

Lord prayed thrice for a comfort which yet seemed to be denied Him; so he prayed on.

Then he returned to the table, his face cheerful and untroubled.

The meal was over before the rain; it still fell heavily. Antonio was paying the bill when the door softly opened, and the sound of a clear young voice was heard—a small street singer.

‘Be off with you! no beggars here!’ It was the landlord’s voice, rough and harsh.

Antonio loved music; he was touched by the melody of the childish voice, and his kindly heart rebelled at the rough tones of the master.

‘There, there,’ he said; ‘let the child be; I like her song—it pleases me.’

‘Certainly, sir,’ replied the host, obsequiously; ‘but our rules do not admit of beggars in the dining-room. If you choose to have the girl sing in the smoking-room, there is no objection.’

‘All right,’ said Antonio, carelessly. ‘Come in here, little one; at least you are best out of the storm.’

And with the ready goodnature which made him friends wherever he went, he drew into the warm room the ill-clad, pale-faced singer. A pretty child of twelve or thirteen, but barely looking nine—with her tiny pitiful face, and small limbs trembling with cold.

‘Now you can sing for us undisturbed, little maid,’ he said kindly, ‘these gentlemen permitting.’

The other inmates of the room making no objection, the little girl sang very sweetly and simply, yet in so clear and firm a voice as to indicate much talent, her little song:—

Far in the chilly night
The little lamb would stray,
The Shepherd sought it out,
And brought it on its way.
That wandering little lamb was I;
The Shepherd near, no more I cry.

During the singing there was a general hush; the players ceased their games. At the close there was a burst of applause.

Bravo, little one, bravo!

But Antonio looked sorrowful. ‘Poor

child,’ he said, ‘she looks starving, and those wretched little bare feet, I can’t stand them. Wait a minute, Francis.’ And he slipped out of the restaurant, returning very shortly with a pair of strong shoes.

‘There, child, put them on; at any rate they will keep you out of the mire. By the way, what do they call you?’

‘Carlotta, sir,’ said the bewildered singer.

‘Well, Lotta, and where did you pick up your song?’

‘In the school, sir.’

‘And you fancy that you are the little lamb of which you sing. Well, if so, your shepherd treats you badly; you are cold, you are hungry, you had neither food nor shoes till I gave you them. It is not your imaginary Shepherd who has pitied you and cared for you, but I.’

The little girl’s pale cheeks flushed, the bantering talk puzzled and distressed her. She could not let the slight cast on the Good Shepherd pass; and yet this gentleman had been so kind!

‘Sir,’ she began, ‘thank you so much for the shoes and the food.’ Then she paused, and, blushing more deeply, said, ‘But my Shepherd brought me to you. He gave me my voice which you praise and which pleases you. He put it into your heart to be good to me.’

‘Who told you these things, little preacher?’ asked Antonio, half amused.

‘My mother, sir. She told me that God does not show Himself now to us, and though He still gives us good things, it is by the hands of other people—rich people, kind people—like you, sir.’

Little Carlotta meant no flattery: it was out of a grateful heart she spoke.

‘It makes two people glad,’ so continued Lotta, ‘—the one that gives and the one that takes. Mother told me that too.’

‘Your mother is a wise woman. I should like to see her.’

‘You can’t see her yet,’ said the child gravely; ‘she has gone to the Shepherd herself.’

‘Dead?’ questioned Antonio.

The little one nodded her head.

‘And your father?’