

What could Marta say but that she accepted so liberal an offer with willingness and gratitude, and that Annunziata should begin her lessons as soon as the gentleman pleased? "But what if it turns out a mistake, after all," she suggested, "and all this expense leads to nothing?"

"There will be no harm done," replied Sassi, who had now quite recovered his good humor. "I am well enough off to afford myself a caprice—it will not be the first time." And so Annunziata's destiny was settled.

Luigi Ratta, passing down towards the shore with his oars over his shoulder, caught a glimpse of the group through the open door. He saw the little fat man, in his black alpaca coat and white jean trousers, talking and gesticulating; he saw Annunziata, standing leaning against the table, with her beautiful bare arms hanging down and her hands lightly clasped, gazing out into the sunshine with a pleased, dazed look in her eyes; he saw old Marta grinning from ear to ear with satisfaction; and a cold, undefined feeling of dread, which he often afterwards recalled, crept over him. Nobody noticed him, and he went on his way without his usual morning salutation.

The winter that followed was one of almost unalloyed happiness to Annunziata. Every day she spent three hours at the Albergo della Sirena, working hard at the drudgery of learning to get out her voice, under the auspices of Signor Sassi and his wife, the latter of whom, having been completely vanquished by the beauty of the young peasant girl, as well as by the undoubted excellence of her clear soprano, had now taken up her cause with as much enthusiasm as her more easily moved husband had done. Toiling at the washtub till one's back was like to break was now a thing of the past; Aunt Marta was always gracious; dinners at the Sirena, accompanied by unheard-of luxuries in the way of strange wines, were of frequent occurrence; good natured Madame Sassi had gone into Naples one day, and returned with a present of two beautiful dresses; every body was complimentary, polite, and kind. Already some foreshadowing of the glory of success was beginning to make the world brilliant for the young aspirant.

Luigi, on the other hand, was cast down almost into the depths of despair by the changed order of things. He seldom saw Annunziata now; she was forever running over, on one pretext or another, to see her new friends; and although she was always kind and pleasant to Luigi, and seemed glad to see him, he could not but feel that a gulf had already begun to open between them. And if this were so thus early in the business, how would it be when she should have visited distant lands, and sung before vast audiences, and become a great lady—as they said she would do! There were times when Luigi felt that if he could induce the fat little singing-master to accompany him on a sail to Capri, and if he could contrive to upset the boat at a reasonable distance from the shore, it would be a satisfactory and an excusable thing. But Signor Sassi had been to Capri, and had been grievously sick on the way; inasmuch that he had sworn by all he held most sacred to tempt the sea no more.

As for speaking of marriage to a young woman who was all exultant at the thought of quitting her native place and seeing the wonders of the great world, that was clearly out of the question. At the bottom of his heart Luigi nourished a faint hope that the cold and misery of those unknown foreign lands might prove insupportable to one who had been brought up in the warmth and color and sunlight of Sorrento, and that, after a few months of struggling against the burden of cloudy skies and barbarian habits, Annunziata might gladly and repentantly return to her native Italy. In such an event how willingly would he throw open the door of his cottage to receive her!

It was not much of a hope to build upon; but, such as it was, it served to sustain him when, on a bright April morning, he stood sorrowfully watching the departure of the travelling carriage that bore away Signor and Signora Sassi and Annunziata on the road to Castellamare. The carriage disappeared in a cloud of dust, taking with it Annunziata and her fortunes to Castellamare—to Naples—to the unknown. Would she ever come back again? Luigi wondered sadly, as he turned to go down to his boat on the shore.

II.

When Luigi saw the last of Annunziata, on that spring morning, he determined that he would think about her as little as possible throughout the summer, that he would expect to hear nothing of her, and that he would devote all his time and energy to the saving of money and bettering of his position. He knew that there was no probability of the return of the wanderer before the autumn; and, indeed, it was to the storms and ruin of that season that he principally trusted to bring about the fulfilment of his wishes. Even in the South autumn is often a dreary time; north of the Alps Luigi supposed that the snow and wind began then, and only ceased with the return of spring.

But, notwithstanding all his resolutions, he found that he could in no wise succeed in banishing the image of his absent love from his mind. Whether he was fishing, or mending his nets, eating or drinking, sleeping or waking—in every hour of the long blazing days, and throughout the sultry nights, the same sweet, kind face was always before him; and as the reflections that arose therefrom could scarcely be of a cheerful nature, Luigi became silent and morose, and sometimes even, as his companions remarked with surprise—for that had never been usual with him—a trifle quarrelsome.

Nor could he keep himself from going every now and then to get what news he could from old Marta Vannini, who did not receive his visits with much cordiality. Marta had begun to dream ambitious dreams with regard to her niece's future, and was disposed to look upon the young fisherman as a decided nuisance.

(To be Continued.)

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