

## CHOICE LITERATURE.

## THE OATH-KEEPER OF FORANO.

A TALE OF ITALY AND HER "ANGEL."

BY MRS. JULIA McNAIR WRIGHT.

## CHAPTER IV.—ALONG THE ROAD.

"Instead of funeral torches  
The sun above our tomb  
Keeps watch in changeless radiance:  
Here rose and violet bloom,  
With vine and olive mingled,  
Shall twine a mourning wreath  
O' lovely graveyard that might make  
The living covet death."

—TUSCAN SONG. *The Land of the Dead.*

Nothing could be more delightful than the season in which Nanni and Sandro made their journey to Barletta. It was for the most part a pedestrian tour—not that public conveyances both of railway and diligence were lacking, nor were the travellers quite unable to pay for them: but both were strong, and expected to enjoy the trip made in their own fashion. Sandro secretly anticipated adventures, and Nanni had a reason of his own for preferring to walk southward over hill and valley, stopping to converse with wayfarers such as himself, and at night entering the country inn or the lonely cabin. The spring comes in Italy with face more beautiful than beauty, and prodigal with flowers; the grass, which has been fresh all winter, takes a richer tint; the olive assumes a brighter green under its silver gray; the well-trimmed vines swell with purple buds; white and purple anemones, golden crocus, gay cinquefoil, blue violets and celandine, and rosy cranberries weave a rich embroidery over every sod; each distance melts into amethyst, while nearer space lies flooded with molten gold.

One while our travellers walked by the shore of that great sea around which history has repeated itself, until the very refrain of its waters seem to come to us ("The thing that hath been is the thing that shall be") as they lap in low music at the feet; again they clambered the hills where figs and vines and olives yielded to chestnut, and these to pine. They passed through the doleful, blasted Maremma, whose fatal malaria now slept, to rise in mists of death under a summer's sun. Nanni and Sandro, looking at the Mediterranean, had no memories of ancient fables, no dreams of Trojan fleets, no thought of the ships of Carthage, nor of the Roman galleys; so when they passed through the Maremma they had no musings of days when this unhappy spot bloomed like God's own garden; of mysterious races who here reared mighty cities, which have left out crumbling walls to mock research, or low foundations of palaces which, like their masters, have died out of the memory of a world. Sandro's heart, boy-like, was filled with vague dreams of the future; Nanni pondered that sleep like death into which his countrymen had been paralyzed by the poison of the giant Superstition; he looked up to the cloudless skies and longed to behold, as the seer, that mighty angel flying between earth and heaven, bearing the everlasting Gospel—an open Bible. He thought of the dead indifference of most of his nation, inaccessible to any consideration but of *life*, or the struggling visions of a half-understood *freedom*. The voice came to him, "Can these bones live?" His soul replied, "O Lord, Thou knowest!"

Thus pondered Nanni, travelling through the Maremma in 1860. The world hastens its work in these days; Nanni was to live to see the dry bones come together, and flesh and sinews laid upon them, and a divine breath blowing from the four quarters of heaven, and the long prostrate, scattered and destroyed sons of Italy standing up, an exceeding great army. If Nanni could have foreseen this when he trod, staff in hand and wallet on back, through the damp Maremma, his step would have grown lighter than Sandro's; had he seen what was to befall himself before that day his heart would have died.

It is thus God leads his people, by a way which they know not, to fulfil his will. Nanni, and many another humble pupil of the Vaudois, had, half unconsciously, a mission to Italy—of runners of the evangel of liberty—not less busy and sincere than Gavazzi, and Garibaldi, and Cavour in their loftier sphere.

Nanni and Sandro sat often by the wayside to rest, and had, also, each day an hour for their noonday meal. These intervals Nanni devoted to fulfilling his promise to Jacopo about improving the education of his son. The Gospel of Luke, a newspaper, and a small slate were Nanni's instruments. He tutored his nephew carefully in reading, drilling him well even on the advertisement columns. On the slate he speedily reduced that "chicken track" whereof Ser. Jacopo complained, to a legible signal. e, wherein Sandro greatly gloried. Then did Nanni also exercise his pupil on making out a bill. What innumerable pairs of slippers at five *lire*, a pair, shoes at twelve *lire*, boots at twenty-five *lire*, tapping, footing, heeling, and soleing, at various prices, did Nanni dictate, making goodly bills, which Sandro must set down, compute the total, and write, "Received payment," etc.; and then were the changes rung on boots and shoes, *lire*, *centesimi*, slippers, and cobbling, in a manner to make glad the heart of Ser. Jacopo. But Nanni had deeper lessons than these. He poured into his young comrade's ear Bible history like a pleasant tale. The apostles, and prophets, and holy families, which Sandro had known as pictures in church, became to him elder brethren, examples to the flock, sons of God without rebuke, followers of that Christ of whom Nanni had learned as a present Saviour.

The name *Vaudois* had been prudently avoided like a contagion, by Ser. Jacopo; but Sandro was less cautious; when it occurred to his mind he spoke freely.

"I am glad, uncle, that you are not a Vaudois. Vaudois, the maestro told me, deny the Virgin and the Apostles, and reject the Lord Jesus, and devour young children."

"It is quite idle for a boy of your age to believe that any Italians devour young children," said Nanni, "Did your maestro never tell you of the cardinal virtue of charity?"

"Charity! Well, perhaps he did; but he did not know one-half so nice things as you do about the Holy Family and Ser. Jesus."

[Here Sandro discerns between the Jesus of the Gospel and the *Bambino* of the Holy Family, as presented by his Church.]

"If the maestro taught you, as he should, of charity, he would have told you that you should not condemn unheard, that we should know of a man's faith from his own mouth before we call him either a cannibal or an infidel. Delay your judgment until you know about them."

The Gospel of Luke was not opened for Sandro's benefit only. Often did the boy, as he was prancing along the road, now scaling a wall, now climbing a tree, now delaying to lie on a green bank, see his uncle in deep converse with some wayfarer, and mark how he frequently referred to his little book, or stood on the road reading whole chapters.

Frequently at those wayside shrines—ever erected to the Virgin in Italy—did Nanni pause when he saw some devotee at prayers, and when the form was concluded, a few kindly words would draw from the talkative Italians the thought of the heart, and Nanni would bring some balm for their griefs, some encouragement for their distress, they knew not how.

In the evenings at their lodging places Nanni was soon the centre of a group of travellers or villagers gathered about the fire. He did not seem to put himself forward, but somehow questions were addressed to him, and his answers enlisted attention. Besides, Nanni had been in scenes of interest. "You saw our volunteers march out to help the Piedmontese?" "You were in the Piazza S. Croce when the Duke's troops fired on unarmed citizens?" "Cospetto! you were in Firenze when the Grand Duke found, last twenty-seventh of April, that he was no longer wanted in Tuscany. Hah! did not the flower of cities bloom like her own roses when she had cast out the destroyer from her heart?" "Ecco! the Austrians in the garden of Italy were as Il Diavolo in the Garden of Eden." "And how fares it in Firenze now? We shall all talk *liberta* under Vittorio Emanuele, I hope. Are the Italians not men, that they must be gagged when their opinion is yet in their throat—and yet Englishmen can bawl out what they please, and the Americans are forever boasting of liberty? But they say all is to be free, even religion! Trust me, I don't believe that; the papies and fraters will look to that! Not to have religion free is their living. If religion were free, we should all fly away from them fast enough!" "Che, che," said another, "we were well enough off under the Grand Duke. And now, under the king, trust me, we shall have greater taxes, and not half the chance for smuggling!"

So the peasants talked among the hills when first fair Tuscany had taken her place under the Italian monarchy. A few months since this change of Government had not sufficed to enfranchise opinion; the priests held their terrors over the people; the Tuscans, for the most part, were cautious of committing themselves, lest the fair promise of freedom should melt like the airy fabric of some morning vision, and leave them once more in the power of their tyrants.

As the travellers approached the Estates of the Church, the influence of the clergy the doubts they engendered about the liberal Government, and the hostility to the idea of religious toleration—became more marked. Near Ortelio, Nanni turned into the hills, and ascending by an unfrequented road, gained a little casetta, where, after a private conference with the owner, who was cutting firewood, they were very cordially received, and given the best place by the hearth. The only inhabitants of this house was an aged man and his wife; people of larger frame and greater physical vigour than is common to the dwellers of Italian cities; they possessed also an unusual intelligence. Their hut, for it was little more, was beautifully clean; the evening meal was well prepared; their speech was the pure Tuscan of Firenze. Sandro, being very weary, fell asleep, after a hearty supper, on a mat by the fire; the old man and woman drew their chairs on either side of Nanni, and bent forward in eager converse. Said the old man.

"Then you really think that the days of our people's mourning are ended? that the sea of blood has ebbed out of the Piedmontese valleys for ever? that the last persecution has spent its force? I was, as you know, a servant of the good Count Guicciardini. On the 7th of May, 1857, my dear master was preparing for departure to England. He was reading the 15th of St. John, with seven friends, when suddenly the gendarmes rushed upon them. I was listening to the reading, standing in the doorway, and dashing past *la pulizia*, I hid in a closet under the stairs, while my dear master and his friends were carried off to the filthy Bargello. The Count had for two years been holding religious meetings, and my wife and I were by him brought to know Christ. It was but a small thing, to shew my gratitude, that I did when I aided in scattering his *Confession* through Italy while he was in exile. You cannot remember how the Papal party raged at that. I was suspected—alas! through my sister, who was questioned in the *confession*, and being in danger of the galleys, fled to the Maremma. My wife lay six weeks in the Bargello, but being dismissed, she joined me here. What has been the dismal history of persecution since then? The *Madai* were seized in 1852, dear Cecchetti was imprisoned in 1855. And now, after all this, can Bibles be read, and taught, and sold in Tuscany? can evangelical schools be opened? can people gather to hear the truth without being fallen on by gendarmes? Ah if that hour comes, my wife and I will return to Firenze, to see the salvation of God in the city where I be an Evangelical was worse than to be a thief!"

"And from a place where you may hope to labour in peace, my son, you go to Barletta, where, if you speak the truth, the enemies of the Gospel will oppose you?" said the old woman.

"Remember," said Nanni, "that my own aged parents are yet in darkness. I go to bring glad tidings to their last days. And, good Mona, I am sure that hereafter we have in Italy no persecution to fear beyond the hard word, the bitter slander, the aversion, the petty spite and private mal-

ice, which will melt away as our lives prove our good intentions."

Monna Marie shook her head.

"Be not too sanguine, my son. We had once a liberal Pope, liberal until—he was Pope; no longer. Intolerance will not die easily here in Italy."

"I have had visions of him—that smiling man of sin," said the aged cottager. "I live alone here in the forest, and ponder until strange visions come to me; and I see him filling full the measure of the evil of the line of pontiffs. Now, I cannot see; perhaps by some deluge of blood over the Italian fields; perhaps by some new pretense which shall, by its arrogance, draw down the long-slumbering wrath of God!"

The old man shook his head and fixed his eyes on space. His wife touched Nanni's elbow:

"He sees visions!"

The patriarch turned suddenly toward Nanni.

"There is a Capuchin friar in Barletta; I know him; he has eaten of my bread. I see him pursuing you, my son. I know not why. Alas! so ever have the friars been on the track of God's sons."

Monna Marie looked awed; the old man still meditated; ten years in those lonely wooded hills had set a mysterious mark on the pair. Presently the patriarch arose slowly, and just as slowly lifted his arms above his head; his white hair and beard met as masses of snow, his eyes burned as he stretched himself upward, and the green baize cloak in which he was habitually wrapped fell from his gaunt shoulders, his stature seemed something gigantic.

"The day comes!" he cried, "the day comes when I shall stand and proclaim the free Gospel of my Lord under the gates of the Vatican! The day comes when I shall give Bibles to the guards at St. Angelo! The day comes when I shall distribute tracts on the steps of the Lateran! These things I have asked of God, and He will answer me."

"Woe is me, then," said Monna Marie, tears stealing over her wrinkled cheeks, "for if you do these things, mio amico, you will burn like Fra Savonarola!"

The next morning Monna Marie was early astir, preparing of her best to set before her guests. After the breakfast and worship, the good woman filled the travellers' wallet with food, and the old man, folding his green cloak closer about him, and putting on a high, bell-crowned hat, accompanied them for two miles on their way. At the heels of the patriarch, ran a gaunt, shaggy dog and two goats, the three in entire amity, following their master through all his walk.

Arriving where the roads divided, before a shrine, the patriarch bade his friends farewell. To Nanni he said, "God make you His messenger in Italy;" to Sandro, with a troubled face: "God give you grace to witness a good confession;" and then he turned, striding up the hills homeward, with his three dumb companions gamboling behind him.

"Well, Sandro," said Nanni, after they had journeyed on in silence for some time, "how did you like those people?"

"Most splendid!" replied Sandro. "How clean they were, and how kind, and what nice little cheeses the Monna gave us for our lunch; and then, we had new-laid eggs for supper!"

"Ah, I did not know but you would think them very evil-minded people," said Nanni.

"Evil-minded! How can they be evil-minded—they gave us fried chickens for breakfast?"

"That is to the purpose, certainly. But, Sandro, they were—Vaudois."

"Eh, what, uncle? Cospetto! they looked just like other people!"

"Yes; but they were Vaudois—Evangelicals. They have been converted by the Vaudois, and joined them ten years ago."

The Padre's teachings were a half-forgotten melody in Sandro's mind; the chickens were a present fact; he was walking in the strength of fried chickens; a cold chicken was in the wallet. Replied Sandro manfully:

"Vaudois or not, I like 'em all the same."

"It is a wise lad who can keep his own counsel," said Nanni.

Having kept to the shore as far as Civita Vecchia, our travellers turned due east, keeping prudently to the north of Rome. Once out of Tuscany, Nanni's quiet evangelistic labours had to be carried on with exceeding circumspection.

Rounding the southern base of Mount Aveline, and winding through the romantic passes of the Neapolitan Apennines, sleeping one night in a mountain monastery, and two nights out of doors, riding sometimes in carriers' carts, taking the railroad once for a few hours, and once the diligence, our travellers passed Loggia and struck out for the Adriatic coast. The two Sabbaths of the journey they had spent resting, one with some hidden Evangelicals, of whom Nanni had once heard in Florence, in a little inn. On the Saturday evening, the twentieth day after they had set out, the pleasant but long journey ended at Barletta, and Nanni Conti, the only and long absent son, was joyfully received by Ser. Conti, the calzolajo. Sandro also, the eldest son of the daughter whom they had not seen since her marriage, was made much of by his grandparents. Sandro found the old people rather feeble in health and lonely, living in a house by themselves. Next door lived his mother's only sister, Mariana, a widow, with three little children.

An Italian home of the humbler sort is not to be judged by one of the same sort in England, or especially in America, for instance, in Ser. Conti's house the front of the *terreno* was a little shop, where he worked; it had no fireplace, but Ser. Conti sat in cold weather with an earthen pot of *bruciato* (a sort of charcoal) between his knees.

When, in the morning, this basket is taken to the *carboniera*, or fuel merchant, for filling, he lays with the *bruciato* a few burning coals; the whole slowly ignites, and being stirred now and then with a chip, or by women, with a hump, it serves to keep warm the hands and feet—now being held in the lap, or again put under the knees.

Behind the fireless and low-ciled shop was another room, devoted to some chickens and two goats; beyond this opened a court, common to the inhabitants of several houses, where a cow, a donkey, a number of children, and some