in hand. "If his worshipful excellency will have the goodness to proceed with the particulars, the business shall receive our best attention."

"Don't interrupt the signorino with your

everlasting jaw. Can't you let his worship speak. Give us our orders, sir ; I'm awake !” growled Pasqualino.

“Look here, then ; this is what it is. At Sponda Lunga, by Lucca—do you chance to know the place ?”

Pasqualino shook his great shock head ; but, Il Moro nodded his, and said, “All right, signor *mio*, I know the place well enough, three miles or thereaway from Lucca, on the bank of the Serchio.”

“Right ! that's it !” resumed Andrea. “At Sponda Lunga there lives a certain Widow Monaldi, who has a wheelwright business . . .”

“Oh, a widow is she ? What, the wheelwright has gone to paradise, has he ?” said Moro.

“Yes, there or somewhere else,” replied the usurer's son. “So you know the wheelwright, eh ? What *don't* you know, eh, Moro ?”

“I don't know where the five hundred crowns are, not yet !” said Moro, with business-like brevity.

“ Well, I’m going to tell you. In the widow Monaldi’s house there are two front-rooms on the *terreno*, one on each side of the entrance door. In the room on the left-hand side of the door, as you go in, there is an *escritoire*; and in that are the five hundred crowns. Now to-morrow night—this night I should say, for it is past one o’clock—this next night there will be not a soul in or near the house but the widow and the old woman, her servant. She sleeps in the room over that where the money is. And she is as deaf as a post. But there will be no noise needed. The passage goes right through the house to a back door—you had better go in that way—the door of the room is never locked; and see, here is the impression in wax of the key of the *escritoire*,” said Andrea, producing a waxen mould of the wards, which he had contrived to obtain, when he had picked up the key from the ground in the presence of the widow, and Carlo, and Meo Morini. “It is a very easy one, you see,” he continued; “and you will have no difficulty in

making a key between this and to-morrow evening.”

“That part of the business I will answer for,” said Moro, taking the mould from Simo-netti, as he spoke, and carefully examining it.

“Good! but now mark. The cash is in a secret drawer, which I must explain to you the trick of. When you have opened the thing, you will see four drawers on either side of a pigeon-hole in the middle in front of you. Pull out the lowest drawer on the right-hand side. Well, you will see that the bottom in front of the drawer is lined with leather, nailed with brass-headed nails all round. You must count the nails, beginning the front left-hand corner, till you come to thirteen. Press your thumb on that thirteenth nail, and the bit below the drawer you have pulled out will start a little from its place. Lift it up, and you will find a sort of well underneath. There is the money!”

“Beautiful!” cried Moro, who had been listening with attention—“beautiful, signor

mio, and as clear as crystal. But now, in case of a forget, had you not better give us a note of those directions ?”

“ All right. Give me a pen and a morsel of paper,” said Simonetti ;—“ or stay,” he added, in the next moment, “ it will be shorter for you to make a note of it for yourself. You will be more sure to understand it. Take a bit of charcoal, Moro, and just note the number and ‘ right ’ and ‘ left ’ on the wall there.”

“ Very good,” said Moro, with a shrewd smile at the young man. “ There is never any good in unnecessary writing, is there, sir ?” And so saying he picked up a bit of charcoal in a corner of the cellar and noted the necessary particulars on the wall—“ lowest drawer, right. Front left-hand corner ; thirteenth nail. That will do,” he said. “ I’ll rub it out before we start.”

“ But this here widow ? Does she live all by herself ? Has she no man about her for looking to the business ?” asked Pasqualino.

“ Bravo ! Pasqualino *mio* ! I did not think

you had so much brains in that sleepy head of yours. Very well asked!" said Moro. "How shall we satisfy this sharp-witted fellow, eh, signor?"

"Quite right that he should want to be satisfied," said Simonetti; "and that brings me to what you will want to understand also, *my* interest in the matter. I'm above board! I make no secrets from *you*. The widow *has* a managing man. The money is in his care. He has the key of the desk. Nobody else except the widow herself, myself, and a lawyer knows that the money is there, or are up to the secret of the hiding-place. Now this manager is the cursed fellow whom I hate worse than poison, as I told you. He was called away suddenly by his father's illness, up into the hills above Pescia, just after the money was put into the desk, and locked up by himself. The money won't be missed till after he comes back. The *escritoire* will be found all right and locked, the secret of the hiding-place untouched and the money gone. Who the devil

could have taken it but he ; and he as poor as a church mouse. You have your five hundred crowns, he is a ruined man—done for ! damn him ! done for ! and I am revenged and quit of him ! Does that suit you ? One word more ! We have worked together before now, and you know whether *you* can trust *me*.”

“ Yes, *mio buono signore* ! I think that the job will suit us very well. This coming night, you say. What o’clock would you recommend ? About one, perhaps ? Do you mean to see to any part of the business yourself, or to see us afterwards ? ” asked Moro, quietly.

“ Neither one nor the other. I shall take no part in the matter at all. Till I give my testimony that Caroli—that is the beggar’s name—that he took charge of the money, and that he, and he only, could have touched it, I shall never speak on the subject again. And now I think that all has been said that’s needed. And I must be getting back to Lucca.”

“ No, I don’t think there is any more to be said, Pasqualino, is there ? I think we under-

stand it all, and we may say that we undertake the job, eh ? ” said Moro.

“ All right ! ” growled Pasqualino.

“ Yes ; there is one word more,” said Simonetti. “ You understand that nothing must be touched in the widow’s house except the money—not so much as *touched*. Anything else would spoil all. You will easily be able to leave the back-door so as to tell no tales. There is nothing but a big bolt. And a gimlet, a bit of wire, and a little putty, will suffice to do the job, and put all to rights again.”

“ That’s it, sir ! We understand it ! And so do you ; don’t the signorino understand it, eh, Pasqualino ? ”

“ Ah, my friends, I understand a thing or two more than you think for. And now I must be off. I suppose I must go upstairs again the same way as I came down, eh, Pasqualino ? *Addio*, Signor Moro ! It’s all understood, eh ? ”

“ *Addio*, signor ! Be easy, it is all right. *Felicissima notte*,” returned Moro, opening the

door at the bottom of the dark stair politely as he spoke.

Pasqualino took up the little lamp he had brought down with him, and proceeded to light the way back to his own abode.

When they reached the top of the stair they had to wait a minute or two while the lady of the dwelling was dragging away the press from before the door. When Andrea entered the room he found that the woman had got up and dressed herself, doubtless with a view to the duty she had just performed. The three or four children, too, had risen from their lair, and were standing about the room in different degrees of *deshabille*. Simonetti nodded an adieu to the woman as he passed through the room, following Pasqualino, who preceded him, lamp in hand, to light him down the public stair to the door of the house.

As the young man stepped across the threshold of the room on to the landing-place of the stair, he fancied that he felt touched from behind so slightly that it might well have been nothing. He looked sharp round, however, but nobody

was near him ; and the woman was engaged in replacing the *armadio* in its position before the concealed door.

Nevertheless Signor Simonetti's senses had not deceived him. The touch he fancied he had felt was the picking of his pocket of his pocket-handkerchief by the eldest of the interesting family he was taking leave of ;—an achievement which quite touched Pasqualino with paternal tenderness, when on returning from conducting his guest to the door he was told of it.

It was nearly half-past two by the time Signor Andrea Simonetti got back to the hostelry outside the gate where he had left his *bagarino* and pony, and it was just five when he restored it to the stables from which he had hired it at Lucca, saying as he threw the ostler a couple of pauls, "A good little beast that ! He has come back from Montecatini in a little over two hours. And if I had not managed to run there to-night, I should have got into a scrape ; for I had clean forgotten a job the governor had given

me to do. So mind you need not say anything of my being out to-night."

"All right, sir!" said the man.

And at seven o'clock Signor Andrea came forth from his chamber in the paternal dwelling just as if rising from a tranquil night's rest.

CHAPTER II.

CARLO AND THE WIDOW MARTA TÊTE-À-TÊTE.

ABOUT one o'clock on the subsequent night, that same night and hour during which Carlo was sitting at the little window of his bed-room in the old house at Uzzano, gazing over the wide extent of chestnut woods, and divided in his musing between the past in connection with the father whom he had just lost, and the future in connection with the love he dared hardly hope to win—the night, therefore, during the later hours of which the great rainfall began, the consequences of which have been described,—about one o'clock on that night a bagarino, with a fast-trotting Maremma pony, much such an equipage as young Simonetti had used for his night trip to Leghorn, pulled-up sharply at a lone

spot of a by-lane leading towards the mountains from the high road between Lucca and Pisa, at no great distance from the village of Sponda Lunga. A couple of men jumped out—Signor Michele Landi, and his *fidus Achates*, Pasquaccio, the reader will have no difficulty in guessing—and proceeding to tie the pony to a gate, while Il Moro pulled a horse-cloth from under the seat, with which he covered the little beast's loins,—left carriage and pony there, and walked off rapidly in the direction of the village.

It will be unnecessary to follow the steps of this worthy pair. It will be sufficient to say that they accomplished the errand on which they were bound accurately and successfully in every respect. The little house was entered without difficulty and noiselessly. Signor Andrea Simonetti's instructions were found to be precise and eminently judicious. The false key prepared by the skilled hands of Signor Michele Landi himself was found perfectly capable of affording the service required from

it. The secret of the hidden repository was discovered without difficulty. The five hundred crowns were abstracted, and all was left, saving that abstraction, absolutely in *statu quo*. Il Moro and his companion knew their patron and friend, Signor Simonetti, sufficiently well to deem it wisest to pay implicit obedience to his behest to touch nothing else in the widow's house. The back door was carefully closed and rebolted, and the little gimlet hole, which had been all that was needed for the opening and re-shutting of it, was carefully filled up with a little putty, and all traces of the operation obliterated from the observation of any eyes which were not specially and microscopically directed to search for them.

All was finished by a few minutes after two, and the burglars drove off with their booty to Leghorn, without having disturbed a single soul in the village of Sponda Lunga.

It was on the following night that the flood was at its height, and that Carlo returned to the widow's roof, bringing with him Regina

Bartoli ; she utterly exhausted, and both of them without a dry thread on them.

“ You have saved my life at the imminent peril of your own, and yours it shall be, and yours only henceforth and for ever ! ” she had whispered to him, as he held her to his bosom for one short minute as they stood in the darkness at the widow’s door, before knocking for admittance.

It was the widow herself who opened to them, and the extremity of her astonishment at the sight which met her eyes, as she held the lamp that she carried aloft to enable her to see who stood at her door at such an unseasonable hour, may be in truth more readily imagined than described.

For a minute or two she was really unable to put her feelings into words. At length they burst forth by the usual flood-gate of southern, and especially of female southern, eloquence, when the emotions are excited—that of an invocation of saints and martyrs of every degree.

“ *Santa Maria aiutaci !* Ah, *Misericordia !* ”

Is it you, Signor Carlo, or is it your ghost? *E questa Signorina? Ma come! È la Signorina Regina Bartoli!* It is not possible! *Oh! Santa Madonna! Ma come Signorina. . . .!*”

And there was here just the slightest manifestation of bridling on the part of the comely widow. But in the next instant her better nature, appealed to by the miserable condition of the two half-drowned applicants for her hospitality, was in the ascendant.

“But what a condition you are in! whatever has happened to you? How comes. . . . Ah! flood, the flood! *Ave Maria gratiâ plena abbia pietà di noi!* Come in, for heaven’s sake, come in! You are wet through!”

“*Altro che wet through!*” said Carlo. “It is a mercy that the signorina is alive and here!”

“*Misericordia!* But Signor Giovanni, what will he say? Where is he? Where, then, is Signor Bartoli? Why did you not take the signorina to her own house? Not that I am not too happy to have her here!” added the

widow, hurriedly, as she brought her guests into her little parlour.

“It is from her own house that I have just brought her, signora. The farm at Ripalta is under water from two to three braccia deep! Heaven knows if the house is still standing. It was as much as her life was worth to have remained in it!”

“*Ohimè! Ohimè! Jesu Maria abbia pieta di noi! Oh, misericordia! Ripalta under water! Dio buono!*” cried the widow, wringing her hands, and turning helplessly from one to the other of the two dripping figures before her.

Regina, meanwhile, had sunk into the nearest chair, and seemed to be in an almost fainting condition. She had as yet not uttered a word.

“Dear Signora Marta, I did not know what to do. It was a matter of life or death. I brought her here because I knew your kind heart would have pleasure in doing what you can for her. If you could get her to swallow a little wine! It has been almost too much for

her. Dear Signora Marta, was I not right to count on your kindness, and bring her here?"

"*Altro! ma come! poverina, poverina!* Has she been in the water then? And the farm? Has the house been carried away? *Dio buono! Dio buono!* And the farmer? Is he safe? Assunta! Assunta! A little hot wine! That would be the best thing! Assunta! Assunta! And you pulled her out of the ruins of the house! And you are wet to the marrow of your bones yourself, *Mio povero Carlo!* Assunta! What a state she is in, *poverina!*"

And the widow, in the excess of her perplexity and astonishment, kept running to and fro between the door, where she screamed at the top of her voice for her old servant, and the almost fainting girl, who, as she but too well felt in her heart, was her rival.

At last Assunta made her appearance, and there was a new flood of exclamation and vociferation.

"If we could get her to take a little wine!" reiterated Carlo, as he looked with a glance

which told volumes to the poor widow, at the drooping figure of the lovely girl.

“Go you, Assunta, and put some wine on the fire to warm with some sugar and a bit of nutmeg. One of the pints of Montepulciano in bottle. That will warm her up a bit! Here, take the key, and be quick! *Poverina! Poverina!*”

“Good God! I am afraid she has fainted!” cried Carlo, as he saw Regina’s head droop forward on her bosom, while her cheeks and lips became deadly white.

“*Povera ragazza!* fainted! to be sure she has, and no wonder, laced up as she is! Why she has hardly room to breathe, let alone eating and drinking!” said the widow, as she hastened to Regina’s side to support her. “We must cut her stays! *Ohimè!* Girls are but silly things! You go, and for God’s sake get dry clothes on your back, Signor Carlo. You go to your own room . . . in the other house,” added the widow, in obedience to some feeling of some sort which crossed her mind; “you go to your

room and leave me to do the best I can for this poor child. Lord! lord! to think of this being Regina Bartoli! She'll never look like herself again! And the farmer ruined too! *Misericordia!* Do run and get those wet things off, dear Signor Carlo," continued the comely widow, with one of the most killing of those always killing glances of her large liquid eyes, which she was such an adept at dispensing.

"I will in a minute, dear Signora Marta! but I want to see whether she" said Carlo, lingering.

"Do run away to your own house, and change yourself—every rag you have on—and leave us women together," reiterated the widow, with as near an approach to impatience in her manner as was possible to her gentle and placid nature. "I must get her undressed and put into a warm bed. Assunta! Did ever anybody see a decent girl look such a figure! I declare her things is all mud up to her waist," said the widow, who could not help drawing a certain degree of satisfaction from the consideration of the con-

trast presented by her own soft, plump, comely figure, with her glossy braided black hair, and handsome comfortable habiliments, and the half drowned, dishevelled, pale, muddy, dragged figure of the girl, whom she knew instinctively to be her rival.

At last Carlo suffered himself to be driven out of the room and out of the house, and did, as the widow implored him, at last think of getting rid of his dripping garments, while la Signora Marta applied herself to doing all that could be done for Regina. And to do the gentle-hearted widow justice, it must be said that no unworthy feeling of jealousy prevented her from expending her best care, and her best Montepulciano wine on the overwrought girl. She had indeed fainted,—not, truly, from the cause that the widow had suggested, with that genuinely feminine dash of spite from which so few women could have refrained under the circumstances,—but from sheer exhaustion and the reaction from the high tension of a state of nervous excitement. She was, however, soon

restored by the widow's care and by the potion of warm spiced wine, which Assunta was not unpractised in preparing. The two women got her wet and mud-saturated clothes off, and put her to bed in the widow's own excellently comfortable bed ; and in a very short time, in the midst of trying to give some connected account of what had happened, in reply to the widow's innumerable queries, she fell asleep,—all which was duly communicated to Carlo in the widow's little parlour, when he hurried back from changing his clothes, more full of eagerly expressed anxiety to hear how Regina was, than was quite as considerate for the comely widow's feelings as he might have been.

“Hush, she is asleep !” said the widow, stepping close up to his side and whispering in his ear, while she placed a very pretty and very white plump forefinger on her full rosy lips. “She is asleep, poor child. She went off like a baby in the midst of telling me all about it. She has taken some hot wine, and she will be right enough to-morrow. But to think of the

farmer being ruined,—for ruined he must be, —and they always held their heads so high! Well, pride *will* have a fall! And to be sure, they do say, there never was anybody like that poor girl up-stairs for pride! But you must be out-and-out starved, Signor Carlo! Assunta will bring a bit of supper in a minute,supper I say! I don't know whether I should not say breakfast! I reckon it's little bed we'll any of us get this night. And you have not had a moment yet to tell me about your about yourself," said the widow, tenderly.

"It was all over, Signora Marta, when I got to Uzzano!" said Carlo, with a sad shake of the head. "I had little doubt that my poor father was dying when I went away that night, but I did so wish to see him and to hear his voice once again. But it was not to be! It was all over before I got there. The funeral took place on the following evening—yesterday, that is—how strange it seems to say yesterday! it feels to me as if it was ever so long ago! I came away at mid-day to-day, and reached Lucca

just as everybody was in trouble and in fright about the flood. I I left the station, and”

Carlo could not help feeling a certain degree of embarrassment at telling the widow the plain truth, that, thinking of nothing in the world beside, he had rushed at the top of his speed straight to Ripalta. So he went on with his account of himself somewhat hurriedly.

——“I left the station, and was hurrying along the dyke by the river, when I found a great crowd of people at Ripalta, expecting every minute the breaking of the dyke. And in a very few minutes it did break, and I shall never forget the scene that followed. They were very much afraid that the house would go down, because of the bursting up of the vaults, and”

“*Misericordia!* bursting of the vaults!” cried the widow, laying her fat hand on Carlo’s arm, as she filled his glass for him, and looked round into his eyes with an expression that was meant to be one of terror, but which somehow

got changed in its passage from the brain to the eyes.

“ Yes, signora! the vaults beneath the house were all burst up by the force of the water. And then it was thought that the house must come down. And the farmer was away looking after the cattle down in St. Martin’s meadows, and there was the signorina alone in the house, and it likely to fall every minute,—she and old Caterina,—and so it was absolutely necessary to get them out. And two of us went,—I and another,—and did manage to get them both out of the house and to the top of the dyke. But it was a hard job, I assure you. And then I did not know what I could do better than bring the Signorina Regina here. I thought you would have said as much if you had been there yourself, Signora Marta! Did I do wrong, signora?”

“ *Ma come, vi pare!* Of course I am too happy to be able to do anything to help. I pity the poor thing with all my heart! I don’t think she’ll ever recover her good looks again.

They say a sudden fright often does take people that way! And then they'll be out-and-out ruined! Did you see the house go down?"

"No, it was standing when I came away. But those who seemed to understand best about such things, thought that it must give way."

"Do take another morsel of the *frittata*, or an anchovy with a crust, Signor Carlo! You must be famished after your journey, and all you have gone through! And poor, dear Signora Barbara, how did she bear up under her loss? Those who know what it is to lose a husband can feel for her."

"She was very much knocked down at first; but she bore up better than I could have expected. The fact is, that my poor father had been so failing for a long time, that my mother must have been long expecting the blow."

"I suppose," said the widow, after a little hesitation, "that poor, dear Francesco has not been able to leave his widow very well off. There is the property at Uzzano; but I am

afraid, from what I have heard, that that is not very much to look to—for a lone woman, specially.”

“Indeed it is not, Signora Marta! We were all living in great poverty—having a hard struggle to make both ends meet—when your proposal came to me. And, to tell the honest truth, I don’t know how my mother would get on, if it were not that I am able to help her by means of your liberality.”

“I am sure, Signor Carlo, I get good value for all you have ever had from me; and I wish Hark! there is somebody at the door! Whoever can it be, at this time of night!” said the widow, with that sort of alarm which people are apt to feel at the slightest occurrence when their nerves have been shaken, as the widow’s had been, by the events of that evening.

“I will go and see,” said Carlo, rising from the table.

The knocking which the widow had heard was at the back door, which was the most habitually used mode of access to the widow’s

house. Carlo opened it, and saw a figure which he at once recognised in the light of the moon, which had by that time risen, the young man, Caterina's son, whom he had left engaged in the task of rescuing his mother from the farmhouse.

“Well, Cecco, you got your mother away all right, I hope. How is she?” said Carlo, with some little twinge of conscience, as he recognised the fact that he had never thought of the old woman once from the time when he saw her son making for the farm to the present moment.

“All right, Signor Carlo ; but it was a hard job. Howsoever, the old woman is none the worse now ! I hope the ‘padrona’ is none the worse neither. But it was a good job we got them away when we did.”

“Why . . . is the house gone ?” asked Carlo, quickly.

“Every stick of it, Signor Carlo ! There is not one stone left a-top of another, as far, anyway, as one can see for the water. If you go

and look where the old house stood, you'll see nothing but water !”

“ *Dio buono!* How long was it after I left you on the bank ? Does the farmer know ?”

“ Oh, it did not stand long after all the cellars was burst up. I went and got mother out the way you told me, and the people had got a rope by that time, and flung me an end down off the dyke ; so it was not so difficult for me as for you. And I'd a got mother away to Beppe, the blacksmith's house, on t'other side of the dyke, when just as I was a coming up the bank again, I heard all the folk cry out, and a great noise, that seemed made up of splashing and thunder, and I looked, and the old house was gone ! They wasn't out of it none too soon !”

“ And the farmer ?” asked Carlo. “ Had he come back from the meadows ? Does he know anything about it yet ? Does he know where his daughter, the Signorina Regina, is ?”

“ The farmer came along the bank, not five minutes after the house went down, and the look of his face was a sight to be seen, when he came

up. He stood a staring at where the old house should have been, as though he could not believe he had come to the right place. Then he looks around from one to another, and still says never a word. And there wasn't nobody there as liked to be the first to say anything to him ; for Signor Giovanni . . . you know . . . *basta !*" And here Cecco executed a piece of pantomime, which was intended to express that anybody who meddled with the affairs of Signor Giovanni Bartoli was likely to come away with a flea in his ear.

" Well," said Carlo, " and what did he do then ?"

" Well, after staring about awhile, like a man that has lost hisself, he suddenly claps up both his hands to his head, and cries out ' Regina ! Where is Regina Bartoli ! ' and if they had not held him back by force, he was a going to run right down the dyke into the raging water. And he fought and kicked that fierce, that three men had almost more than they could do to hold him. And when at last they made him

understand that you had got her away out of the house, and that she was safe and sound somewhere, he says never a word, but sits himself down on the top of the dyke, and takes his head in his two hands, and takes no more notice of nobody. People do say," added Cecco, mysteriously, after a pause, "that Signor Giovanni be gone clean off his head, and that he must be took to the mad-house."

"Nay, nay, it won't be so bad as that, I hope! Naturally he was a good deal taken aback, poor man, at seeing house and homestead all gone. But how came you to run out here, Cecco *mio*, all wet through, as you are?" said Carlo.

"Mother said the best thing I could do was to come here to see if the signorina was here. Nobody couldn't tell Signor Giovanni where the *padrona* was; and mother says, says she, 'two to one,' says she, 'as the signorina went along with Signor Carlo to the widow Monaldi's at Sponda Lunga. She is a good, kind woman, and where could the *padrona* go better?' says she. 'You run and see, and come back as fast as

your legs can carry you ; and be sure,' says she 'to ask how she is.' So, if you will please to tell me, Signor Carlo, I will be going back as quick as I can. I don't know whether Signor Giovanni be a sitting on the top of the dyke all this time. Seemed when I come away as if nothing wouldn't move him."

"All right, Cecco, my boy! And you are a good fellow for coming, all wet to your bones as you are," said Carlo. "Yes, the signorina is here. It was pretty well as much as she could do to get here, *poverina!* but she is all right now. The Signora Marta has put her to bed, and seen to her ; and told me just now that she was fast asleep. So you may tell Signor Giovanni that his daughter is in good hands and quite safe."

"Thank you, Signor Carlo. And now I will be going," returned poor Cecco.

"Stop one moment ! The Signora Marta will give you a drink of wine. It will do you good and keep your heart warm."

And so saying, Carlo stepped back into the

widow's parlour, and explaining the case, came back to the door with the fair widow herself bearing a large tumbler full of wine, and added, while Cecco, with many reverences and *con permesso*, tossed off his bumper, her own assurances that the Signorina Regina was at that moment fast asleep in her (the widow's) own bed, and that she would be doubtless quite well the next morning.

And Cecco started on his walk back to Ripalta with these tidings.

It wanted by this time but a very few hours to daybreak, and Carlo, to tell the truth, would have been right glad to go to bed. But the widow had been excited by a series of events and emotions of a very unusual character in her placid and ordinarily monotonous existence, and was far more inclined to sit and talk it all over than to sleep—not to mention the fact that she had no bed to go to, inasmuch as Regina was occupying hers. And it may be suspected that the gentle widow was not disinclined to prolong a *tête-à-tête*, to which the strangeness of

the hour, and the fact that every other human being around them was fast asleep, seemed to her imagination to lend a peculiar charm. And Carlo, in common politeness, could hardly, after having begged the use of the widow's bed for one, whom he as well as she knew at the bottom of their hearts to be her rival in his affections, and after having eaten up the supper which her fair hands had prepared for him, walk off to his rest, leaving her to wear out the remaining hours before the morning in solitude.

So they continued talking over the recent events, which the widow could not for the life of her abstain from, moralising in a sense which she hoped might tend towards the consummation her gentle heart was so fondly bent on reaching. She enlarged much on the utter ruin which this misfortune must entail on Farmer Bartoli—on the sad nature of the fall from her proud position which awaited the haughty Regina—on the tightness of the lacing of her stays, and the great probability that her beauty would never again be what it had been—and mingled these

diverse topics of reflection and commiseration together, and interspersed them with a running commentary and interpretation truly feminine.

At last, as it was drawing towards daybreak, the widow's own eyelids began to droop over the large dark eyes which had that night done an unusually heavy amount of business, and after a struggle she fairly fell asleep in her chair.

Then Carlo quietly stepped to the door, and, having first called to Assunta, who had long since gone to her own bed, to get up and attend to her mistress, he lifted the latch of the back door, and, tired though he was, set out to walk to Ripalta to ascertain the real state of matters there, and to give an account to Signor Bartoli of what he had taken upon himself to do in respect to his daughter.

CHAPTER III.

IN LAWYER MORINI'S STUDIO.

WHEN Carlo reached the scene of the disaster at Ripalta, he found that Cecco had in no degree exaggerated the extent of it. Of the large old house, so solidly built, that it had seemed as if it might well last as long again as it had lasted; of the extensive and well-plenished farm-buildings; of the garden, the rick-yard, and the adjoining fields, nothing was to be seen! A large lake covered the place where they had been, and in the direction of the lower valley the whole country was under water almost as far as the eye could see. The water was tranquilly stagnant now. The rushing of the currents had ceased, for the waters had found their level. It was a melancholy

scene as Carlo looked down on it from the top of the dyke. The old balustraded terrace, which had been the scene of so many memories never more to fade from his mind but with life, had disappeared under the water, above the top of which the roof of the little chapel at the further end of it was still visible.

The still vexed and angry river continued to bring down with it from the upper country all sorts of evidences of the havoc that the waters had made throughout a large extent of country,—floating masses of hay and other crops,—boughs of trees,—hencoops and farm utensils,—and from time to time the dead bodies of domestic animals. No loss of human life had as yet been heard of.

It was a miserable and desolate scene under the grey raw morning light. Carlo could not at first hear anything of the farmer. Whether Cecco had found him on his return from Sponda Lunga still sitting on the top of the dyke, Carlo could not know ; but he had clearly gone away since. There were a few straggling men and

boys loitering purposelessly about, and staring at the scene of the catastrophe with moody and listless faces, as men will in similar cases. But none of them had seen Farmer Bartoli.

After gazing for a few minutes at the ruin around him, Carlo bethought him of the blacksmith's cottage in the immediate neighbourhood, where Cecco told him he had deposited his mother. And thinking it possible that he might there learn something of Bartoli's whereabouts, he went thither. Old Caterina had not seen the *padrone*; but the blacksmith, who had been on the dyke nearly the whole night, said that the farmer had risen from his seat, soon after Cecco had gone away, and had gone towards Lucca. And the blacksmith thought that the most likely place to look for him would be at the house of the lawyer Morini.

To Lucca, therefore, Carlo at once proceeded to walk; and in less than a couple of hours after he had left the widow's house at Sponda Lunga, he stood at the lawyer's door in the neighbourhood of the Piazza San Michele in Lucca.

Yes! Farmer Bartoli was there, and had been there for an hour or more, the maid servant, who opened the door, told him. The farmer was upstairs she believed; but her master was in the *studio*, and Carlo might go and speak to him there.

Early as it was he found the lawyer dressed, and sitting at his table; and his son was with him. They were evidently discussing the same subject, which probably every other soul in Lucca, who was up yet, was talking about,—the flood, and the mischief and losses it had occasioned.

“Yes; Bartoli is here,” said the lawyer; “he will be very thankful to hear the tidings you bring him, Signor Carlo. Pray sit down. You had better step upstairs, Meo, and tell the farmer that Signor Carlo is here.”

And Meo left the studio to go on this errand.

“Oh! Bartoli is all right enough, as I was just telling my son,” said the lawyer, in reply to some remark made by Carlo;—“Bartoli is

right enough. It won't hurt *him*. There's many an one has lost a great deal more than Bartoli this night who can a precious deal less afford it."

"The house and farm buildings are all gone! There is not a stick or stone of them to be seen!" said Carlo.

"What then?" said the lawyer; "people talk as if the loss of the buildings was Bartoli's loss. The buildings were not his. The loss is the loss of the landlord."

"Ah!" said Carlo.

"To be sure it is!" rejoined the lawyer; "it is true," he added, "that Bartoli loses all the year's crops, and his farm implements, and something in the way of live stock;—not so much, though, for he succeeded in saving all the beasts that were in the Saint Martin meadows; and then there is the furniture and the property in the house. Altogether it is a loss—certainly a heavy loss. But Lord bless you Bartoli! If Giovanni Bartoli were to lose twice as much again, he would

be a rich man still! I wish there were none harder hit than he. But he don't like it at all. Here he comes! I hear his foot on the stair."

And in the next instant Meo returned, bringing the farmer with him. He had evidently been up all night,—had been wet through,—and had not changed a bit of his clothing. He looked worn and haggard; and seemed to Carlo to look at least ten years older than when he had last seen him.

"So it was you, Signor Carlo, that took off my girl from the house before it went down?" he said, as he entered the room, in a voice that sounded more like anger than gratitude.

"Yes, Signor Giovanni! It was I; and if I had not done so, she would have perished when the house fell. I thought I was acting for the best, and hoped that you would think so too."

"Oh! as for that, Signor Carlo," put in Meo Morini, "it is all very fine to say, that if *you* had not brought the Signorina Regina away she would have been drowned. Of course, if

she had stayed in the house she would have been. But it was not likely that she was going to be such a fool as that ;—let alone that there were plenty of others ready enough to fetch her away, if you had not. There was nothing so much in it to do, I suppose ?”

“ Well, Signor Meo, I make no doubt that there was many another man there who would have done what I did, if I had not. And I don't say that it was any very great matter to do. But I will make bold to say that I don't think you would have done it. It was not an easy job ;” said Carlo, with a look of some scorn at the slight figure of the town-bred young man.

“ At all events, you were not there to do it, Meo, my fine fellow ; and Signor Carlo here, was ! And I am not above giving him my hand, and telling him, that he has done for me what never a one of them that call themselves my friends thought of doing or taking heed to ; what is more to me than if he had kept every drop of water out of Ripalta, and what old

Giovanni Bartoli is not the man to forget. Give us a grip of your hand, young man!" said the farmer, extending his brawny arm, a little shaking with the violence of the emotions he had passed through. For the farmer, though as stout a *contadino* as ever stepped, was still a southern.

Just as Bartoli and Carlo were shaking hands, and Carlo was beginning to say some word of the pleasure it gave him to have been of service, the door of the studio opened, and young Andrea Simonetti came in.

"*Con permesso!* Signor Morini!" he said, as he came into the room;—"I thought that your studio would be about the likeliest place in Lucca to hear some news of last night's work. *Servo suo*, Signor Bartoli! I am afraid, from seeing you here at this time of the morning, that there may have been mischief at Ripalta. I am sure I hope not."

"Mischief!" cried the farmer, with a bitter sneer; "I don't know whether you call it mischief to have house and home, homestead and

crops, farm-buildings and live stock, all carried away as clean as if there had never been a bit of building on the land. I don't know whether you call *that* mischief. I call it enough to make a man throw himself into the *benedetto fiume* after all the rest. That is all I know."

"You don't say so!" returned Simonetti, making a very long face; "there must be a very terrible loss;—a very heavy sum to write off,—almost too much for a man to stand under, *I* should say."

"*You* should say, young jackanapes!" cried the farmer, turning on him fiercely, and delighted to find somebody who gave him an opportunity for discharging some of his ill-humour,—*sfogare*-ing himself, as he would have said,—"how the devil do *you* know how much I can stand under! Stand under, indeed! It would take a precious deal more, I'm thinking, than would be enough to pitch you and all yours into the gutter, to bring down old Giovanni Bartoli! Stand under it, indeed!"

"We know better than that, don't we, *amico*

mio?” put in the lawyer, anxious to keep the peace; “and, perhaps, Signor Simonetti is not aware that the buildings, as I was saying, are no loss of yours, but the landlord’s.”

“Well, Signor Giovanni, I didn’t mean to offend you. All Lucca knows you are a warm man. I did not know but that you had to stand to the loss of the buildings;” said Simonetti, fawningly.

“And if I had to stand to the loss of the buildings” returned the farmer, still angrily.

“You could have stood it, no doubt. We all know that. But since they are a total loss, I am very glad that they were not yours, that’s all.”

“Much you, or any of my town friends here, for that matter, cared about it one way or t’other!” grumbled the farmer.

“Nay, Signor Giovanni, I think you are a little hard upon us there,” said Meo Morini; “how could we tell that there was any danger to anybody at Ripalta. Here’s Signor Carlo,

Andrea, has had the luck to be the man to bring away the Signorina Regina out of the house before it fell down, and Signor Giovanni seems to think that he has done more than any of us would have done. I can answer for myself, I know. If I'd so much as dreamed that there was any danger at Ripalta, I should have been out there fast enough, he may depend."

Simonetti had during the above conversation bestowed two or three supercilious scowls on Carlo, wondering what brought him there at that time in the morning, and now stared at him with unconcealed aversion.

"What I say is, that this young man saved my girl's life, and that he *was* where his help could be of use, and where it was soon needed, when nobody else, as may be I had more claim on, was. And I shan't forget it. You'll see I shan't, young man!" he added, with a nod to Carlo.

"And may one be bold enough to ask how it came to pass that Signor Carlo happened to

be at Ripalta just in the nick of time?" said Simonetti with a sneer, the implied meaning of which provoked the farmer almost to the pitch of striking him.

"That is very easily told, signor," said Carlo. "I had been to Uzzano, as you and Signor Meo here both know, knowing too on what errand I went. I left my home at midday yesterday, came from Pescia to Lucca by the afternoon train, and got here just as people were beginning to be seriously alarmed by the rise of the river. Of course I did as any other man would; instead of going straight home, ran along the top of the dyke to see whether I could be of any use anywhere. And as it chanced I got to Ripalta not five minutes before the dyke gave way. The house was surrounded with water in a few minutes. But I had no thought of there being any danger, till I heard the people say that in all likelihood the water would burst up the cellars, and so bring the house down. I heard, too, that Signor Giovanni was away at San Martin's meadows, and that the Signorina

Regina and the servant Caterina were alone in the house. So I and Cecco, old Caterina's son, went to the house, and brought them away no sooner than a few minutes before the foundation gave way, and the house came down. That was how I came to be there, and that is all I did. And so that Signor Giovanni is content with it, I confess it don't much matter to me what anybody else thinks about it."

"Well said, Signor Carlo! And as for content, I am more than that, I am very, very grateful!"

"Thank you, Signor Giovanni. And now I must be thinking of getting back to my work. Can I take any message to the signorina, Signor Giovanni? I shall not be likely to see her, but Signora Marta will be with her, and I can give any message to *her*;" said Carlo, with a delicacy of feeling that was probably not understood by any of those who heard him.

"Thank you, lad! You may say that I will come out and thank the widow myself in the course of the day. I must think of finding

some place to put our heads in the first thing," replied the farmer.

"Good morning, gentlemen! I will give the widow your message, Signor Giovanni," said Carlo, going to the door.

"Pray, signor, was there any damage done at Sponda Lunga? And were you equally fortunate in being of service there?"

"There was no mischief done at Sponda Lunga, signor, nor was there any danger that there should be. Sponda Lunga lies in such a position as to be quite safe. Good morning!"

And so Carlo set out to walk back to the widow's home, in which all he cared for in the world was for the nonce housed.

"It is lucky for the widow Monaldi," said Simonetti, as soon as Carlo's back was turned, "that the flood did not touch Sponda Lunga, or she might likely enough have lost that bit of money she has got in the house, Meo;—the money you know that your father sent you over with the night before the rain set in."

"Yes, I remember; five hundred crowns,"

returned Meo ; “ well, five hundred crowns would not have broken the widow any more than the loss of all Ripalta would have broken our friend Signor Bartoli.”

“ Seems to me,” snarled the farmer, “ that Signor Simonetti thinks people in general is very easily ruined.”

“ I did not say anything about being ruined, Signor Bartoli,” answered Simonetti, very submissively ; “ but it would have been a provoking thing to lose five hundred crowns in such a way. It is a foolish thing, to my mind, to keep cash in your house that way ;—there’s so many things may happen. But the widow would be ruled by the advice of that gentleman who has just left us, rather than by her old friends.”

“ Why you don’t mean to say that that young fellow advised the widow to hoard the money in the house instead of investing it ? ” asked the old lawyer.

“ Well, not exactly that,” replied his son ; “ but when Andrea here was offering her a good investment, he advised her not to accept it, but

to look out for a mortgage, and keep the money by her in the mean time."

"By her, you say, Meo; but it was by him rather. He said he would be responsible for it, and he took charge of it. Don't you remember, Meo?" said Simonetti.

"Yes, I remember all about it. He said he would be answerable for the safety of the money. And we all, that is, you and I and the widow and this Signor Caroli all together, saw it put into a secret drawer in an escritoire of which he took the key. That was just before he got the letter that called him away to Uzzano. No doubt the money is safe enough!" said Meo.

"Oh yes! it is safe enough, no doubt," returned Simonetti; "but I did not like the way he put himself forward to settle Signora Marta's affairs for her. One would have said that he fancied himself the master already."

"And by all that one hears, he may be that any day he likes," said the farmer with a laugh.

"May be, or may not be, perhaps! I don't

pretend to know anything about that," rejoined Simonetti, with a savage scowl. "But I say I did not like the manner of him. It is not a prudent thing to keep money by one in that way. Why should not the widow have been making a good interest for her cash all the time? If she preferred a mortgage, why not have asked you, Meo, to carry the scudi back to your father, and ask him to look out for one? But no, my gentleman there must needs take it on himself to 'make inquiry.' A pretty making inquiry his is likely to be about finding a good mortgage! It is about the first time in his life, I reckon, that he ever heard of such a thing! It is absurd! But he was determined to have the money left in the house in any case. One would have said that he thought it would not be safe if left in your hands, Meo, or mine."

"That is so like a *contadino*!" chimed in Meo; "they never can believe that they have really got their money, unless they see it in hard cash."

"Anyway, he was determined willy nilly that

the five hundred crowns should be left in the house ; and the widow was too easy to gainsay him. For my part, I don't like the fellow, and I don't hide my opinion. I have had some little experience in judging people by the ways and looks of them, and somehow I don't like this Carlo Caroli."

"I don't wonder at your not liking the looks of him, Signor Andrea!" said the farmer with a chuckle ; "he is too good-looking a fellow by a great deal for a man to like the looks of him when he comes in the way of a rich widow that one would fain have for himself."

"He marry the widow! You mark my words, Signor Giovanni! The widow Monaldi will not let herself down to marry a fellow like that,—a fellow without a soldo in the world to bless himself with! He has had the chance to be in the way, and jumped at the opportunity of doing a civility to the Signorina Regina, which there's not a man in the country would not have been too happy to do. And you are *troppo buono*. It seems to you directly that he must

be all that's good and honest. But just you wait a bit! Don't be in such a hurry to put out your hand to him, Signor Bartoli. Take my advice and wait a little! You think I am prejudiced against him because of the widow! But trust me, I am used to judge men as I see them."

All this was spoken with a concentrated spite that showed plainly enough that Signor Simonetti did *not* like the object of his remarks. And the farmer was not a little amused at the inability of the usurer's son to hide his vexation and disappointment at being cut out of the chance of the fair and well-to-do widow's hand by the new comer.

"Well," said he, "we shall see who wins! I back six feet two against the field. And now I must be stirring to see where I am to find a shelter for my head this night. And we must have some talk, Signor Morini, about sending the proper notices to the landlord, and about sending in the claims to the insurance people, and ever so many other things. *Pazienza!* To think

of that lot of the old Chianti in those cellars! We shall never taste another glass of wine like it, *amico mio!* There was no insurance on that! And if there had been, not all the insurance offices in Europe could give me back again such another lot of wine!”

“That is a fact, Signor Giovanni! We are neither of us likely to taste another such a glass of Chianti as that again! Talk of your Bordeaux! But I was thinking, Signor Giovanni, that the best plan would be for you and the signorina to come here for a few days till you can settle matters a little. We can't offer you such a home as you are used to; but my wife will do all she can to make you and the signorina comfortable, and we have plenty of room.”

“It is very kind of you, Signor Morini,” said the farmer. Possibly Regina might have fancied that it was not altogether so disinterestedly kind as it seemed to her father.

“And then it will be convenient, you know. There will be, as you say, a deal of business

to be done between you and me. What say you ?”

“ Well, I say, thank you kindly ! And I hope one of these days to see you and yours under my roof ;—that is, if I ever have a roof of my own over my head again. It *will* be a great convenience. I don't know where I could put Regina so well as under the care of La Signora Morini.”

“ So that is settled !” said the lawyer, rubbing his hands briskly together ; “ run up-stairs, Meo, and tell your mother that Signor Bartoli and his daughter will stay with us here for the present. Tell her to see that all is made comfortable for them.”

Meo went on his errand this time with alacrity enough. He thought to himself that it must be odd indeed if, with such an opportunity as fortune had thus provided him with, he should fail in making himself master of the hand and heart of the proud but lovely Regina.

“ I must be going, too, or father will wonder what has become of me ! Good morning,

signori! *A rivederci,*” said Simonetti, as he lounged towards the door of the lawyer’s office.

He would have preferred to the arrangement which the lawyer and Farmer Bartoli had agreed on, that Regina should have remained at the widow’s house in Sponda Lunga ; for he thought it likely enough that her presence there might lead to a quarrel, or at least to misunderstanding between Carlo and the widow. “But pshaw ! what signifies !” he thought to himself as he sauntered towards his father’s place of business. “What signifies ! His tether is a short one ! There will very shortly be an end of him and his damned managing and love-making. Six feet two ! as that old fool Bartoli says ! Yes, a very fine subject for the galleys ! Effraction, with breach of confidence ! Yes, my fine fellow ! you’ll take your six feet two to the galleys, and no mistake !”

“I must be stirring, too,” said the farmer, as soon as Simonetti had gone ; “Lord ! how spiteful jealousy can make a man ! That young fellow would crucify Caroli if he could, because

he knows that he has cut him out with the widow. Haw ! haw ! haw ! Well, good morning, Morini. I must go over to look after my girl. And I must go and see what is being done with the beasts that were saved ;—and whether the water is beginning to go down ! *Ahimè !* what a world of troubles ! *A rivederci stasera amico mio.*”

“*A rivederci, Signor Giovanni,* together with the Signorina Regina !” answered the lawyer.

And thus left alone he betook himself to the upper regions of his house to concert with his wife all that was necessary for receiving such honoured guests as the Farmer Bartoli and his daughter befittingly.

CHAPTER IV.

“ A MIND DISEASED.”

It is desirable, at this point of our story, for the lucid telling of it, that the reader should be requested once again to climb the forest-covered mountain, on the top of which Uzzano nestles amid its chestnut trees.

It has been told briefly, that the Signora Barbara Caroli, and her friend the Signora Sibilla Gralli, the arch-priest's housekeeper, made their journey to Florence, received payment for the lottery-ticket, and brought back the money to the widow's house in Uzzano, successfully ;—on the whole successfully ;—inasmuch as the object of their journey was to effect this purpose ;—yet not altogether satisfactorily ; as the Signora Sibilla would have abundantly

testified, if there had been anyone to whom, under the circumstances, she could have opened her mind on the subject.

The Signora Sibilla had, in truth, had a bad time of it during that excursion,—especially during the return home after the money had been received. For no sooner had the widow got the heavy prize into her possession than all her fears, and misgivings, and scruples of conscience returned upon her with redoubled force. One would have said that the broad, shining, jingling *rusponi* were indeed devil’s money, and were already, as is the known specialty of that kind of coin, producing a curse instead of a blessing to the holder of it.

Again the widow reverted to her original interpretation of the miraculous extinction of the lamp before the shrine of the Virgin in the church at Pescia. It seemed to her now that it could in the nature of things have had no other significance. And all the earnest and reiterated efforts of the Signora Sibilla to convert her to a more comfortable reading of the omen failed to

convince her. She had dreamed that her husband had appeared to her angry and menacing! A magpie had flown across the path as they started down the mountain that morning on their way to Florence! And the widow had stumbled as she stepped on to the platform of the railway station! What mind could resist the cumulative evidence of all these phenomena? Who could fail to see that Heaven was displeased with the widow, and with the whole transaction, and that the coming up of the numbers was in all probability due to the direct operation of the fiend. And in that case the widow felt that she was a lost woman.

In vain the stronger-minded Signora Sibilla exerted herself to combat these hydra-headed fears as they arose. In vain she magisterially insisted on her own superior knowledge and special facilities for interpreting the will of Heaven. The work of meeting and combating the widow's fears was a truly Sisyphean labour, never ending, still beginning. She almost lost patience. And, indeed, she might perhaps

have succeeded better if she had rated the Signora Barbara well, and given her a good moral shaking. But how could one venture on taking such a tone with the possessor of ten thousand crowns? Devil's money or heaven-sent money, there might still be some pretty pickings to be got out of it by a devoted and affectionate friend. And it would never do to run the risk of offending the feeble-minded, but not necessarily therefore humble-minded or forgiving widow. So poor Signora Sibilla, though sorely put to it to restrain her tongue, confined herself to coaxings and theological expositions of the most elaborate kind, but had the mortification of finding that the widow only got worse under the treatment, and became more and more desponding and miserable as they approached the term of their journey homewards.

“ But when one knows that you are an angel of piety and goodness, *anima mia!* to think that the blessed saints would go for to take you in in that way, for a take-in it would be,—neither more nor less. And *that* the saints never do, not

even to sinners, let alone to such as you. Take my word for it, dearest Signora Barbara!”

“But the saints did not tell me to sell my husband’s crucifix, even if they *did* send the dream of the numbers! That is where it is! Oh me! oh me! oh me! Maria, *Madre di Dio*, *abbio misericordia di me!*”

“*Santa Madonna!* Why, where were you to get the money? The saints didn’t mean you to play in the lottery without the means of buying a ticket! They did not mean you to steal the ticket, or the money to buy it with! What were you to do! I tell you again that it was the plain will of the saints that you should sell the crucifix. Does it not stand to reason that if they had been offended at your getting the money that way the numbers would not have come up? Answer me *that*, Signora Barbara! My poor dear angel! it breaks my heart to see you a suffering, and all for nothing, as *I* know well enough.”

“Ah, Sibilla! you don’t know what it is to have sold your dead husband’s crucifix, and he

not cold in his grave! How should you know, seeing that you never had a husband! And I'd say, Sibilla, as I prayed you never might know, if it was a thing to look to that you ever would have one! But that is not likely, and you'll be spared the feelings as is breaking my heart now.”

This was hard to bear meekly. But Sibilla bore it all, and much more too, before she left the widow for the night in her lone home at Uzzano, with all the money in the house. The two women locked it up in the little closet in the thickness of the wall from which the crucifix had been taken, and in which there was an old desk which had also been poor Francesco Caroli's special property. They locked it up there, not from any dread of thieves at Uzzano, for, even if there had been any, it would never have entered into the head of any human being that there was anything to steal in the house of the widow Caroli. But the widow carried the money there, because that had been the place where her departed husband had kept his

money on the rare occasions when he had had any.

Poor Signora Barbara passed a very miserable night alone in her desolate house with her money. Her nerves were utterly unstrung. All the momentous events which had recently happened to her had been too much for a mind accustomed for so many years to a life of the utmost and most unbroken monotony. For a long while after the Signora Sibilla, compelled by the necessities of her duties to the priest, her employer, had left her, she continued to wander about the lone house, now standing staring at the place in the wall where the fatal crucifix had hung, now wandering vacantly from room to room of the empty house, which frightened her with the echoes of her footfall, and now again returning to contemplate, with a strange mixture of feelings, the heap of money which was causing all this misery.

It was late,—much later than was usual with the Signora Barbara,—before she could persuade herself to go to bed. She was tired, very tired,

with her journey, but she did not feel as if she could sleep, and she feared to go to bed with no human creature near her, in the room in which her husband had breathed his last. She feared to lie awake and listen to the strange noises of all sorts, which she every minute fancied she heard in different parts of the house,—now in the cellar, and now in the garret, and now in the next room to her, and then again in the terrible little closet, where the crucifix had been and where the money now was. And she feared yet more to sleep because of the “perchance to dream” which came in its train.

When, at length, she did go to bed, because she had become so nervous that wandering about the old house in the dead night hours seemed to her yet worse than that venturing into the land of dreams, she had worked herself into such a state of superstitious terror, that her poor, feeble mind was ready for any amount of self-delusion. Of course after lying awake for awhile with ears on the alert to catch every wandering sound made by the mountain wind,

which blew very liberally where it listed through the ill-closed old tenement, every scratching of rat or mouse behind a wainscot, and every banging of a loose shutter in the street, wearied nature asserted her empire, and poor Barbara fell asleep. Equally, of course, her excited imagination began forthwith to cause a whole phantasmagoria of dream pictures to pass through her brain.

First there was little Stefano Gralli, just as the widow had seen him in his little shop on the bridge, only that his feet had turned to hoofs, and his hands to claws ; he had horns on his head ; and he glared at her out of eyes of fire with a malicious and devilish grin, while he grasped the crucifix in his unholy claws, and seemed to dispute the possession of it with a sad and shadowy figure, which imploringly stretched out its hands towards it. In this second figure of course the widow had no difficulty in recognising her late husband. As the devilish dealer in curiosities and antiquities made off mockingly with his purchase, the departed Francesco turned

his sad eyes upon her with a dreadful expression of sorrow and severe reproach in them. He pointed after the retreating figure which was carrying off the crucifix, and then slowly turning and extending his forefinger in solemn menace towards his wife, sadly shook his head. Then she saw him kneeling in the little closet, and gazing with wistful eyes up to the place on the wall where the crucifix had hung, while he beat his breast piteously, and the accursed money jingled in the desk, as if to tell him of its unholy presence there.

Then she was again in the little church in Pescia, and again the distant glimmering light before the shrine of the Virgin was extinguished amid peals of the most awful thunder. They were so loud and terrible, that the widow was waked by them, bathed in perspiration, and trembling, while the boltless and heavy shutter of one of the windows was banging itself to pieces against the wall of the house.

The widow crossed herself, and muttering an "*Ave Maria gratiá plena libera nos nunc et in*

horá mortis nostræ," she pulled the *coltrone* over her ears, and strove to close them against the sounds that at each return made her heart leap into her throat.

At last the first light of morning came ; and though it was somewhat of a relief to be released from the terrors of darkness and the persecution of dreams, still the daylight did not, in her case, as it often does, banish the phantoms of the night, as the sun chases the mists of the dawn before it. Her mind was too entirely shaken, her nerves were too unstrung, her terror and misgiving were too real.

She arose from her bed, and the first thing went to the closet to visit the hoard of gold, which was working her all this woe. Yes ! the coins were there safe enough. Though she had heard them dancing and jingling in the night, they seemed to be now just as she had left them ! Nor had they yet shown themselves to be devil's money by turning into a heap of ashes ! Nevertheless, there was no comfort for the widow. She thought that she should have

been able to feel more comfortable if the money had flown away in the night, so that she might wash her hands of the matter ! But no—there it was, the price of the sacrilegious act she had been guilty of as soon as ever her poor husband’s breath had left his body !

Nevertheless, she was able in the broad daylight to compass something more like thinking than had been possible to her during the hours of darkness. And, after a time spent in meditation, she thought that she had at last determined upon a course of action which she wondered had not commended itself to her before. She would consult the arch-priest. She would lay all her doubts and difficulties before him, and learn at once the worst. If, indeed, as she greatly feared, she had committed a dreadful sin, he would be able to tell her what means were the best adapted for setting herself right with heaven ;—what prayers and penances would suffice for wiping out her sin. Of course, in a case of the kind, that was the only thing to be done. She would tell her trouble to the Church ;

and she would have fain put her resolution into action that very instant. But she knew,—she would hardly have been able to tell how or why,—but she felt quite certain that her friend and confidante, the Signora Sibilla, would be altogether averse to her taking this step. Sibilla, as a sort of ecclesiastical personage, ought, one would have thought, specially to have approved of the widow's purpose. But she was sure that it would not be so. She was sure that Sibilla would not wish that the priest should hear anything about the journey to Florence, the sale of the crucifix, the lottery-ticket, and the prize. None the less for that, however, was the widow determined to act on her own idea ; but it was necessary so to manage as to carry out her object without the knowledge of the house-keeper. She shrank from doing it in overt defiance of her opposition. She knew in her own heart that she would not be strong enough for that. She must steal a march on her confidante, and make her confession to the priest before Sibilla had any inkling of her intention.

It was not very difficult to accomplish this ; —if it had been, doubtless the widow Caroli would not have accomplished it. The house-keeper went out every morning to “make the *spese*” for the day ; and on that very morning the widow knew that she would be absent for some little time, for it was a fast day, and it would be necessary to get some eggs for the priest’s dinner ; and the Signora Barbara was well aware that the housekeeper was in the habit of buying her eggs from the wife of a cottager, who tilled a solitary patch of cultivable ground a good step higher up on the mountain. The Signora Sibilla got her eggs some small matter cheaper thus than if she had bought them in the town of Uzzano ; and possibly also it was desirable that it should not fall in the priest’s way to inquire exactly what his housekeeper paid for them.

The widow was thus sure, that at about ten o’clock, after the house-work had been done, and the Reverend Signor *Parroco* had had his slight morning refection of a cup of black coffee

and a morsel of fruit, the Signora Sibilla would be off on her expedition up the mountain, and probably not be back much before it was time to prepare his Reverence's midday meal. She made up her mind, therefore, that at that time she would seek the *parroco*, and lay her case before him;—not, she thought, in the way of auricular confession, but in the guise of an afflicted parishioner seeking counsel. She thought that thus the ordeal, which she had screwed her courage to go through, would be less terrible, and that she should be more able to get something in the way of worldly advice as well as strictly ecclesiastical opinion.

As she had fully anticipated, however, she had first to go through an interview with her dear friend. The affectionate Signora Sibilla found time to run over to her poor friend's house for a few minutes while the priest was reciting his daily office. The widow rather dreaded the visit; for the consciousness that she had determined on a course of action which was to be kept secret from her hitherto implicitly

trusted confidante, and that she had something to conceal from her, made the simple Signora Barbara feel guilty and nervous.

“ Well! dear! are you better this morning?” began Sibilla; “ you were overtired last night, poor dear! And when one is *stremata* that way, all sorts of fancies come into one’s head.”

“ Ah, Sibilla! I have had an awful night! I do not wish my bitterest enemy ever to have such an one! Visions! Lord bless you! I have had nothing but visions;—oh, and warnings, Sibilla, dreadful! And whatever I shall do, I don’t know.”

“ No! you don’t say so, Barbara! What was the visions? You tell me, and I’ll tell you whether they really *was* visions, or only dreams. Oftentimes it’s very difficult for them to know, as aren’t bred to it. What did you see, dear?”

“ It’s too long to tell you now, Sibilla. You’ll be off up the hill, I guess, to get the eggs for his Reverence’s dinner; and we shouldn’t have

time. I'll tell you when we can have a quiet hour to ourselves comfortable."

"And meantime, don't you go for to worry yourself, Barbara. I have reason to know that you are all right; and I'll tell you when we have a bit of talk this evening;" said Sibilla, with several nods of the head intended to express infinite knowingness and spiritual wisdom.

Signora Sibilla spoke solely with the laudable view of keeping her friend's mind quiet, if possible, during the day. But her speech caused the widow to doubt for a minute or two whether Sibilla might not have already taken the priest's advice in the matter. But a little reflection persuaded her that this was very unlikely to be the case. She felt sure that Sibilla would much dislike any mention being made to the priest on the subject.

She kept her counsel therefore; and soon after the housekeeper had taken her leave of her, and was fairly on her way up among the chestnut-woods, walked down the street as

quietly and as much as if nothing was the matter as she could, and tapped at the door of the priest's house.

CHAPTER V.

PRIEST AND PENITENT.

UZZANO was not fortunate in its pastor—arch-priest though he were, by virtue of the whilom importance of the decayed little town. It is not necessary to chronicle here the various stories which had been rife about his Reverence when some fifteen years previously to the date of my story he had come to take possession of his remote mountain cure. Much, no doubt, was said that had no foundation in fact of any kind—as must, indeed, necessarily have been the case; for the stories told were altogether inconsistent with each other. But it was generally known that the reasons which brought the Reverend Pasquale Mommi to Uzzano were not of a creditable nature.

The fact is, that it is the constant custom of the superior authorities of the Catholic Church, in Italy at least, to punish a priest who has been guilty of any such conduct as to render his further residence on his cure undesirable and a matter of scandal, simply by removing him to some distant and remote sphere of duty. The main object is to avoid scandal, always a consideration of the first importance in the minds of Romish ecclesiastics. At the same time, a certain measure of punishment is meted out to the delinquent, who is taken from some agreeable location—some town or city probably—and relegated to the banishment of, for example, such a spot as Uzzano. What kind of solicitude is manifested by such a practice for the spiritual welfare of the inhabitants of the luckless place selected as the scene of the reverend culprit's exile, it is needless here to inquire. It is always attempted to prevent any rumour of the cause of such a removal accompanying the delinquent to the scene of his new labours. But all such precautions, as might be

imagined, are generally vain. And it may be easily conceived that a spiritual guide does not commence his labours to advantage among a population who knows that he has been sent to them because he is deemed too bad for any more important place.

Uzzano was, therefore, not fortunate in its pastor. But it was fifteen years ago since the Reverend Pasquale Mommi had come to Uzzano under these circumstances. His hair had turned from black to silver in that time. And though his mountain parishioners deemed him a hard and avaricious man, very eager to make the most of every opportunity for squeezing a *soldo* out of every man, woman, or child that came in his way, and though he cannot be said to have been either beloved or respected by them, he had, as far as was known, committed no scandalous offences against law or morality since he had been at Uzzano, and the old stories had been well-nigh forgotten.

Nevertheless, the Reverend Pasquale Mommi was not the guide, philosopher, and friend that

a poor troubled woman,—or, indeed, that any human being, for that matter,—would have selected in the hope of obtaining medicine for a mind diseased. But he was the only person to whom it was, as far as she could see, open to her to apply. What she needed was, in her own estimation of her need, simply a professional opinion on a purely professional question. Had she, or had she not, committed a sin in selling her husband's crucifix under all the circumstances which had attended the sale of it? And what was the right interpretation to be put on the various signs and manifestations which had been vouchsafed to her since? It was clearly within the functions and duty of the parish priest to enlighten her on these points. It was impossible to doubt that it was in his power to give her the information she needed. And the widow did not see any reason for suspecting that he could wish to mislead her on the subject.

It was not, however, without a considerable beating of the heart and increase of the nervous

agitation, which was wearing her out, that the poor timid woman found herself before the arch-priest's door. She gave her little hesitating tap, and in the next minute found herself confronted by the burly, thick-set, square figure of the priest, who, in the absence of his housekeeper, had come himself to see who knocked.

Some people would have said that the Reverend Pasquale Mommi was a *goodnatured* looking man. Others, who might be disposed to a more critical weighing of the meaning of that term, might have said that the expression of his face was merely sensual. At all events, there was no mistaking the fact, that of the two great categories of priests into which the mass of Rome's clergy in Italy may be mainly divided, the fanatico-ascetic and the earthy sensual, the arch-priest of Uzzano did not belong to the former. He had a large, square, firmly-built lower jaw, with a double chin beneath it, a thick-lipped, large mouth, which looked, if not "goodnatured," at least "jolly,"

when he was pleased, two shrewd little grey eyes under bushy white eyebrows, and a thoroughly mean and low forehead. Long silver hair is always, to a certain degree, a refiner and a softener of an otherwise disagreeable appearance; and of this the Reverend Pasquale Mommi had the full advantage.

“Ha! is that you, Signora Barbara? delighted to see you this morning!” said the priest, smiling very graciously; “come in, pray come in! Though I am afraid I have neither bit nor sup to offer you. For the Signora Sibilla is away up the hill to buy some eggs. Friday, you know! And whatever you others of the laity may do,” he continued, while his smile became a broad grin, “we poor priests must at least set an example of obedience to the laws of the Church . . . not you! not you!” he added, hurriedly, in reply to a deprecating and protesting look of his visitor, “. . . not you! I know, Signora Barbara, that you are a God-fearing woman, and a good Catholic. But, *pur troppo*, there are many who

are apt to mistake the days of the week. Now what is there that I can be of service to you in?" he went on, as he brought his visitor into his little study on the ground-floor, with its pretty window commanding a lovely view over the forest and the mountain-side. "Some little matter of a mass or two, I suppose, on behalf of your excellent and worthy husband? It is a good and pious thought,—a gift to the departed, of which it may very truly be said that the giver is as much benefited by the charity as he that receives!" said the priest, with a sudden assumption of an unctuous professional manner, as he seated himself in a large greasy old leathern arm-chair, much the worse for use, while motioning the widow to a seat opposite to him.

All this time poor Signora Barbara had been striving to collect her thoughts, and to make up her mind at how far back a point in the history of the lottery-ticket and its purchase it would be necessary to begin her confessions, and what it behoved her to say first. The priest's sug-

gestion that she came to purchase a few masses opened a path to her, of which, at the cost of a little disingenuousness, she at once hastened to avail herself.

“*Dice bene la sua Riverenza!*” she began, putting her handkerchief up to her eyes, from a sort of consciousness that, doubtful as she was respecting the tone and manner of behaviour which it behoved her to assume, *that* at least could not be otherwise than becoming and proper under the circumstances. “Your Reverence says well! Yes! that is what I would wish for the dear departed; a few masses—perhaps one might make it a dozen. Not that my poor dear husband, *buon anima*, blessed be his memory! had any special need. *Dio ne guardi!* A better Christian, *Signor Parroco*, never breathed, nor one who”

“*Gia! gia! si sa! si sa!* To be sure! to be sure! I know it! It is well known in Uzzano!” said the priest, who thought that the chapter of her discourse on which the widow was entering might prove to be a long, and was

certainly an uninteresting one, "we know all that ; but a mass or two—a dozen, even, as you were so piously saying, Signora Barbara, can never do other than good !"

" *A chi lo dice, Signor Parroco!* God forbid that anybody should have it to say of a Trendi, that they ever grudged a mass to departed relatives, let alone a husband. And as I was saying, I should not mind making it a dozen, or or a score even, for I am in a position to afford it."

" Indeed," said the priest, raising his eyebrows a little, and beginning to think that the interview with his widowed parishioner promised to be a more interesting one than he had anticipated ; " indeed, Signora Barbara, I am truly delighted to hear it. I had feared ahem that"

" Yes, truly !" said the widow, shaking her head mournfully, in a manner which seemed to the priest singularly inconsistent with the nature of the communication she was making to him ; " but but the Virgin has been very good to

me, that is to say I mean I don't know about it! I am afraid perhaps not. Heaven forgive me that I should say so! And that brings me, *Signor Parroco*, to what I wanted to consult you about."

The priest was altogether mystified by the widow's words and manner. But it became clear to him that her object in coming to him had not been to order masses for her husband, and that there was something else behind. The woman, however, said clearly, that she was in a position to pay for twenty masses, and would not object to doing so. The case was, therefore, an interesting one, and the mystery well deserved inquiring into.

"I shall be most happy, Signora Barbara," he said, "to give the best advice in my power, upon any subject you may wish to consult me on. It is my duty to do so. And in your case, it will be a pleasure also. I am truly glad to hear that you have been left in a better worldly position than I had feared was the case."

"*Lei è troppo buono*," returned the widow.

“ Yes, I have been left no, not left ! for my poor dear husband had nothing on earth to leave me. The property at Uzzano, as is well known, came from the Trendi ; and it was a poor match I made, I a Trendi, the day I married Francesco Caroli. Not but what he was a good husband to me, *buon anima sua* ! but for leaving, he had not a soldo in the world to leave ; and difficult enough it was to *campare la vita*,—to make both ends meet, God knows. And the bit of corn land, that had been in the family these three hundred years and more”

“ Yes, yes ! I know, *carissima Signora Barbara*,—I am aware of what you would say. But you were telling me just now that the Virgin had been good to you, and that you were now in a position to behave liberally in the matter of assisting your poor dear husband’s soul !” said the priest, crossing himself as he uttered the last words.

“ *Si, Signor Parroco*, that is just what I wanted to consult you about,” said the widow,

moving uneasily on her chair, and again applying her handkerchief to her eyes.

“Yes,” said the priest, with every appearance of interest; “I am ready to hear all you wish to tell me. What is your difficulty?”

“About the blessed Virgin, *Signor Parroco*,” said the widow, and there stopped, twisting her handkerchief round her fingers in nervous distress, and not knowing how to proceed.

“You say that she has been good to you,” said the priest, very patiently; for was he not speaking to a parishioner who spoke of her ability to pay for twenty masses? “How did she manifest her favour?”

“Ah, that’s it, *Signor Parroco*. I misdoubt me whether she has been wishful to do me a service, or whether she is angered against me,” said the widow.

“I think I can answer that,” said the priest, very benignly, “before I hear any more. I am sure, Signora Barbara, that there can be no reason why the blessed Virgin should not be

favourably disposed towards you . . . *anzi*. But tell me what are the circumstances."

"Yes, *Signor Parroco!* that is what I wish to do," said the poor widow, very humbly; "but it is a long story, and I hope you will have patience with me, and not be hard upon me, for indeed, indeed, I did not mean to do wrong; and Sibilla, she—but that is neither here nor there," added the widow, checking herself abruptly.

"Sibilla won't interrupt us," replied the priest, who thought the mention of the Signora Sibilla had reference only to the threatened longness of the story to be told; "she has gone up the hill, and won't be back before midday. So we have plenty of time before us, and I am quite ready to listen to you."

"Thank you, kindly, *Signor Parroco*. *Lei è troppo buono*," said the widow, still painfully at a loss how to begin her story. "Well, you know, *Signor Parroco*, the day that my poor dear husband died. He was a very good husband to me. . . ."

“ Yes, dear Signora Barbara ! We know all that,” interposed the priest, with some little irrepressible impatience ; for he thought that by the path the widow seemed to be taking the story, whatever it was, would never get itself told even by midday.

“ *Troppo buono, Signor Parroco.* Well, as I was saying, that night,—I shall never, never forget it, not if I was to live a hundred years ; —that night I was all alone, and and that was not my fault any way ! I dreamed three numbers for the lottery,—19, 26, and 87, —not once only, *Signor Parroco*, but three distinct times.”

“ Three distinct dreams,” put in the priest, with serious attention.

“ Yes, *Signor Parroco*, distinctly three times over. I did, indeed ; and I am not capable of telling you one thing for another ; I’m not, indeed, *Signor Parroco !*”

“ I am sure you are not, signora mia,” said the priest ; “ and there was no harm in dreaming numbers for the lottery. People often do.”

“But is it true that such dreams are sent by the blessed saints, *Signor Parroco*? That is what I want to know,” said the widow, speaking eagerly.

“That all depends, signora,” replied the priest, cautiously. “When I have heard all the circumstances I will tell you whether your dream was a heavenly warning or not. I should be inclined to suppose, looking to the time and the manner of its occurrence, that it was. But I must hear all the circumstances.”

Had the priest spoken sincerely, he would have said, “Looking to the fact, which you have already told me, that you are rich enough to pay for twenty masses, and which leads me to guess that your numbers must have turned up a prize.” But then that would not have been professional.

“Well, *Signor Parroco*, as sure as we two are now talking together, those very three numbers came up; they did as sure as the blessed Saints are in heaven!” said the widow, clasping her

hands, and looking into her adviser's face with intense anxiety.

“And I trust, my good Signora Barbara, that you profited by the favour of the Saints! For truly your dream seems to have been a real warning from heaven!”

“You think so, really, *mio buon signore!* You really think so! Oh! it is such a blessing to hear you say that you think so. You really do think so?”

“Indeed I do, as far as I have yet heard the story,” said the priest, cautiously, and still much puzzled by the widow's doubts and difficulties. “I hope you were able to turn the blessed warning to a good account?”

“Ah, that's it, *Signor Parroco!* How was I, a poor lone woman, left without so much as a dollar in the house, how was I to take advantage of the favour the blessed Virgin intended for me? I ask you that, *Signor Parroco.*”

The priest now for the first time since the commencement of the conversation, thought he began to understand the nature of the difficulty.

The widow had dreamed her numbers, had not had so much as a *paul* to buy a ticket with, and had been tempted to some dishonesty in order to procure the wherewithal. The ticket, however, let it have been come by as it might, had come up a prize. The widow was probably in possession of several hundred lire ; . . . and the case was evidently, therefore, one for gentle and lenient handling. So the Rev. Pasquale Mommi proceeded accordingly.

“ Nay, signora, it is not for me to say now, after all has been done, how it might have been best to proceed under the circumstances. At all events, it would have been a great pity, not to say an impiety, to have paid no attention to a warning so evidently intended by heaven for your benefit.”

“ You think, then, *Signor Parroco*, that the dream *was* sent by the Saints ? ” said the widow, greatly relieved.

“ I dare not venture to doubt it, *signora mia*. It was granted, probably, to the intercession of your beloved husband, who wished thus to

repair his inability to provide for you in any other way. The more do you owe it to him to spend a liberal portion of your good fortune in assisting him in his need. May I ask, pray, what was the amount of the ticket?" said the priest, with a shrewd glance under his bushy eyebrows.

"I am going to tell you, *Signor Parroco*," said the widow, looking dreadfully frightened as she approached thus nearly to the knot of her difficulty. "I judged that it would be like flying in the face of Providence, as one may say, to take no advantage of the dream. But where was I to get the means of doing so, as I said just now? Where was I to find the price of a ticket, specially a sum that would seem worth while like to the blessed saints, that sent the dream. So now I am going to tell you what I did!" said the poor woman, shaking all over.

"Stop, Signora Barbara," interrupted the priest; "stop a minute. Tell me first what was the amount you expended on your ticket.

It is desirable that I should know the amount in question."

"I put ten dollars on the three numbers," gasped the widow.

"Ten dollars!" exclaimed the priest, almost shouting; "ten dollars! and the ticket came up a prize! Are you sure of what you are saying? Why you must have won something like ten thousand dollars! Gracious heavens! ten thousand dollars!" reiterated the priest, mouthing out the words with a sort of loving reverence, and raising his outspread hands to heaven, or rather to the rafters above him, as he spoke.

"Yes, *Signor Parroco!* It was just about ten thousand dollars!" replied Barbara, very humbly, and hanging her head.

"And you have been paid by the administration?" asked he.

"Yes, *Signor Parroco!* I have been paid," sighed the widow.

"And you have the money?" he pursued.

"Yes, *Signor Parroco!* it is in the house," replied the poor woman again, speaking more

and more as though she were ashamed of herself.

“And does anybody know of this? Do the neighbours know of it? Your son—does he know it?” asked the priest, looking at his companion very keenly.

“No, *Signor Parroco!* Nobody knows anything about it, except except” and the widow hesitated.

“Except whom?” asked the priest, almost sternly. “Remember, that when you ask advice, it is necessary to tell everything—everything to your adviser, if the advice is to be good for anything. Who is it that knows of your prize?”

“The Signora Sibilla! *Signor Parroco!*” confessed the widow, feeling that it was utterly impossible for her to resist the priest’s questioning.

“The Signora Sibilla!” said the priest, in a tone in which an acuter or more practised ear than that of the widow would not have failed to detect an accent of satisfaction. “The Signora Sibilla, and nobody else?”

“No other living soul, *Signor Parroco*.”

“Humph! The Signora Sibilla!” repeated the priest thoughtfully. “And what was it you wished to tell me about? The manner in which you raised the ten dollars for the purchase of the ticket?” he continued, in a caressing tone, which the keen and eager expression of his eye would have shown to a less simple soul than the widow Barbara to have been by no means the genuine exposition of the thoughts that were passing through his mind.

“It was not ten dollars, *Signor Parroco*,” replied the widow, submissively, “it is twenty-seven. But I thought that ten was enough to put on the ticket.”

“That was an error,—a sad error! You should have put it all on,” said the priest, with a greedy expression in his glittering eyes. “It is likely enough,” he added, “that the saints may feel that you slighted their favours in not trusting them with all you had! It may well be that some reparation must be made to them for the slight. I will consider of it. And the

twenty-seven dollars ? How did you raise that sum, my good Signora Barbara ?”

“ Ah, *Signor Parroco!* That is the worst of it ! That is the worst of it !” cried the poor woman, throwing herself down on her knees in an agony of contrition, and lifting up her hands to the surprised priest in supplication.

The priest by no means raised her, or bid her raise herself from her attitude of supplication. It is an attitude of body and spirit, in which his caste love well to see their penitents, especially when the suppliant seeks to approach heaven through heaven’s appointed minister. But he said, in a serious voice, looking down on her gravely, as she knelt at his feet,

“ If wrong have been done in this matter, signora, it can hardly be a wrong that may not, under the circumstances, and by God’s blessing, be righted. Restitution may be made ;—and it can very easily be made by one in your position. There is great value in restitution. That done, and proper consideration shown to the

Church, I think I may say that there could be no difficulty about absolution—plenary absolution! By what means did you obtain the twenty-seven dollars?”

“Oh, *Signor Parroco!* it was much worse! I am afraid it was much worse than wronging any living body. I could give the money back again, if it was only that. But I am afraid that I have brought a curse upon my head! I am afraid that this money will be a curse to me! I I” and the unhappy woman fell forward on her face in an agony of tears.

“Signora Barbara!” said the priest, feeling a real curiosity to hear what could be coming, and led to suspect more and more, from every word which the widow had spoken, that the matter in hand was one which might, by dexterous handling, be turned to his own no small advantage, “Signora Barbara, I cannot help you if you do not let me know the whole truth. Do not be afraid. Trust to my regard for you. Be sure that I shall hear what you have to tell

me with every disposition to judge your conduct favourably and leniently."

"My husband," said the widow, amid her sobs, "had a crucifix that he was much devoted to . . . and I took it down from the wall, while he lay dead in the house, and . . . and sold it!" she gasped out, covering her face with her hands.

For a couple of minutes the priest made no reply. He was intently engaged in a rapid mental review of all the circumstances of the case, and in planning the course of action which it behoved him to take under them. There was silence in the room, broken only by the convulsive sobbing of the unhappy widow.

At last the priest said, in a dreadful voice, raising his arm in denunciation as he spoke, "Woman, what have you done! Unhappy, lost woman! Who could have guessed that you had fallen into such sin as this! Sacrilege! Sacrilege! Sacrilege of the deepest, vilest kind! And that at the very time that the saints were manifesting their pity and good-

ness towards you ! Miserable woman ! I know not what will become of you ! ”

And with these words the priest, who had risen from his chair when the widow had gone down on her knees, sank back into it, as if overpowered by the tremendous nature of the position, and covered his face with his hands.

The unhappy woman fell forward on her face, as if she were shot, and absolutely grovelled at the feet of the man who thus denounced her. For a moment the priest imagined that he had overshot his mark, and had killed her by the shock of his terrible award. But in the next, the fresh outbreak of her sobs and wailing reassured him on this point. The widow was alive, and still sufficiently in her senses for the work of moulding her to his purpose to be proceeded with.

“ *Pietà ! pietà di me ! Misericordia buona Madre di Dio ! O Santissima Vergine Maria ! I sinned without intention ! O buono Signore ! have mercy upon me ! I did not mean to do*

wrong! I did not know!" gasped out the wretched woman, amid her convulsive sobs.

"Woman!" said the Reverend Pasquale Mommi, in a terrible tone, "How can it be pleaded that you did not know that you were committing a sin, when your conscience has been ever since tormenting you with the recollection of it?"

"No! no! no!" cried the poor soul, in her agony, "I did not know! Indeed I did not know! It was afterwards! . . . afterwards, when I went to Pescia, to see whether the numbers had come up."

"What do you mean? What was afterwards?" inquired the priest, in a voice of stern displeasure, but with a glance of which shrewd inquiry was the main characteristic.

"It was afterwards that I found out that the blessed Saints were angry with me . . . anyway that I began to fear they were;—for I did not know! O, indeed, I did not know; and that was why I came to your Reverence to be told," answered the widow piteously.

“What made you begin to fear that the Saints were angered against you?” asked the priest.

And then the widow related the awful phenomena which had occurred in the little dark church at Pescia, which she had entered merely as a place of rest.

The priest groaned in appropriate places, as the trembling woman told her story.

“It is awful! very awful!” he said. “But Barbara Caroli, you ought to thank God for his mercy in putting it into your head to enter that church;—for his goodness in thus vouchsafing to bring you to the consciousness of your iniquity.”

“If there was any hope” pleaded the poor woman, faintly; “if the blessed Virgin would but be pleased”

“Barbara Caroli,” said the priest, interrupting her, and rising from his seat as he spoke, “there is always hope for the sinner who is penitent, and willing to submit himself in all things to the Church. Nevertheless, it would

be very wrong of me to conceal from you that your case is a very bad one ;—a very terrible one ! The blessed Saints intended to favour you, and you went and did a deed of sacrilege, which seemed to make them complices, as one may say in a manner, in your sin ! And it is very clear that that is the light in which they look at it ! It is a very terrible position for a mortal sinner to stand in ! And if you were to die this minute, there could not be the smallest doubt, that an eternity of never-ceasing fire would be your portion. You would find yourself with hideous and accursed devils in hell, the instant the breath was out of your body !”

A renewed burst of wailing interrupted the priest's words for an instant, and he paused to let the ideas and images he had called into his victim's mind do their work, before he went on to add—

“ But the blessed Mary is merciful to you ! She gives you time to repent, and, let us hope, to repair your sin. Leave me now !” (It was

almost time for the Signora Sibilla to return from her marketing.) “Leave me now! I must have time to meditate on what you have told me. Go to your house, and fall on your knees, and pray. Thank God that he has given you the grace to come and make your confession to his Church. I also will pray for you! I will intercede with the blessed Virgin, and seek counsel from her! And Heaven grant that I may be able to direct you to some means for obtaining reconciliation with the blessed Saints! Should I fail, you are lost, lost for ever and for ever! But I will pray for you! I will strive! Come to me again this evening, at . . . let me see . . . yes, at seven o’clock, after vespers, and I will then tell you what my intercessions have been able to obtain for you. Pass the intervening time in unceasing prayer; and hold no communication with any one till I have again seen you. Go now!”

The miserable woman dragged herself up from her prostrate position on the pavement, and shaking in every limb, turned her to the

door, casting a piteously imploring look into the priest's hard gross face as she went,—for she dared add no further word.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WIDOW'S SECOND VISIT TO THE REVEREND PASQUALE MOMMI.

IF it had been the purpose of the Reverend Pasquale Mommi so to terrify and excite the imagination of his penitent as to render her blindly submissive to any behests he might see fit to lay on her,—as it may be fairly assumed *was* his purpose,—it must be admitted that he had played his part well, and that he had been most completely successful.

We all know the sort of submissive obedience with which wiser folks than the Signora Barbara Caroli are wont, when terrified by some alarming fiat of their bodily physician, to look up to, and eagerly catch every word that drops from the man, whom they cannot help con-

sidering as the arbiter of their fate. And the implicit faith, the undoubting confidence with which the poor widow waited on the words which fell from her priest, was yet more blindly submissive from the fact that it was wholly unreasoned.

She hastened back to her own desolate dwelling as fast as her trembling steps would carry her, feeling, as she crept along the street, less solitary at that noontide hour than at any other time, as if she were a detected culprit, whose guilt must be visible to every eye that fell on her. She dreaded lest some acquaintance or neighbour should stop her to speak to her, and thus cause her to violate the letter of the priest's injunction to hold communication with no man until he should have seen her again. Happily, however, she reached her house unmolested. And having sedulously closed and barred the door, she proceeded to carry out the instructions that had been given her, by falling on her knees in solitary prayer. The whole still house was at her disposition for the purpose, but she

selected the little closet in the thickness of the wall, from which the crucifix had been taken, and in which the faldstool, used by her late husband, still stood ; and there, with her eyes fixed on the spot of the wall where the crucifix had hung, she passed the hours till the chime from the church tower told that it was time to return to the priest.

She had gone out in the morning without any breakfast. The Italians, except those of cities in which newfangled habits have been introduced, rarely take any food before the midday meal. And now, on returning to her house, she had not so much as given a thought to the subject of food. And those who have ever experienced the effect of long fasting will understand that this total abstinence from food was yet more perfectly doing the work of the Reverend Pasquale Mommi. Had either mind or body not been weak enough before, this fast of many hours was well adapted to reduce them both to the requisite degree of absolute imbecility. Nor was the dwelling of her poor

tortured mind on the one dread subject that occupied it during all those miserable hours, omitted from the priest's scientific calculation of the processes needed for the securing the result at which he was aiming.

In the midst of the poor woman's passionate prayers and thousandfold ejaculations and intercessions, her ear was on the alert to catch the church-tower's announcement of the hours and the quarters as they slowly passed by. For she was fearfully, agonizingly anxious for the moment when the solitary meditations which were driving her to the edge of madness should be at their end, and it would be permitted to her to go again to the priest and hear, as she fondly hoped, some words of consolation and comfort.

At last the quarter to seven was tolled forth, and the widow rose from her knees. She was literally scarcely able to stand, not less from mental agony than from bodily weakness and pain. She had absolutely remained on her knees from the time she had returned home

after her interview with the priest to the present hour. Gradually it had become dark in the little closet and in the house, and the darkness had not tended to lessen the mental trouble and prostration of the sorely-tried widow. She tottered as she rose from the faldstool, and stretched out her hand for support to the wall behind it. Then she groped her way out of the closet into the adjoining chamber, and starting at every chance sound that broke the stillness of the house, pausing at every two or three steps to listen and try to assure herself that there was no supernatural significance in the noises that reached her ear, she made the best of her way down to the door of her desolate home.

She had some little difficulty, in the darkness, in unbarring the door, which she had been solicitous to close with more than ordinary security ; and as her shaking hands fumbled with the fastenings, she began to be tormented by a nervous dread that she should be too late for her appointment with the priest, and that

this also would be deemed an aggravation of her sin.

Guiltily conscious, and bent as if twenty years had been added to her age since the morning, she hurried along the street, less afraid now than in the broad daylight of noon of being seen. But nervously anxious as she had been not to be too late at the priest's door, when she reached it she was so overpowered by the awful import of the tidings that were to be communicated to her that she could hardly make up her mind to tap at it. Then she bethought her that it would probably be opened by Sibilla; and in the midst of her infinitely graver horrors she was troubled by the thought that she should have to reply to the house-keeper's questionings and surprise.

But it was no part of the Reverend Pasquale Mommi's plan that the widow Caroli should henceforward have any confidant in the matter besides himself. And when he had told her to come to him that evening at seven, he had already settled in his mind the means of

getting rid of the surveillance of his house-keeper. So he had said, at the hour of vespers,

“Sibilla, *cara mia*, I forgot, to-day, to tell the widow Gigli that I wanted to speak to her before she goes down to Pescia to-morrow. So just step down to her house, while I recite the offices, and tell her to be sure and call as she goes by in the morning. If you are back by supper-time, that will be plenty of time.” And Sibilla, who, as her employer knew, liked a gossip with the widow Gigli, was well contented to go on the errand proposed to her, and not at all likely to return before the time named.

So when the widow, making a great effort, while the beating of her heart nearly choked her, gave her little feeble tap at the door, it was at once opened by the priest himself, who, on the watch, like a spider in the centre of his web, was on the look-out for his visitor.

“Come in, Signora Barbara ; come in, and sit down. I trust you have employed the time since we met in the manner I suggested to

you! I trust that you have been occupied with earnest prayer."

"O, *buon Signore Parroco!* say, is there any hope for me! I have prayed so hard! Indeed, indeed I have; I have done nothing else but pray since I was here. I have not so much as tasted a mouthful of food this blessed day, and"

Here the priest's room, and all that was in it, began to swim before the widow's eyes, and, feebly staggering, she fell into a chair.

"Fool of a woman!" muttered the priest, as he hurried out of the room in search of a crust of bread and a glass of wine—for it did not suit him that the widow's feebleness should be pushed *beyond* the limit of consciousness—"fool of a woman! What can she expect if she starves herself from morning to night—and that with the fright on her that she has had!" he muttered to himself with a grin.

"Here, my poor soul," he said, returning in a minute into the little sitting-room with the refreshment he had been to seek, "drink this

glass of wine—it is right good Chianti, and will do you good! and eat a crust. The body must be attended to! *Che diamine!* There, now, eat a mouthful!” he said, as he took from the woman’s pale lips the glass which he had made her drain.

By degrees, a little colour returned into the widow’s lips, and she became capable of speaking and replying to what was said to her.

“Is there any hope for me, *Signore Parroco?*” she asked again, while still holding in her shaking hand the fragment of bread the priest had given her; “will the good Virgin, our blessed Lady, have mercy upon me?”

“I trust, I believe that our prayers have been heard, and that she has interceded for you at the throne of grace!” replied the priest, solemnly.

“*O, signore! O, Dio buono! O, grazie—grazie, mio buon signore!* Thanks, blessed Virgin, thanks!” exclaimed the poor woman,

throwing herself upon her knees, and lifting up her hands and streaming eyes to heaven with a feeling of immense relief.

“I say that I *trust*, Signora Barbara, that your sin may be forgiven you. For I, too, have prayed for you, and the blessed Virgin has deigned to grant a manifestation to me, even as she did to you in the church at Pescia. A means has been pointed out to me by which there is a hope that you may yet be pardoned and escape from the otherwise certain punishment of your sinful deed. It is the only possible hope ; and if it be not acted upon at once, your soul is lost, and you will, immediately after your death, be burned for ever and ever in the fire of hell, in the company of the fiends.”

“*O, Jesu Maria, abbia pietà di me !*” began the widow, again relapsing into her maddening terrors ; “ you said, *Signor Parroco*, that I might be pardoned”

“I said,” returned the priest, gravely, “that I trusted that you might be forgiven *if* you would

take the means that have been revealed to me by the blessed Virgin."

"*Si, signore! Si! O, si, mio buon signore!*" cried the widow, with intense eagerness; "I will! I will! I will do anything! I will fast and pray! I will pay for any number of masses!"

"This is no question of masses!" said the priest, waving his hand in a dignified manner; "nor will prayer or fasting suffice to undo a deed which has been done! Other means are necessary!"

"What other means, *mio buon signore?*" I will do anything! Only tell me what the blessed Virgin desires of me!"

"Restitution must be made!" said the priest, slowly and emphatically. "In every case of wrong done, restitution is the first condition of absolution. There can be no repentance without it. Restitution must be made!"

"What is that, *Signor Parroco?*" asked the widow, with an air of puzzled submission. "How must it be done?"

“Ay! that was the difficulty, *signora mia!* How could restitution be made in this case? I could have told you this morning that that was the only hope for you. But the difficulty was, how, in this case, could fitting restitution be made? But now the blessed Virgin has had the infinite goodness to reveal to me how this may be accomplished.”

“What must I do, *Signor Parroco?*” asked the widow, humbly, and altogether astray as to the meaning of the priest’s words;—“only tell me,” she added, with suppliant voice, “what I must do, and I will do it.”

“I have told you that restitution must be made,” repeated the priest again.

“But what is it, *signore mio*, and how must it be done?” asked the widow, with all submission.

“Ay! that, as I told you before, is the difficulty in this case. It is a grievous sin to wrong the living. But what is that to wronging the dead!” said the priest, in an awful voice, shaking his head and groaning deeply.

“ *O, signor mio,*” cried the widow, clasping her hands, “ how have I wronged the dead ?—I, who never had it in my heart to wrong anybody ! How have I wronged the dead ? ”

“ Ah, Signora Barbara, look into your own conscience ! ” returned the priest, in a tone of deep sadness ; “ have you not wronged your dear departed husband,—cruelly, sacrilegiously wronged him ? ” he added, raising his voice to a tone of menacing denunciation as he uttered the latter dreadful qualification of the act.

“ *Ohimè, Ohimè, Mea culpa ! mea maxima culpa ! Ave Maria gratiá plena ! abbia pietà di me !* I do not mean . . . I did not know it. *Mio buon Signore Parroco,* I did not know it ! ” pleaded the poor woman, falling back into the depths of terror.

“ Not know it ! Why, then, has your conscience been tormenting you ever since ? Ah ! Signora Barbara, do not let us deceive ourselves ; and do not let the devil deceive us ! You know in your heart that your conscience warned you against the act when you took your late hus-

band's crucifix from the wall to sell it for vile gain. If you succeed in deceiving yourself, you cannot deceive the blessed Saints. What! sell your Redeemer! Sell him for so many pieces of silver, even as Judas Iscariot did, and say you did not know that it was sin! And that Redeemer, whom you sold, was stolen," cried the priest, in a terrible voice; "stolen from your dead husband, before the grave had closed over him!—that grave in which he cannot rest, because of the wrong you have done him! Ah, Signora Barbara! Signora Barbara!"

And again the priest shook his head sadly, and sighed deeply. And again the widow seemed to be collapsing in the excess of her abject terror and despair.

"Do you not see?" resumed the priest, after a moment's silence, "that it is to him,—to him, your wronged and injured husband, that restitution must be made."

"Si, *Signor Parroco*," whined the widow, submissively; "I will do whatever you tell me!"

“What *I* tell you! What *I* tell you! Yes, that is easily said! But the case was too bad for my handling. This morning I did not see any way, or any hope for you! It is only by the revelation of the blessed Virgin, which, as I told you, had been granted to my prayers, that the way has been made plain to me,” said the priest, who seemed notwithstanding the revelation of the blessed Virgin, to feel a considerable difficulty in coming to the point, and telling his penitent clearly what was the course of conduct he was going to recommend to her. A somewhat shrewder observer than the widow Caroli would have said that he was afraid to speak his mind out, and was beating about the bush till he thought that he had worked the mind of his penitent into a fit condition for receiving the revelation he had to communicate to her.

“Must I get the crucifix back again?” asked the widow, who had been meditating on the one plain declaration of her adviser, that restitution must be made to the husband. “I

dare say," she added, "that Signor Stefano that is to say, I mean, that perhaps by paying a good penny of advantage to those that had the blessed crucifix, I might get it back again! And I am sure"

"Woman!" interrupted the priest, with tenfold sternness; "you know not what you say. Silence! for the love of heaven! and do not irritate the blessed Virgin by opposing your ignorant fancies to her revealed will! Get the crucifix back again! get it back again, after it has been degraded, disgraced, and desecrated by the vile purposes to which it has been put, and the vile hands into which it has passed! No! the Saints cannot be cozened in *that* way. Do you think they don't know?—do you think the spirit of your departed husband does not know what has been done with his crucifix, and what has resulted from it? Don't say any more about getting back the crucifix! It would be adding insult to the injury you have done. The wicked deed of selling of it has been done, and cannot be undone. But it may be remedied, by

the help which the blessed Virgin has promised to give."

"What is it, then, that I must do, signor mio?" asked the puzzled and tortured woman.

"That is what I am about to tell you," said the priest, solemnly. "Are you stedfastly determined to comply with the revealed will of the Virgin, and so to save your precious soul from the fire of eternal torment?"

"Oh, indeed, indeed, *Signor Parroco*, I will do as you tell me!" whined the widow, piteously.

"However disagreeable it may be to you, however much the devil may tempt you to rebel against the will of heaven?"

"Si, signor *mio*. I will do as the holy Virgin pleases!" returned the widow, in a frightened tone.

"And remember, that if I communicate to you the revelation which has been vouchsafed to my prayers, under the solemn promise that you will abide by it, and you afterwards shrink from obeying, you will have added another

awful sin to the other, and will only have made your case worse. Are you aware, Signora Barbara," he added, in almost whispered tones of awe and terror, as the reflection crossed his mind probably that it might be difficult for the widow to understand how her case could be made worse than what he had already threatened her with,—“are you aware that it often happens, that when a sinner has filled the measure of his wickedness, and certain hell is before him, he is not allowed to escape from the *immediate* fulfilment of his doom by any years of prolonged life here. He is very often called away at once to his appointed place. And I have little doubt that, if you should, after having heard from me the will of the blessed Virgin, as revealed to me this day, refuse or neglect to comply with it, a sudden death without the sacrament—the most awful fate that can befall a human being—would overtake you. Are you, then, minded that I should tell you what the Virgin requires you to do, bearing in mind what would be the probable penalty

of neglecting to comply with my instructions?"

"Indeed, *signor mio*, I will do it! I will do all the blessed Virgin orders me! I will indeed."

"Then listen to me. And if you fail in aught that I am about to tell you, the consequences of your awful sin will be upon your own head! I have done my duty. Now listen and attend to my words. This money—this wretched money which you have become possessed of by wickedly selling your Saviour—you have it in your house?"

"*Si, Signor Parroco!* the money is in my house," answered the widow.

"All of it—untouched?" asked the priest.

"*Si, Signor Parroco!* I have not put a finger to it since I locked it up in the desk that was my poor dear husband's," said the widow, putting her handkerchief to her eyes.

"So far it is well. That sum—the whole of it, without the abstraction of a single dollar,

mind!—must be restored to your husband to whom it rightfully belongs.”

“To my husband!” faltered the widow; “but if you please, sir, how can I restore it to him, *buon anima!* who now lies dead in his grave?” said the widow, looking into the priest’s face with amazed eyes.

“Woman!” cried the priest, rising, and raising a menacing forefinger, “your husband does *not* lie in his grave! His unquiet spirit cannot have rest because of your sin! This was revealed to me by the Virgin herself. Was not your good husband specially devoted to the worship of the blessed Mary?” asked he, suddenly.

“*Si, signore*, he was indeed! He was a member of the confraternity of our Lady of the Seven Sorrows,” replied the widow.

“I thought as much!” cried the priest. “I guessed it. How true it is that the blessed Mother of God *never* deserts those that have been devoted to her! And she has been angered, too, because her servant has been kept

from resting in his grave by your sin. This helps to explain her deigning to reveal to me the means of setting all this wrong right. Listen, Barbara Caroli, to the revealed will of the blessed Virgin. That accursed money must be restored to your husband! It has been revealed to me that he will be permitted to appear to you for the purpose of receiving it."

"O! *Signor mio! misericordia!* I should die of fright! I know I shall drop down dead! When will he appear to me, *mio buon Signore?* I should never dare to give him the money!" said the widow, in extreme trepidation.

"What! already! Are you already shrinking from compliance with the will of Heaven, the revealed will of Heaven? Then, as I said, your eternal destruction be on your own head! Anathema! Anathema! . . ."

"O no! no! no!" whimpered the widow, "I will, I will! I will do it, if I drop down dead the next minute! I will, I will!"

"Do so," rejoined the priest, "and you will

then again know a peace of mind and conscience which you have never known since that unhallowed money has been in your possession ! Do it, and the Virgin will bless and protect you ! ”

“ And when will he, my husband, I mean, signore *mio*,—when will he come for the money ? ” said the widow, her teeth chattering with fright.

“ That is what I am going to tell you, ” said the priest, looking solemnly into her face. “ You must this night go with the money in your hand to the churchyard behind the church on the hill yonder, and you must wait till you see the ghost of your husband appear. It will not be necessary that you should approach him closely. Thinking that you would be dreadfully frightened at doing this, I have obtained for you that it should suffice for you to place the money on the spot which the ghost shall indicate to you. He will point to some particular spot, and you must deposit the money there, and then leave the churchyard without looking

back, and hasten to your home. And you must, above all, take care to mention this to no human soul. Should you do so, the whole expiatory virtue of what you are going to do would be lost, and you would be as badly off as you are now. Have you understood me?"

"*Si, signore,*" said the widow, whose teeth had been chattering in her head while she had been listening, with all the power of her mind, to the priest's instructions.

"And will you perform this faithfully?" he asked again.

"*Signor Parroco,* I will, if I do not drop down dead first! But when must I go to the churchyard? Will the blessed Virgin be with him?" asked the widow, with the most perfect faith in the ability of her companion to tell her.

"Probably not," replied the priest, gravely. "In all probability you will see the figure of your late husband alone. You had better go to the churchyard at one o'clock to-night."

"This night! this very night! Oh, me!

oh, me! How shall I ever be able to do it!" cried the unhappy woman, trembling in every limb.

"There is in reality nothing that need frighten you, Signora Barbara; nothing save the fate that will await you if you do not do what I have told you on behalf of the blessed Virgin. Do as I have said, and you will again be restored to peace of mind, and will be in favour with the Saints and the holy Virgin Mary. Fail to do it, and eternal torments are before you!"

"I will do it! I will, signore, I will! But, *mio buon signore*, would you not have the Christian charity to go with me? I should be so grateful; and then you could see, you know, that it was all done right. *Per amore di Dio, caro mio*, signore, do, do go with me to the churchyard!" said the widow, in the most suppliant and insinuating tone.

The priest had very carefully considered every part of the conversation he was holding with the widow, and every contingency of the

directions he had been giving her. Indeed, nearly all the hours during which his penitent supposed him to have been engaged in communication with the Virgin had been given to this task. But it had never chanced to occur to him that the Signora Barbara might make such a request as the above. And there seemed to the mind of the Reverend Pasquale Mommi something so very amusingly *naïve* in the poor widow's proposition, that it was with the utmost difficulty that he prevented a broad grin from becoming visible on his coarse, thick features, as he proceeded to answer it.

“Signora, that cannot be! Most willingly would I assist you by accompanying you, or in any other way in my power. But it is to you alone that your husband will consent to appear. Were any other human being there he would not come. It is for that reason that I have told you to go at one o'clock at night, when you may be quite sure that nobody will see or interfere with you. No, I must not go with you!

Leave me here to pray for you the while. That I can promise you ; and you may be very sure that I shall be of most use to you in that way."

"It will be very dreadful to go there all alone!" whined poor Signora Barbara.

"Will it not be much more dreadful to expect to be called away from this world to everlasting torments? To expect it from hour to hour, Signora Barbara?" asked the priest, with a return of his dreadful voice and menacing manner.

"Oh, yes! yes! I must go! I must! I must!" said the poor creature, cowering, and hiding her face in her hands. "And must I take the money with me?"

"I have already told you so! Listen to me once again, that there may be no mistake ; and then, as you care for your life and your immortal soul, do exactly as I tell you. At one o'clock this night—it will be sufficient to leave your house at one o'clock ; you will be in the churchyard in a few minutes—at one o'clock this night you will set forth

from your house, taking the money with you, and you will go to the churchyard behind the church. Take your place exactly by the side of the buttress next the little door on that side of the church, and do not move from that spot till you have done what you go to do. Remain close to the church, so as to touch it, and then no evil thing will have power to harm you or to deceive you. Then you will see the ghost of your late husband appear in the churchyard. Do not move from the spot where I have told you to stand, till he has pointed to the place where you are to lay the money down for him to take. Most likely it will be on one of the flat tombstones in the churchyard. Do not speak or look at him ; but lay the money down, and then make the best of your way to your own house, and spend an hour in giving thanks to the blessed Saints for the great deliverance that has been granted to you. If you like, you may wait till you see your husband take the money, to make sure that it has gone into the right

hands. Have you attended to all that I have said, and do you understand aright what you have to do ?”

“*Si, signor mio!* I will do it, if my poor old limbs will do my bidding!” said the poor woman.

“And remember that the salvation of your soul from eternal torments depends upon your accomplishing the task. Now leave me; and may our Lady give you grace and strength to go through your work of expiation.”

“Amen! Amen!” exclaimed the widow, fervently. “I will go, *Signor Parroco*. And I thank you much for all your kindness.”

And with that, Signora Barbara sighed heavily, and turned her to the door of the priest's room.

It may seem strange, but it was the fact, that among all the workings of the widow's troubled mind, sorrow for the loss of the vast sum of money she had so much rejoiced over in prospective, had no place. The priest had too successfully filled all her feeble mind and imagina-

tion with other terrors, hopes and fears. What was money to one who did, really and practically, believe that she was in immediate and imminent danger of falling into eternally burning fire! All the hopes, all the purposes to which she had intended to put this money did not only fall into the second distance in the landscape within her mental horizon, but they faded away out of sight altogether. She had no thought about the money, as she went down the street to her home, feeling more as if she were in a painful dream than as if she were really awake.

There was no danger that, worn out as she was, she should sleep during the coming hours, and so miss that appointed for her dread task. She did take a little food, when she found herself at home, for she had sense enough left to fear that she should not have bodily strength for the enterprise if she did not do so. And having done this, she again betook herself to the faldstool in the little closet, and remained there trying to pray,

but, in fact, only suffering agonies of terror, and counting each beat of the clock as the successive hours passed, till, at last, the awful bell tolled one !

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE CHURCHYARD.

THE widow started as she heard the one single stroke flung out from the old tower over town and forest—started as if some terrible and wholly unexpected summons had sounded in her ears. And yet she had been expecting this moment all the night, and had counted quarter by quarter all the weary hours as they had slowly passed. She started from her knees, and steadying herself by leaning heavily with her shaking hands on the top of the faldstool, turned at once to go down to the door of her house. There was a strange expression in the old woman's face, and a strange manner in all her movements as she set herself to the performance of her task, which might almost have led any

one who saw her to imagine that she was walking in her sleep. She walked as if moved by some internal spring or mechanical contrivance rather than by human volition. The moving spring, however, was, in fact, no other than an over-riding, all-powerful volition strung to the highest pitch of nervous intensity. But it was acting in the strongest possible opposition to the more immediate volitions of the moment. It is probably not saying too much to assert that the widow would at that moment rather have died there and then than go on the errand on which she was bound. But a much more terrible terror than that of death urged her on. Death, as she had been informed, would probably ensue with very little delay if she failed in accomplishing her enterprise; and then . . . an eternity of torment to be entered on *immediately*. And this was *believed* by the widow—not *held* as an article of speculative creed, but believed with the same sort of belief with which she would have believed in the terrors of being cast into a visible fire there in the flesh.

The priests of the Roman Catholic Church act, as is usual with them, with a very perfect understanding of the nature of uncultured human minds, when they enforce their comminations with frequent pictures of the visible flames of hell, and the tortures of the damned in the midst of them. "*Segnius irritant animos demissa per aures, quam quæ sunt oculis subjecta fidelibus*"—"There is nothing like seeing for believing." And the gross pictorial representations of human beings writhing in the midst of material flames, which so frequently meet the eye in Roman Catholic countries, do unquestionably enable and compel the otherwise inert imaginations of those to whom they are addressed to realise and intensify their belief in a future eternity of torture with a vividness that would not be attained by any other means.

The widow *knew* that very shortly she would be cast into flames which would torture her for ever and ever, if she failed to execute the instructions she had received. And, therefore, though every fibre and nerve of body and brain

protested against the deed, she unhesitatingly set herself to the task.

The mere weight of the burthen she had to carry was a source of difficulty to her. She had placed the bags containing the money in a basket such as peasant women are in the habit of carrying over their arms. It was the same basket, as it chanced, in which she had concealed the crucifix, when she had carried it for sale to Florence; and she could not help thinking, as she started on her painful way up the silent and empty street, of the trouble she had felt on that occasion lest the contents of her basket should be guessed, and how much worse it was with her now, when the object of her journey was to get rid of the proceeds of that other day's deed.

She had taken a good walking-stick in her hand to aid her steps, and as she walked, leaning on her stick, much bent, labouring under the weight of her burthen, slowly and painfully along the half ruinous street, it would be difficult to imagine a more truly wretched or more miserable-looking object. She had told the

priest that she would assuredly do his bidding if her limbs would obey her will in the execution of it. And truly it would have seemed probable enough to any who had watched her progress, that they would altogether fail her before she reached the churchyard. But the strong terror which drove her was the master, and she crawled, without stopping, over the short distance she had to traverse.

The situation of the churchyard at Uzzano has been indicated in some degree in a former chapter. It is a remarkable spot, of great natural beauty, but in a special degree lonesome, gloomy, and forbidding to a southern nature. The side of the church which faced the south and the slope of the mountain and the town, had a little "piazza," or open space of flagged stones, bounded by a parapet wall on the side of the town. And this, cheerfully sunned as it is, and commanding a lovely view over the forest-covered mountain side, is the favourite place of resort of the townspeople at mid-day in winter, and at the hour of the Ave Maria in summer.

But not a soul of the lounging, gossiping crowd ever wanders round the church to the northern side of it, where the graveyard lies. No portion of the inhabited buildings of the little town is situated on this side of the church. None of them are even visible from it; for the rapid fall of the ground, the intervening church, and the thick and magnificently large chestnut trees shut them out entirely from the sight.

One building indeed there is to the northward of the church and the graveyard, once the most important of the town, and doubtless the first cause of the existence of the town on that mountain-top—the ancient castle. But it is a mere ruin, though still a large and lofty mass of building. As the ground continues to rise behind and above Uzzano, the ruins of the old castle are situated on higher ground than the church, which is itself higher than almost all the rest of the town, and somewhat higher than the graveyard, which occupies the space between them and the church. The frowning old edifice, beautiful as it is to a northern eye, with its

jagged, ivy-grown walls and closely surrounding forest, does not help to make the solitary graveyard a more cheerful spot.

The southern mind abhors ruins. It sees no beauty in them, but ugliness. They are as ugly as rocks, which are not capable of producing corn or wine for human use and comfort. A castle in good habitable condition, well arranged and orderly, promising "good entertainment for man and beast," this may be beautiful to the southern imagination—not a ruin. A ruin is but the symbol of disaster, decay, death, and the absence of all that ministers to human wants and comfort. To the southern imagination a ruin is a simply repellent object, calculated only to make such a spot as a graveyard yet more odious and disgusting.

To differently constituted imaginations this Uzzano graveyard is not without beauty of a high order. Encircled by the church, the ruined castle, and the huge chestnuts, which have here grown to an unusual size, it is ever in deep shade, and is accordingly exceptionally rich in

the luxuriance and depth of its verdure. Even in the heats of summer it seems to breathe coolness and freshness. And between the trunks of the trees, on the right hand of one standing with his back to the castle and facing the church, delicious peeps of distant scenery—other mountain sides and tops, and far-away vistas reaching down into sun-bathed valleys—may be seen. A more charmingly tranquil spot for the last sleep of “the forefathers of the hamlet” could hardly be conceived by imaginations which love to picture to themselves that last sleep as one of repose and peace.

But to the southern this peaceful solitude, its surroundings, and the purpose to which it is devoted, are all repellent and hateful. Mid-day might have been the hour appointed for the accomplishment of the widow’s task with very little chance of her errand being interrupted by the intrusion of any human creature. But at the terrible hour of one in the morning all the dreadful character of the place appealed to poor Signora Barbara’s imagination with tenfold force.

The combined length of the chancel and nave of the long church—for Uzzano was once a sufficiently important place to have a church of considerable size—the whole length of the church bounds nearly entirely the grave-yard on its southern side. And there is nothing to break the long dead length of wall save one small door. On the other side of the church, facing the piazza, there is a large door, with a rather handsome porch, the ordinary mode of access to the church. But the little door to the north, a sort of mere postern, was never opened—had never been opened in the memory of the oldest inhabitant. And under these circumstances it was the object of a sort of superstitious horror to the minds of the simple mountaineers. They called it “the Devil’s Door,” unseemly and unreasonable as such an appellation appears in connection with the building in question. If “Auld Nickie Ben” *did* wish to find a door into a church, ought it to be persistently closed against him? Perhaps on proper theological grounds it ought. At all events, the little door

in question had never given either ingress or egress to anybody, time out of mind. The people knew that death, solitude, and gloom were on the other side of its stout old planks, and regarded it with a dislike, which ought rather to have been liking, inasmuch as the little door kept out all these disagreeable things.

Now it was in the immediate neighbourhood of this ill-reputationed little door, that the Reverend Pasquale Mommi had ordered the widow to take up her stand. It was situated at the eastern end of the nave, close to the corner made by that and a short transept, and between the latter and a buttress ; so that the spot was in even deeper shade than any other part of the churchyard. There are very few tombs of any pretension in the Uzzano burying-place. Four or five large slabs, raised a foot or so above the level of the soil, are to be seen in a group under the shade of the chestnut trees on the eastern side of the ground—the side that is nearest the village street, and opposite to that where, as has been said, a view opens out over the adjacent

scenery. For the rest of the graves, there is little or nothing to distinguish the exact spot where coffins have been laid, save a little black wooden cross stuck into the earth at the head of the grave, which the weather and mountain storms in a very few years make an end of. A certain general rolling irregularity of surface indicates the purpose which the ground serves ; but that is all.

The way by which the widow would have to approach the graveyard, lay around the west door of the church, and passed close to the four or five low altar tombs which have been mentioned. The nearest way for anybody coming from the priest's house to the same place would be round the eastern end of the church.

Slow as the widow's progress along the street of the little sleeping town had been, and painfully as she had dragged herself and the burthen she carried up the steps which communicate between the street at its eastern extremity and the higher level of the church, it was not more than ten minutes past one when her

stooping and feebly-stepping figure came round the north-western corner of the church into the graveyard. She stopped for one minute, resting her back against the corner of the church, while she sent a rapid and anxious glance round the space before her. There was a late moon, which had risen above the forest tops since she had left her house, and gave a faint light to the scene, making all the features of it more weird in expression and appearance, but affording a possibility of distinguishing any figure that might be beyond the shade of the trees. But there was no figure there.

The widow dared not halt long. The almost irresistible temptation to turn and run away, as well as the fear that even now her strength would not suffice to enable her to reach the spot that had been pointed out to her, warned her to get on.

“*Ave Maria! gratiá plena! Abbia pietà di me! Jesu Maria, abbia pietà di me!*” she muttered in a quivering whisper. She had begun to utter the holy words aloud, but the sound of her own voice in the midst of the dread stillness of

that place and hour had so startled her, that she had dropped her voice to a whisper, and completed her pious ejaculation under her breath.

She proceeded to hobble onwards towards the ill-omened little door, helping herself by her hand on the church wall, and once or twice nearly falling over the uneven and grass-grown surface of the soil she had to traverse. The violent beating of her heart seemed to threaten to choke her every minute.

At length she reached the dark corner where she had been told to stand, and placing the heavy basket on the grass beside her, she wiped from her brow the heavy drops which, despite the coldness of the night, had gathered there. Her teeth were chattering in her head, and her knees shaking under her as she stood. Nothing could have prevented sense and consciousness from leaving her altogether, save the intensity of the purpose which had brought her there.

She was not however condemned to endure the agonies of suspense very many minutes.

It will be understood from the particulars of the locality which have been detailed, that the spot where the widow stood was separated from the eastern side of the graveyard, where the four or five altar tombs were grouped together, by the whole length of the nave of the church. The priest had mentioned that very probably the expected apparition of the late Francesco Caroli would indicate that as the place where his widow should place the money she was come there to "restore" to him. It was in that direction, therefore, that she directed her anxious gaze.

And in less than five minutes from the moment at which the widow had reached the station assigned to her, true to the blessed Virgin's revelation, the ghost appeared! The awe-struck widow saw it glide from out the shadow of the great chestnut trees, and approach the little group of altar tombs! The poor woman could hear her heart beat, as she stood holding her breath, shaking in every limb, and supporting herself on her stick, with her

face peering forward in the direction of the apparition. The widow recognised instantly the figure of her deceased husband. Had the ghost been ten feet high, or as many broad, the widow would have equally "recognised" him. So true it is that it needs but a little excitement to make the eye see what the mind and brain tell them they are to see.

The ghost was got up in the well-known and appropriate style of ghostly fashion common to all countries. He was simply draped in a large white sheet, drawn over his head after the manner of a cowl. This was of course correct and effective ; but it had been achieved at the cost of a deficiency at the other extremity of the toilet, which might have been calculated to destroy the general effect, had any spectator more critical than the agitated widow been there to look on. In fact, the drawing up of the sheet, which apparently was subject to all the limiting qualities of a mortal work-a-day world sheet, left somewhat too much exposed for perfect artistic effect, a pair of coarse black worsted

knitted stockings, encasing a pair of very stalwart legs. It may be that Francesco Caroli had been wont to wear such habiliments when in the flesh ; and, if so, all that can be said is that he adhered to the practice under his new circumstances of life. The garments in question, however, are certainly, for the most part, distinctive of the clergy on this side of the Styx. And it may be assumed that if the Signora Sibilla had had an opportunity of obtaining a glance at them, she would have been at no loss to name the wearer.

The widow Caroli, however, was very far from being in a condition to note any such trifling peculiarities of ghostly attire. She would have sworn afterwards with a safe conscience, that the figure she had seen was clad in perfect white from head to toe, that he glided, after the known fashion of ghosts, along the ground, without stepping, and that there was no mistaking the identity of her late beloved husband.

The figure unquestionably did progress to-

wards the group of altar tombs with a motion as nearly akin to that of gliding as the thick legs and heavy person of the Reverend Pasquale Mommi could contrive to make it.

When "it" reached the tombs, it paused and made what it may perhaps be allowed to call, in sporting phraseology, a "dead point," at that one of them which was nearest to the place where the widow stood. It was clearly anxious that there should be no mistake about the matter, for it paused for at least a minute with one arm stretched out beneath the sheet towards the slab in question. Then, executing half a *volte face*, it stalked on till it disappeared behind one of the large trees in the direction of the ruined castle.

The widow did not pause in the execution of her part of the performance. She was by this time in a state of too highly strung nervous excitement for it to be possible for her to do so. Breaking down, fainting, madness might come with reaction afterwards. But for the moment the widow was able to do her part with a febrile

absence of hesitation, which a physician would not have deemed a re-assuring sight.

She lifted the heavy basket from the ground, and, with staring eyes still fixed on the spot at which the ghostly visitor had disappeared, walked more rapidly than could have been thought possible for her by any one who had seen her progress up the street a few minutes previously, over the uneven surface of the grassy ground towards the tombs, and deposited its contents on the slab which the ghost had indicated.

A great sigh, as of relief, escaped from her as the heavy bags rolled out on the marble, and she stood for an instant gazing at them before she turned to make her way from the weird spot as fast as her feeble limbs would let her. She forgot all about the priest's permission to stop until she should have seen the ghost secure the money. She had suffered so terribly since it had been in her possession, that it seemed a relief to her merely to be rid of it. Standing by the side of the tomb on which the money

had been placed, she was much nearer the point of exit from the churchyard by which she would have to return to her home than in her former position by the side of the "Devil's Door." She felt now as if she would not, on any consideration, have returned to that evil omened spot. But there was nothing between the place where she stood and the north-west corner of the church, on the other side of which was the living world of flesh and blood, save the few large trees that helped to enclose the graveyard on this side, so that in a minute at the longest she had turned the corner and emerged into the moonlight, which had already left the northern side of the church.

No sooner had the figure of the widow disappeared round the corner of the church than the ghost, no longer making any attempt at "gliding," stepped briskly out from behind one of the great trees that grew near the castle wall, and coming with a quick step to the tomb, gathered up the bags of gold in all haste, and made off across the churchyard towards the east

end of the church,—in the opposite direction therefore to that which the widow had taken,—round which the shortest way lay to the parsonage of the Reverend Pasquale Mommi.

Had he taken his way to his home by passing around the western front of the church, so as to have followed the widow in her retreat from the graveyard, he would have seen that which might have caused sundry events that happened afterwards to have fallen out differently.

The unhappy widow, on regaining “the glimpses of the moon,” and the sight of familiar human habitations, felt an immense relief. She had accomplished her dread task, she had liberated her soul, the awful terror which had driven her onward was removed from her heart. She felt as if a crushing material weight had been lifted off from her bosom. But now was the moment for her physical nature to assert its claims and necessities. The paramount, all-conquering mental excitement which had braced her nerves and lent a febrile energy to her frame was at an end. The time of

inevitable re-action had come. And the result was, that scarcely had the widow reached the top of the little flight of steps leading from the west front of the church to the street, when her head swam round, her consciousness deserted her, and she fell to the ground, narrowly escaping from a fall down the seven or eight steps beneath her. The priest, of course, regained his house, and after ascertaining that nothing had disturbed the serene slumbers of the Signora Sibilla, carefully locked up in a secret repository the amount of the widow's prize, and went to bed in the happy consciousness of being a wealthy man, altogether ignorant the while of what had happened to his victim, and supposing that she too was by this time in her bed, happy in the conviction that, though once again a poor woman, she could now sleep o' nights with an easy conscience.

The hapless widow's fainting-fit was a prolonged one. Her feeble vital forces had been utterly exhausted by the fasting, by the mental

agony, the terror, and the strain put upon all her powers to accomplish the task which had been set her. For more than four-and-twenty hours her mind had been in a state verging on distraction, and her body had been all but entirely unsupported by food. There she lay, wholly unconscious, during the remaining hours of the night and the sharp cold of the dawn of day, till she was found, about the hour of sunrise, by a little boy leading forth a couple of goats to pasture in the outskirts of the forest on the other side of the castle walls.

The child knew the Signora Barbara Caroli perfectly well, as every member of that small community knew each other; and, thinking that she was dead, left his goats to wander at their will and ran back to the street in great alarm to tell the neighbours what had happened. Coming down the street the lad met one Stefano Ricciardi, the proprietor and tiller of a patch on the mountain side, a near neighbour of the widow, going out to his daily toil, and telling him that the widow Caroli had fallen down

dead, took him to the spot where the poor woman lay.

“ *Misericordia! la poveretta!* ” exclaimed Stefano, who doubted not that la Signora Barbara was indeed dead; “ to think of her falling dead on the steps like this! She will have been going to pray at her husband’s grave after the Ave Maria last night, and been took sudden like this! Poor soul! But they do say it is a happy thing to die on sacred ground, and this is inside the churchyard! Just you run and tell some of the neighbours, *bambino mio*, and I will carry the poor old creature to her house. She is not very heavy, I reckon, dried up as she is! ”

The boy ran to do as he was bid. Stefano Ricciardi proceeded to lift the widow from the flags on which she had fallen; and, in doing so, soon perceived that she was not dead, though, as it seemed to his judgment, not very far from it. He carried her as carefully and tenderly as he could down the steps and along the little street to her house. And, by the time he got there,

several of the neighbours had heard of what had happened, and had hurried to the widow's house. And Stefano, waiting only to hear that she had "come to," left her in the hands of the women, and went his way to his work.

The widow did "come to" after a fashion soon after they had placed her in her well-warmed bed ; that is to say, she became conscious, and was able to speak. But she rambled strangely in her talk, and the gossips around her could make nothing of aught that fell from her. The hypothesis that she had been going to pray at her husband's grave the preceding evening, had been seized with a fainting-fit, and had unfortunately lain there on the steps in the cold all night, was generally accepted. One old woman, indeed, came so near the truth as to hazard the remark that she "should not wonder if the widow Caroli had a seed something in that *postaccio* of a churchyard. They tried to induce her to take some food, but unsuccessfully ; and, after a couple of hours or so had been lost in wondering, invoking the Virgin and

the Saints, and chattering, they sent for the doctor. At the end of about another hour the doctor came. But by that time poor Barbara had again relapsed into a state of unconciousness, and the last faint, fluttering pulses were answering to the final struggling beats of the heart, which was on the point of stopping for ever. There remained nothing for the doctor to do but "*constatare*" in due form and manner that the deceased had died from exhaustion and an exposure to the inclemency of the weather, which her feeble vitality had been unable to resist.

But, before he had left the house, the Signora Sibilla arrived, having only that instant heard of the catastrophe. She had evidently made the utmost haste to come to her friend. But she came too late, save to assume that direction of all that pertained to the poor widow's house and affairs, to which her recognised intimacy with the deceased, and in some degree perhaps her position as the arch-priest's housekeeper, seemed to entitle her. She mani-

fested great grief at not having been informed of her dear friend's state in time for her to have been with her during her last moments. But her sorrow was not of a nature to prevent her from exerting herself very actively in taking heed to matters of business, which are apt to be neglected by sorrowing survivors at such a moment.

She bustled about the house, anxious apparently to make a mental catalogue of all the little property it might contain. There was not a drawer, or a chest, or repository of any kind that she did not open and examine. She was evidently very anxious to get the other women, some four or five of them, out of the house. But this it was not so easy to do. The occasion was too fair an one for lounging and gossiping, and neglecting whatever of work of her own each of them had to do.

Sibilla could not get rid of them, nor did her perquisitions appear in any degree to set at rest the evident uneasiness which her poor dear friend's affairs seemed to occasion her. And

what was still more disagreeable to her, as might be judged from her evident reluctance to leave the house and the other women in it, she was obliged, by her duties to the priest, to return to the Parsonage about an hour before mid-day.

His Reverence had not risen at his ordinary hour that morning, having pleaded a bad headache when called at the usual time, and, turning his face from the light, enjoyed another sound nap. It was, therefore, only on awaking from this that he heard from the Signora Sibilla, who had just returned from the widow Caroli's house, what had happened.

“God bless me, Sibilla! you don't say so!” cried the reverend gentleman, with great appearance of interest; “on the steps leading to the church! Was she able to give any account of herself . . . to say how she came to be there? Does any body know what took her there?”

“None of them could make out anything she said. Poor soul! she could not speak

much, it seems. But they suppose, and it stands to reason, *Signor Parroco*, that she was going to pray on her husband's tomb."

"To be sure! of course! Ay, ay, on the steps going up to the church, you say! Yes! yes! That was it, no doubt, no doubt! I think I will get up now, Sibilla." *

* The dreaming of the numbers for the lottery, the sale of the crucifix, the coming up of those numbers a prize, the remorse of conscience of the dreamer, the consultation of the priest, and the conduct of the latter, as described above, are all real facts, and became the subject of investigation before the tribunals in Italy not many years ago.

BOOK IV.



THE ROBBERY.

CHAPTER I.

THE WIDOW'S MITE.

IT was now about a week since the disastrous night of the flood, and the extent of the damage done had been pretty well ascertained. It was very great; and, as Lawyer Morini had remarked, few of the sufferers were so well able to bear their losses as Farmer Bartoli. Some of the poorer sufferers had been reduced almost to destitution, and various plans were on foot for the relief of the most urgent cases of distress. Among other endeavours it had been arranged that, while larger schemes for obtaining aid from other parts of Tuscany were being organised, a subscription among the inhabitants of the suffering district themselves should be raised to meet the immediate necessities of the most

urgent cases. Lucca and its immediate neighbourhood could do something. And even some of the sufferers themselves would not be unable or unwilling to stretch out a hand to their more hardly hit fellows.

Farmer Bartoli was among the first of these. Though he loved his money, he was not a man to be niggardly on such an occasion as this. And he had put down his name for a handsome sum at the head of a list intended to be circulated in his special district.

The farmer himself, together with his daughter, were at this time inmates of Lawyer Morini's house in Lucca. The arrangement had been an intensely disagreeable one to Regina, but she had been unable to say a word in objection to it. It would have been so nice to have been allowed to remain at the widow's till her father had arranged where their future place of residence was to be. But it was just because it would have been so very nice that she could not venture to hint at the possibility of such a thing ; nor, indeed, did the widow say

a word in favour of any such scheme. She had done all in her power for Regina when she was brought to her door houseless, and homeless, and without a dry thread on her. She had given her her own bed, and had carried her hot wine and other comforts with her own fair fat hands. But to expect that the widow should unnecessarily volunteer to retain her rival in her own house, when her being there would have involved daily meeting with Carlo, would have been too much. And, besides, the widow Monaldi had not a spare bed-room. So, when Farmer Bartoli came over on the morning following the night of the flood, full of gratitude for the timely kindness and hospitality which his daughter had received, and stated that it had been arranged that he and Regina should for a time be the guests of Signor Morini, the pretty widow said not a word in opposition to the arrangement.

To Regina, however, the prospect was little less than terrible. It was not only that she should be wholly separated from Carlo, but that

she should be daily and hourly exposed to the now more than ever detested persecutions of Meo Morini.

She knew that she should be altogether separated from Carlo. For, though it had not been difficult for them to find occasions and opportunities of meeting at Ripalta, it would be a very different thing at the lawyer's house in Lucca. Carlo, unauthorised by her father and uninvited by Signor Morini, could hardly present himself at the lawyer's door as a visitor to her. But Regina thought the positive sufferings in store for her were yet worse than the negative ones. She had no dread of leaving Carlo in the daily society of the widow. There was something in Regina's nature that acted as a protection against the sufferings caused by jealousy of such a kind. But she did dread being constantly exposed to the love-making of Meo Morini. However, there was no help for it, and she could but accompany her father, on the afternoon of that day, to the lawyer's house.

One comfort she had before starting on the unwelcome journey, and it was a great one. She was a witness to her father's cordial meeting with Carlo. On seeing him again at Sponda Lunga the farmer renewed, even more heartily than he had spoken in the lawyer's studio that morning, the expressions of his admiration and gratitude for what the young man had done, and said he hoped the day might come when he should have an opportunity of showing him that Giovanni Bartoli was not the man to forget such an obligation. But with all this there was not a word or a look that made the smallest approach to any contemplation of the possibility of accepting him for a son-in-law. And Carlo could not help feeling that the very cordiality of the farmer was an indication of the perfect security he felt that there was no danger of such an event ever being brought to pass. On the other hand, the farmer mingled with his praises and assurances of good-will sundry sufficiently broad jesting hints and innuendoes as to the certainty of

an alliance between the well-to-do and pretty widow and her managing man, which, while they caused the lady to blush and bridle with almost unconcealed gratification, were excessively annoying to the young man, who was compelled to listen to them in the presence of both the widow and Regina. With regard to the latter, a little by-play of eye-talk was amply sufficient to repudiate very successfully all that her father was attributing to him. But the excellent, though too loving, widow could not be similarly warned of the baselessness of the visions the farmer was presenting to her imagination.

While Signor Bartoli was bringing the little *calessino*, in which he was going to drive his daughter to Lucca, to the door of the widow's house, Carlo did find an opportunity of whispering in her ear.

“ We are going to be separated, my Regina ! separated utterly, and for Heaven knows how long. May I say—may I always think of you by day and dream of you by night as *my* Regina ? ”

“Yours, Carlo *mio!* yours and none other’s, for ever and ever, let the separation be as utter and as long as it may! Are you afraid to trust me in the society of the fascinating Meo?” she added, in a lighter tone.

“No, my own love! I am coxcomb enough to feel no disquietude on that score;” replied the young man.

“But for me?” continued Regina, looking into his eyes, with an arch smile; “what must I be, if I have no fears of leaving you to the daily fascination of Signora Monaldi, who is neither hideous, nor disagreeable, nor detestable? And I *have* no such fears!” she added, with a noble expression of perfect love and trustfulness which stamped itself indelibly on Carlo’s brain, and made his sole comfort and consolation during many a coming day of trial and sore sorrow.

So Regina and her father drove off to their temporary home in the lawyer’s house.

It was a few days after this, as has been said, that a subscription list, headed by Signore Gio-

vanni Bartoli, was handed round among the inhabitants of the villages on that side of Lucca for the relief of the poorest of those who had been ruined by the inundation. Signor Meo Morini and a well-to-do young farmer, a neighbour of the Bartolis, were charged with the task of collecting the subscriptions ;—the latter as being a man sufficiently well known to all those among whom the list was to be circulated ; and Meo Morini, partly because he happened to be on the spot, when the plan was finally arranged by Bartoli and one or two others, in Lawyer Morini's studio, and partly because it was considered desirable to have a man of business habits, whose position and character entitled him to entire respect. Morini the father, was to be the treasurer of the fund.

It was between twelve and one o'clock,—an hour chosen for the purpose, because it was one when all country-folks would be tolerably safe to be found at home,—that Meo Morini and his colleague, with their summaried statement of losses, and their subscription-book and forms of

receipt in their pockets, set out to canvass the Sponda Lunga district. Their main hope there was the widow Monaldi. With the exception of "grandi signori," who lived in Lucca or more distant cities, and who had to be approached in a different way, the widow was the richest person in the hamlet. She had not suffered in any degree from the waters herself; and she was well known to be good and charitable on all occasions when help was needed. The house of the late wheelwright was, therefore, one of the first to which the two collectors addressed themselves.

When Carlo Caroli had first come to Sponda Lunga in the character of manager of the Signora Monaldi's business, the buxom widow had taken sundry little precautions against the tongues of all the good-natured friends, who might be expected to say what good-natured friends in all countries are apt to say when fortune favours them with the godsend of a similar opportunity. The young manager was not to reside in the house. Of course such a

thing was not to be thought of. He had his lodging in a separate building, as has been seen. And what could la Signora Grundina—(there is an Italian branch of that ancient and wide-spread family ;)—what, I say, could any Signora Grundina ask more? The manager was not even to board with the widow,—a most decided sacrifice to the *convenances*; for such an arrangement would evidently have been convenient and advantageous to all parties concerned.

But not even Mrs. Grundy herself, the great and recognised head of all the family, could have found any objection to the employer occasionally inviting her managing man to dinner, or to supper. And the widow Monaldi had availed herself, sparingly at first, of this liberty of action. Gradually, as no sort of evil or ill-consequence had been found to follow from such invitations,—*anzi*, as an Italian would have said,—which one word would have expressed that they had, on the contrary, been found to be agreeable, convenient, and un-

objectionable in all ways,—they became more frequent. And imperceptibly, and without any definite arrangement having been made on the subject, it had come to pass, that Signor Caroli might be found with tolerable regularity at twelve o'clock every day at the frugal but comfortably spread table of the Signora Monaldi.

He had been so dining on the day of the visit of the young farmer and Signore Meo Morini. The dinner was pretty well over; but Italians, whatever their position in the social scale, are never in a hurry to bring the mid-day cessation from labour to a premature close. And the widow and her managing man were still sitting opposite to each other, with the little square table between them, on which there was a clean coarse cloth of hempen web, of the best quality, grown, hackled, hand-spun, and woven in the upper valley of the Serchio, famous for such products, a flask of wine, a bit of Parmesan cheese, and a few new chestnuts, the first of the year, by way of dessert.

Opposite to each other, with the table between them, if you please to remark, Mrs. Grundy, ma'am!—a position, however, which did not save Carlo from being subjected to a very severe point-blank fire, at terribly short distance, from the frequently hereinbefore mentioned magnificent and too eloquent eyes of his entertainer. But he had become used to that sort of thing by this time; and probably felt respecting it, somewhat as the navy celebrated in history is said to have felt with regard to the wife who beat him. It apparently amused her, and could not hurt him! No! it certainly could not hurt him. And had Regina been there in the flesh, as she probably was in the spirit, she would have been perfectly contented by the perseverance with which Carlo attended to his plate, as long as there was anything on it; and when there was not, persisted in bringing back every tendency of the conversation to wander towards dangerous topics, to weighty considerations as to the necessity of having Farmer Bratti's new cart finished by the

end of the week, or the expediency of making renewed application to Farmer Spannocchi respecting that long outstanding bill.

The widow and her manager were thus occupied when Assunta came into the little parlour to announce that Signor Meo Morini and another signore were at the door and begged to see the Signora Monaldi.

“Ask them to walk in directly ; and, Sunta, take away this flask, and bring another ; here are the keys ! and put two more glasses on the table. Who can the other gentleman be, I wonder !”

And the widow, with a rapid glance at a mirror that was hung above the stove, arranged more becomingly, if that were possible, the ribbons of her pretty cap, and smoothed the broad glossy bands of black hair that bound her white temples.

“Good day, Signor Meo ! it is always a pleasure to see you ! And Signor Bratti, too ! To think of Sunta calling you ‘another gentleman,’ as if she did not know you ! ‘Here’s

Signor Meo, and *un altro signore,*' says she! We were just a speaking, Signor Carlo here and I, about the new cart. I think I may promise that it shall be sent home Saturday night, eh Signor Carlo? Sit down, gentlemen, and honour me by taking a glass of wine."

"It is always a pleasure to pay you a visit, Signora Marta!" replied Meo, as they sat down and accepted the widow's invitation, while Carlo tossed the closing oil out of the neck of the flask, and having first poured a little wine into his own glass, proceeded to fill those of the new-comers amid the protestations *de rigueur*, that he was not leaving room enough for any water.

"Nothing comes to me in the way of business that is a greater treat to me than a visit to Sponda Lunga," resumed Meo. "It is rarely enough, Heaven knows, that I go anywhere except in the way of business. And the fact is, Signora Marta, that Signor Bratti and I have come here on a little bit of business this morning."

“Indeed, Signor Meo? Other business besides that of Signor Bratti, that I was speaking of?” said the widow, looking at Meo, as if her words had been weighted with a meaning of infinite tenderness.

“Indeed, Signora Marta, I was not thinking of troubling you about the cart,” said young Farmer Bratti; “Signor Carlo will be sure to get it done for me as soon as may be.”

“The fact is, Signora Marta, we have come as beggars. We are trying to get together a trifle of money to help some of those that have been hit hardest by the inundation. There’s a deal of misery. Some of the poor people have lost every stick of furniture, and every bit of crop they had in the world. And father, and Signor Bartoli, and two or three more, have set this list a going to see if they could do a little to help. No doubt there’ll be help sent from other places. But there is great need of doing something at once. Empty stomachs won’t wait, you know, Signora Marta!”

“And that is a true word, if ever there was

one, Signor Meo!" replied the widow, glancing at him a liquid glance of killing tenderness. "And I am sure," she added, "I am willing to do what little a poor lone woman can to help."

"*Poor*—all my eye! all Lucca knows better! and *lone* just as long as she pleases, and not a day longer!" returned Meo, with happy and delicate gallantry. "Our best hope here, in Sponda Lunga, is you," continued he; "I was just saying so to Bratti here, as we came along. See, here is the list!"

"Giovanni Bartoli, fifty dollars!" read the widow. "Well, I am sure that is very handsome, for one, too, who has suffered so much himself. 'Giacomo Morini, thirty dollars!' very generous too!"

"We cannot pretend to do as much as Bartoli can, you know!" said Meo. "There might come an inundation every year for the next five years,—God forbid!—and Giovanni Bartoli would still be a rich man."

"Well, come!" said the widow; "I don't

think I ought to put myself on a level with Signor Giacomo. I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll give twenty-five dollars."

"Bravo! Signora Marta!" cried Farmer Bratti.

"I knew we should get a handsome sum from you, signora; you are always charitable."

"*Signora Marta Monaldi, twenty-five dollars!* See, I have written it down at the head of all the Sponda Lunga subscriptions. I hope it will encourage some of them to be liberal," said Meo.

"I declare I don't think I've got so much in the house!" said the widow, with a languishing look at the young farmer. "I am afraid I shall have to give you the trouble of calling again."

"Don't speak of it as a trouble, pray, Signora Marta," replied Bratti; "we shall only be too happy to pay you another visit; shan't we, Signor Meo?"

"I can answer for myself!" returned Meo; "but the Signora Marta knows that anything

that brings me here is a treat for me. Talking of that, though, puts me in mind of the business I came on here the last time I had that pleasure. I suppose, signora, from your saying that you have not five-and-twenty dollars in the house, that you have found an employment for the five hundred I brought you that night."

"Laws! to be sure!" cried the widow; "I forgot all about those five hundred dollars! No! I have not done anything with them. That night you brought 'em here was the night poor Signor Carlo was called away so sudden to Pescia. Then when he came back, there was this trouble of the flood! And what with one thing and the other, the five hundred dollars went clean out of my head."

"And have you let them lie all this time in the *escritoire* where we put them?" asked Meo, investigating with curious intelligence the extraordinary phenomenon of a mind that could, under any circumstances, forget five hundred dollars.

"Yes! I suppose so! . . . unless Signor

Carlo has thought it best to put them anywhere else!" said the widow.

"No, indeed!" said Carlo; "there they are still. For to tell the truth, all that has come and gone since that night has quite put the matter out of my head, too!"

"It would be as broad as 'tis long then, to give us the five-and-twenty dollars out of the five hundred," said Farmer Bratti, who was a married man, and did not see any advantage in having to come back again on the same errand to the widow's house.

"To be sure, Signor Bratti! Of course I can give it to you out of hand. Signor Carlo, just step into the next room and fetch the money. Have you got the key of the *escritoire* about you?"

"*Si*, signora! I always carry it in my pocket; and though there has never before been anything of importance in the *escritoire*, I have always done so for habit sake, ever since you first entrusted it to me;" said Carlo, going towards the door.

“I say, Bratti, just come and look at the place where we put the money,—always with the permission of the Signora and Signor Carlo,” said Meo. “It is the best contrived secret you ever saw. I have seen many such contrivances; but I never saw such a capital dodge as this. May I show it to Signor Bratti, Signor Carlo?”

“By all means, if he cares to see it!” replied Carlo—“if you will come, Signor Bratti, it is only in the next room.”

So the three young men went, leaving the widow in the other parlour.

In the next minute she heard an outcry of exclamations in raised and agitated voices; and in another instant Carlo rushed back into the room, as pale as death, and to the widow’s alarmed *Dio mio, che c’è;*” answered;

“The money is gone! it is not there! it has been removed! Good God! What can have happened! What will become of me!”

The other two men followed him into the room with very blank faces.

“Nonsense!” cried the widow, colouring scarlet from some feeling or other; “the money must be there; you have not looked in the right place; you have missed it somehow!”

“Signora Marta, it is not there!” said Carlo, in a voice in which the agony he was feeling was clearly audible. “It is not there!”

“There is no doubt about that, signora!” said Meo. “I was present when it was put there! There was Andrea Simonetti, too. Don’t you remember? I recollect the secret of the well under the drawer as if it was this minute; I was so struck by the curiousness of it. There is no mistake about it! The money has been taken away from the place where it was left Five hundred dollars!” added he, mouthing out the words, as if to impress upon his hearers the magnitude of the loss, and of the wickedness of the hand which had removed the deposit. “You must remember, Signora Marta,” he added, “that we all saw the money put into the secret hiding place to-

gether ; you and I, and Simonetti, and Signor Caroli all together."

"Drat the five hundred dollars ! I don't remember nothing about it !" said the widow, in a state of considerable agitation, and still colouring scarlet up to her ordinarily snow-white brow.

"Not remember it, Signora Marta !" said Meo, with astonishment.

"*I* remember it perfectly well, Signor Morini ! The money was placed as you describe, in the presence of the people you have named, and most assuredly it is not there now," said Carlo, in a low but steady and almost stern voice.

"And, as you were but just this minute saying yourself, the key has never left your pocket from that day to this ?" said Meo Morini.

"I did say so ; and it is the truth !" replied Carlo, in the same solemn manner.

"And the Signora Marta has told us that she has neither known nor thought anything

about the money since that night?" persisted Meo, gathering up the links of evidence with an instinct as marked as that which prompts a pointer pup to point.

"I tell you, I know nothing about it!" said the widow, hastily and confusedly. "And it's nobody's business but mine, I suppose! I don't know whether I had the money or not! I told you at first I had forgot all about it! I am not bound to consult my manager about laying out money. Many a time there's a sudden call for—ay—bigger sums than that in the business!"

All which strange utterances caused Signor Meo and Farmer Bratti to look at each other, with a remarkable expression of face, which seemed to say that they began to understand which way the cat jumped; but that it would not do.

"The fact is, signora," said Meo, "that it is immaterial whether you recollect anything about it or not. Very likely you do not remember such things as people who give their

minds to business mostly do. And, as I said, it don't matter a *soldo*. There will be no need to call on you for evidence."

"I don't know what you mean about 'evidence,' Signor Meo," said the widow, in a tone more nearly approaching crossness than was at all usual with her; "and I don't want to know. I told you I hadn't got the twenty-five dollars in the house to give you; but you shall have it safe enough. Five hundred dollars, more or less, won't break the business, will it, *amico mio*?" she added, turning to Carlo. It was not a mode of address that the widow had ever permitted herself to use to her manager before, at all events in the presence of strangers. But there was something in the present aspect of circumstances, and something in the widow's heart, that prompted her to venture on it upon this occasion.

"Certainly not, dear Signora Marta," said Carlo, who fully appreciated and was deeply touched by what he perceived to be the widow's aim, though it was not exactly the tone that

best pleased him, or one to which he could submit. "Certainly it will not," he said; "but these five hundred dollars must be found," he added, in a firm and grave tone.

"Of course they must, and of course they will be, when we come to look over the house. And if these gentlemen won't grudge the trouble of calling here another day, the five-and-twenty dollars shall be ready for them."

"Very well, signora; we will call again, and many thanks to you," said Farmer Bratti.

"With all my heart, Signora Marta!" said Meo; "but for all that," he added, speaking more to Carlo than to the widow, "you must know that this matter can't rest here! Good day, Signora Marta! *A rivederla!*"

And with that the two young men turned to leave the room, and Carlo, disregarding the looks and secret beckonings intended to prevent him from following them, went to the door with them.

"Of course," he said, as they stood together

for a few moments at the door, "of course I am aware that this matter cannot rest here. All those, whom you have named, saw the money placed in the *escritoire*. There is equally abundant evidence that it was not there when we went to look for it. And I have stated in your presence that the key has never left my keeping during the interval. Nevertheless I declare, and I beg, signori, that you will both of you take note of the declaration, that I know nothing of the money, that I have never opened the *escritoire* from that day to this, and that I have no conception of the means which have been used to abstract it, or of the persons who have used those means. All this I solemnly declare."

"There is one point which you have omitted to notice, signor, in your able statement of the facts of the case, but which must not be lost sight of. You will excuse me, but I speak as a lawyer. It is to be observed, and it is an important point, that there was no appearance of the lock having been tampered with. It

appeared, when you applied the key to it just now, to be in perfect order."

"It did so appear. It had not been tampered with in any such manner as to injure the working of it. But I cannot admit that there is anything to show that it may not have been opened with a false key," said Carlo.

"Well, signor," returned Meo, drily, "I hope, I am sure, that you may be able to show that it was opened by a false key, and not with the real one. For there is no use in attempting to conceal the fact that the matter, as it stands at present, has an extremely ugly aspect. I have the honour, sir, to wish you a good morning."

"Addio, Signor Carlo! I, for one, don't believe that you took the money, be it how it will," said Farmer Bratti, as he too turned to go, leaving Carlo standing as if rooted to the doorstep,—so stunned was he by the terrible nature of the calamity that had befallen him.

CHAPTER II.

TWO LOVES.

IT is hardly necessary to say that the discovery, which Meo Morini conceived himself to have made, was very agreeable to him. He was not a man capable of taking the means, which his friend Andrea Simonetti had taken, to ruin the man he hated. Nor indeed can he be said to have hated Carlo with at all the same malignant intensity. He was very far from imagining that Carlo had in fact made himself the master of the affections of the woman whom he had set his heart on marrying; as Simonetti believed that Carlo alone had been the means of his failure in securing the hand, the prosperous business, and the money of the fair widow.

Still Meo cordially disliked Carlo Caroli. He considered him, as provincial Italians are so apt to consider with jealousy a new comer among them, an interloper, an upstart and an adventurer. Then, though he considered himself pretty secure of obtaining the lovely Regina's hand and wealth by favour of her father's will and authority, he had unquestionably seen enough of the degree of intimacy, to say no more, that had established itself between this young and handsome stranger, and the haughty Regina, to afford sufficient grounds for a good robust hatred. He—this same inopportune Carlo Caroli—had also cut out his friend Andrea Simonetti in the matter at all events of the managership of the wheelwright's business. It would have been so much better and pleasanter in all ways to have had Simonetti comfortably established in the neighbourhood of Ripalta. Then Carlo did not behave himself in a manner to cause all these various causes of offence to be in any degree condoned. He was known to be as poor as a church mouse ; yet

he would not, in any of the relations of life, consent to sue *in formá pauperis*. And to rich people, whose position is made by their wealth, there is no more unpardonable offence than this. Then, again, he was out and away the handsomest young fellow in the place,—another very sufficient offence. And there was a way of holding that handsome head of his high,—an assumption of equality,—and a not very easily described something, that warned such men as the lawyer's son, and the Signor Andrea Simonetti, and their peers and acquaintances, that it would be a very unsafe indulgence of their feelings to manifest by overt act or word the contempt they felt for the new comer to the object of it, which altogether rendered him quite insufferable.

So that in his inmost conscience Meo Morini did not feel that he was at all unreasonable in hating Carlo Caroli with very considerable bitterness.

And now this little incident of the missing five hundred dollars was really quite a provi-

dential dispensation ! It was just the very thing that was needed to put everything and everybody in their right place again. The loss of the five hundred dollars was not a jot worse punishment than the widow deserved for her stiff-necked folly. It would teach her to value respectable and responsible people, whom everybody had known from their youth upwards, at their real value in future. It would teach her to give due weight to their opinions and advice, instead of trusting the first good-looking vagabond that came in her way.

Then his own wisdom and sagacious judgment of men and things would be triumphantly vindicated by the facts. Had he not from the first expressed his distrust and dislike of this stranger ? Had he not warned the widow and Farmer Bartoli ? They would all see now whether he knew what he was talking about ; and what came of disregarding his words.

As to the pestilent fellow himself it was impossible to imagine a fitter fate and justice more admirably retributive. There would be an end

of him and his cursed insolence and upstart ways for good and all ;—an end of just the right sort. It was better than if he had fallen down and broken his neck ! Then people would have pitied him, and nobody would ever have known how right and wise he, Meo Morini, had all along been.

Now he was a convicted thief ! It was just the very thing ! Convicted ! but would that silly fool of a widow prosecute him ? He had begun to conceive some disagreeable doubts on that point from certain things that the widow had said. But the circumstances generally had fallen out in the most favourable manner. It was a great point, that of his having been heedless enough to declare in the presence of him and Farmer Bratti that the key had never been out of his possession. And then, again, he had a strong opinion that the case might be taken up without any intervention of the widow. There was plenty of evidence without hers. Surely the police would take up the matter irrespective of any complaint on the part of the widow. Signor Meo, however, did not feel quite strong

enough in his law to be sure of this ; and was eager to consult his father on the subject.

As to the real guilt of Caroli, he had no doubt whatever. The thing was quite plain ! Of course he had taken the money. He was in the greatest need of it naturally. His father had just died not worth a *solido* ! His mother was left in the greatest distress ! And there was the money under his hand ! Of course he had stolen it. But what a lucky thing it was, this subscription, and he and Bratti having by this chance been led to be witnesses to the disappearance of the money. Likely enough but for such a happy accident, the widow would never have said a word, and nothing would ever have been heard of the loss. Well ! people might say what they pleased, but he, Meo, would always believe, for his part, that a good action brought its reward ! Here was he engaged in the good and pious work of collecting subscriptions for the suffering poor ; and that had been made the means of bringing about this most admirable providential dispensation.

Very few words had been said between Morini and Farmer Bratti after leaving the widow's door. The event which had happened was too momentous and interesting a one to permit them to think of their continuing the work they were on. Cart-ropes would not have held Meo Morini from hastening to Lucca with his news. And Bratti was too much disturbed to give his thoughts to any other matter than that of the widow's mysterious loss. He loudly expressed his disbelief in Carlo's dishonesty, and was very decisively pooh-pooed from the heights of Signor Meo's legal learning and experience. When asked triumphantly by Meo to put forward any other theory on which the disappearance of the money could be accounted for, he professed his entire inability to do so ; yet, nevertheless, sturdily reiterated his opinion that Carlo had not stolen it ;—offering no sort of grounds for that opinion, save the assertion that the young man was “ not the sort of stuff that thieves were made of ; ”—very much to Meo's disgust. So they very shortly parted

company, having fixed an early day for the continuation of their canvass. And Bratti returned thoughtfully to his farm, while Morini made the very best of his way back to Lucca.

Caroli, left standing by the two men on the door-step of the widow's house, remained there for some minutes as if rooted to the spot, unconscious of all around him, and alive only to the intense agony of the thoughts that were passing through his mind. He was utterly unable as yet to give any portion of his mind to thinking of the robbery itself, and of how the money could have been abstracted. He could only think of the position in which he stood with regard to the facts as they appeared and of the results that position must produce. And it is not difficult to guess the special direction which his thoughts on this subject took. Regina! When it should be told her that he, Carlo Caroli, was a convicted thief! Oh, merciful God of heaven! What suffering, what misfortune would he not have welcomed gladly as the cost at which this dreadful agony

might be spared him ! What would she feel ! What think ! What do ! What say ! He, the man, the only man to whom she had stooped from her high pedestal, a scorned and detected thief !—the robber of his benefactress !—the betrayer of the kind heart that had trusted him !

“ Oh ! God of mercy ! anything but this ! anything but this ! ” he groaned aloud in the agony of his heart, leaning his throbbing temples against the lintel of the door.

He was roused from his abstraction by a gentle hand very gently laid on his shoulder. The widow had, after waiting awhile for him to return, crept quietly out to the door, to see whether he had perchance returned to the workshops or gone away with the two men, who had gone out with him.

“ Come in ! Signor Carlo ! come into the parlour ! Do come in, dear Signor Carlo ; and don't fret yourself about it. Don't fret ! I want to speak to you. Why, it's all stuff and nonsense ! What do they come a meddling

with my affairs for? I suppose I may do as I like with my own. And I'm sure if you wanted to borrow the bit of money you were right welcome to it. Only it is a pity you did not tell me; because of those hasty interfering fellows a ferreting out, and a poking their noses where they are not wanted. But there, lord, it doesn't follow that you should think of telling me just the first time you saw me. There's always so much to say. And there's always accounts between us to be settled. Of course the natural time for you to tell me about the five hundred dollars was when we came to go over our accounts. Of course it was. And so I shall take care to tell 'em all! Only you hold up your head, and don't fret! Don't let 'em vex you, dear Signor Carlo."

All this the kind-hearted widow had said in her placid-purring voice, as Carlo suffered himself to be led into the little parlour, where the table with its cloth, at which they had dined, was still standing,—an evidence that the widow's thoughts also had been busy with other matters

than her usual cares, since Carlo and the other men had left her.

“But Signora Monaldi, my kind good friend,” he added, taking her hand, when he had shut the door, and stood looking with sad steady eyes into her face, “I have not taken this money. Do I not know that you would have lent it me, or given it me either, if I had asked it of you? Could I have been so base, so foolish as to prefer to steal it? Dear Signora Monaldi, I want you to do me a still greater kindness than either lending me or giving me five hundred dollars,—a much greater kindness”

The colour mounted in the widow's delicate cheeks, and the muslin on her bosom was agitated, as he spoke. I am afraid that she thought that the great kindness that was to be asked of her was one which her gentle heart would have been but too delighted to grant,—that the greater thing than the five hundred dollars was her own soft self and all her hard dollars. But alas! disappointment followed very quickly on the vainly-raised hope.

“ a much greater kindness, Signora Marta,” continued Carlo ; “ I want you to believe, strange as it seems, that I did not take this money, and know no more than you do what has become of it.”

“ You don’t say so ! ” said the widow, with a long sigh, and the slightest possible backward movement from the propinquity in which she had been standing to him. “ You don’t say so ! Yes ! certainly I believe it, Signor Carlo ! If you tell me you know nothing about the money, I am quite sure you don’t,” she said, recovering herself from her disappointment with admirable temper. “ But, bless my heart ! ” she added, “ how could it have happened ? Who could have took them dollars ? You must have left the key about somewhere ? ”

“ No, signora, I am quite sure the key has never been out of my pocket ! You may suppose, Signora Marta, what I would give to be able only to guess how that money could have been stolen. For *pur troppo* nobody else but you will have the generosity to believe my

simple word, when I say that I know nothing about it. Those two men, or at least Signor Meo, the lawyer, thought that I was the thief. Everybody will think so! everybody! I can't expect them to think otherwise. The circumstances are too strong against me! Signora Marta, I am an unfortunate man!—a very, very miserable man!" he groaned, as he turned away and leaned with his face towards the wall.

"But," persisted the widow, "if *I* don't believe you took the money, what signifies the others? If I make no accusation against you, what is it to anybody? I'll give 'em their answer if they come here on any such errand again."

"But think what it is to be reputed a thief, and such a thief, signora! It is not the punishment of the law, but the infamy! That I should live to be thought to be a thief!"

"But who will think so?" said the widow, whose mind was perhaps travelling in the same

direction to which Carlo's bitterest thoughts were directed.

“Everybody will think so! all the neighbours! Lawyer Morini will think so! That bad fellow, Andrea Simonetti, will think so! Farmer Bartoli will think so! He who spoke so kind and took me by the hand here this morning! He will never take me by the hand again!”

There was a consciousness in Carlo's heart which held him back from naming Regina among those who would think that he was a thief! But the widow knew but too well which of all the adverse opinions he was contemplating was the most unendurable to him.

There was some feeling in the gentle widow's heart also which prevented her from approaching this part of the matter in hand any more nearly. She only therefore said, in reply to Carlo's last words,

“Come, Signor Carlo, you cheer up. Things won't be as bad as you think for. Depend upon it, as it will come out sooner or later, who took

that money. Such things always do come out. And I'll put up a lot of candles to the blessed Volto Santo in Lucca with that intention. And meantime, if I say that you have not robbed me at all, I should like to know who is to go and say you have? Come, don't fret about it, *amico mio*."

The widow said this in the kindest and most gentle voice; but she did not again lay her hand upon Carlo's shoulder.

"You are very, very kind to me, Signora Marta," said Carlo; "may God requite you for it. I shall never be able to do so. I think, Signora Marta," he added, "that I will go to my own room for a bit and be quiet. I want to think over all this."

"Do, my poor fellow; and if you could lie down and get a nap, it would do you more good than thinking," said the widow.

She also had her communings with herself to which she was willing to be left. If indeed the suspicion which rested on Carlo,—resting so unjustly,—for the widow did not doubt for a

moment that he had told her the truth,—if indeed it should be the means of making a marriage between Carlo and Regina Bartoli quite impossible ;—if the farmer and his daughter should behave under the circumstances in a manner which should make an irreparable breach between them and Carlo . . . might he not *then* become more sensible to the affection of one who had shown how much more truly and trustingly she had loved him ? Might it not, in short, turn out that this incident of the missing money might be a most excellent and happy dispensation ? Would it be wise in her, in this view of the case, to be too active in asserting Carlo's entire innocence of the charge brought against him ? Might it not better serve his own best interests as well as her own, if this cloud were to be allowed to overshadow him—for a time—just long enough to show him unmistakeably where he really was beloved ;—only just long enough to let the conviction sink into his breast that, when all the world was against him, *there* in those fond arms

and in that gentle bosom was his ready refuge and harbour of peace! Might not this be well! It was a sore temptation; and the devil tried hard to make it seem to the widow that such a course of policy on her part would be well. But the widow knew in her inmost conscience that it would *not* be well! And with an effort she bade Satan get behind her, and cast away from her the temptation, determining valiantly that let the result be what it might, she would show herself the determined asserter and advocate of Carlo's entire innocence.

It was not without a hard struggle that the loving widow came to this virtuous determination. She longed so much to occupy the position of Carlo's *only* comforter in his time of trouble. It would have been so sweet to her to show him that *she* loved him with a love that excluded the possibility of believing in his unworthiness,—to have won him by pouring the balm of her love into his heart-wounds,—by the perfect devotion which would have been proud to stand by his side when all the world

held off from him. And she was not without a lurking hope,—all her virtue did not suffice to eradicate this from her heart,—that all this might yet come to pass. The moral sentiments of the widow Monaldi were not of a sufficiently enlightened order to enable her to feel that she was wishing evil to the man she loved in suffering this prospect to be harboured as a *hope* in her bosom. But she had a sufficient sense of right to determine that she would not by any suppression of the truth, endeavour to contribute to the bringing about of such a result.

And then her mind reverted to the strong agony which all his efforts to suppress the expression of it could not prevent from bursting forth when he was but now with her. And the tenderest pity took possession of her heart. *Poverino! Povero giovane!* And how superbly handsome he looked as he had stood leaning against the wall with the expression of this undeserved agony on his brow! Should she add to those sorrows by intentional act of hers? Should she stab him to the heart by allowing it to be

supposed that he had committed what she was persuaded he had not done? Suppression of the truth! The gentle widow's ideas on the value of abstract truth were in no wise in advance of those of the world in which she lived. How should they have been? And before her meditation had come to a conclusion she had determined to reply to any inquiries into the matter of the missing money, in words which should go straight to the object of exculpating Carlo, without much reference to the accurate truthfulness of them.

As for Carlo, sitting in his little room over the work-shops the while, with his elbows on the deal table, and his brow resting on his hands, it may be feared that no thought,—or but very little thought,—of the tender widow, whose thinkings were so wholly and so generously of him, made any part of his meditations. He sat himself down with the intention of deeply thinking over all the circumstances connected with the deposit of this money and the loss of it, to see whether he could discover any

possible clue to the mystery ;—any fact, however small, which might supply a hint of a possible line of inquiry. But instead of any such practical line of reflection, his mind would only circle round and round the thought of Regina, and of what her feeling would be when this dreadful news should reach her.

Would she believe him to be guilty in accordance with the logic of the facts? Or would she cast facts and proofs to the winds, and refuse to admit on any proof the possibility that the man she had loved could be a thief? Love, he thought, could do this,—ought to do it ;—would achieve it, he told himself, in his case. What proof could avail to make him believe in the worthlessness of his Regina? It did not occur to the ungrateful man to tell himself that love had already accomplished as much in the little parlour downstairs.

If Regina *did* believe the story told by the facts of the case against him, he doubted not what her line of conduct and of feeling would be. She

would tear him from her heart, though her heart should bleed to death from the wrench. She would never see him more! And as the thought passed through his mind, he avowed to himself that he would not for worlds that she should be one who could do otherwise. Regina love a man—make a man her husband, whom she believed to be a thief! Not the Regina of his worshipping love! And then—ungrateful!—the thought of the widow did arise in his mind—a kind, good, loving woman! But oh! what measureless distances separated her from the bright particular star of his adoration! The widow Monaldi could have been content to believe that he had stolen this money, and yet to give him her love. It had been too plainly shown that she was ready to do thus for him to pretend to himself to doubt the fact! Ah! what a world of difference between the two!

But what if Regina *did* disbelieve in his guilt, his disgrace would be a fact, to which no eye could be shut. Would she, could she, be true

to him in despite of all the world, avow her love for one held by all men to be a proved thief, undergo for his sake the scorn and reproach of all men ;—become the wife of such an one ? Ought he to wish her to do this ? Did he wish it ?

“ Never ! never ! never ! ” he cried aloud, rising from the place where he had been sitting, and striding from wall to wall of the little room as he spoke. “ I would not have her so soiled for all the world could give me. If she can still in her secret heart believe me worthy !—if she could have the charity, the divine charity, to tell me that, let seeming be what it may, she knows that the man who loves her cannot be vile and base—it is all I can ask—all I would have from her ! Oh, my beloved, would that it were possible for you to read my heart ! ”

And here again it occurred to his mind that there was one near him who would have been ready to share disgrace with him, to unite her lot to his, though infamy came to her with him. For it had been plain enough even to

his eyes that the widow would have asked nothing better than to be allowed to do so.

Ay! said his thought;—he did not shape the thought into words even to his own heart;—Ay! but is it that she loves me more, or that she hates disgrace less!

And then his mind did suffer itself to be turned for awhile to the practical consideration of the inexplicable circumstances of the disappearance of the money. That the escritoire had been in some way opened was certain. Could access have been obtained to it by some other means than opening the cover of it? Carlo went down, as soon as the idea occurred to him, and examined the back and bottom of the piece of furniture minutely. But he not only could detect no signs of any effraction, but quite satisfied himself that the interior of the escritoire could not have been reached in that way without leaving such signs.

It might be considered as proved, therefore, that the proper cover of the desk had been opened. Nor was it possible that it could have

been broken open without very plain marks of such violence having been left on it. The lock appeared to be in perfectly good order. There were no signs of it having been tampered with in any way.

Was it conceivable that the key might have been abstracted from his person? As the thought crossed his mind he drew the key from the pocket in which he always kept it, and gazed on it intently, as a man often does gaze at an object on which his thought is engaged, although the sight of it can in no way help his thinking.

And gazing thus, he saw a minute fragment of paper, evidently part of the detritus of some documents that had been long rubbed in his pocket, adhering to the inner part of one of the wards of the key. And on examining it more closely he satisfied himself that wax had been in contact with the metal at that spot no very long time ago.

The fact at once suggested to him the possibility of a false key, made from an impression in wax of the wards of the real one, having

been used. But he was as much at a loss as ever to imagine how, when, or by whom any such impression could have been taken.

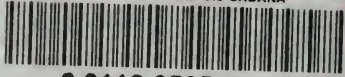
Nevertheless the incident turned his thoughts into a fresh channel, and led him to review all the circumstances of the case from a new point of view.

It was at all events a healthier occupation for his mind, under the heavy misery which oppressed him, than continually dwelling on the worst results of the worst aspect of the misfortune.

END OF VOL. II.



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