

CHOICE LITERATURE.

THE OATH-KEEPER OF FORANO.

A TALE OF ITALY AND HER KVANGEL.

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CHAPTER V.—THE MARCHESE FORANO.

"Their views indeed were indistinct and dim,
But yet successful, being aimed at Him,
Christ and His character their only scope,
Their object, and their subject, and their hope."

During this same summer the story of Judith Forano drifted to the Palazzo Borgosa, borne along on the tide of events, as a bit of weed is borne on the incoming waves of the sea. Mrs. Bruce, deeply interested in her *protégé*, wrote to her own countrywoman, Honor Maxwell, reciting the story of the Jewess' wrongs. "She believes her child is living. I believe in the mother instinct that causes her to know in some mysterious manner that her son is not dead. If the boy is living, suppose it should happen that you should see him or hear of him." Thus Honor read the letter to Uncle Francini.

"Why," says Uncle Francini, "she has lost a child: you have found one: perhaps they are the same." "O uncle!" cried Honor, in excitement—"but how could I tell—stay, here is a slip of paper on which Mrs. Bruce writes Madame Forano's description of the child. Come to me, Michael!" Michael, who was lying on a rug on the farther side of the salon, playing with a backgammon board, sprang up and planted himself before her; Uncle Francini leaned forward to compare the boy with the description. Honor read: "her babe was fair: a look at Michael—his skin was a clear, brown olive, the blood burning ruddy in his cheek and lips, and now flushing his throat, from the warmth of the day: 'its eyes were a lovely violet.'" Honor looked at her foundling, but knew well enough already that his great, laughing eyes were black as jet; "and his hair was curly and golden." Michael's hair was curly enough, his locks fell in shining masses, gently lifted by the sea-breeze, stirring through the room about his shoulders, but these locks matched his eyes, except where a strong light creeping through the blinds, which were now down to keep out the sun, tinged their waves with bronze. Honor was reading a mother's description of a babe of a month old, lost nearly six years ago; she was looking upon a great, romping boy; there was nothing in common between the picture of Judith Forano's memory and the boy of Honor Maxwell's reality. I think both Uncle Francini and Honor were glad that there was not: on these hot days, when he could not paint, what could the old man do without the boy?

The summer brought forth harvest and vintage, and vintage and harvest were gathered; meanwhile the seed which Nanni had sown in Ser. Jacopo's heart in early spring, had also brought forth its fruit. All summer the honest man had come to Honor for counsel, and she had ever taken him to the law and to the testimonies. As his thirst for the very Word of God grew greater, Assunta had gone evening after evening with her Italian Bible, and shut in, in an inner room with the calzolajo and his wife, had read to them by the hour. Honor Maxwell had taught her maid to read the Scriptures; the Spirit of God brought home their meaning with divine efficiency.

We come to the evening of one of the regular meetings of the Vaudois Church. The room was dark, rough, low ceiled, the floor brick; the benches backless, the lights dim and few—our Vaudois brethren are poor. The Swiss pastor sat at a little table with his Bible before him, Doctor and Mrs. Polwarth came in, presently also Honor Maxwell and her maid, then shortly after appeared two who had never hitherto gathered with the Vaudois band, Ser. Jacopo and Monna Lisa. There was reading, prayer, exhortation from one and another. Then Ser. Jacopo rose, and there was a waiting silence. He began to speak in the firm, calm voice of a man whose mind has been cautiously and irrevocably made up. "At the close of last Carnival my brother-in-law came to my house, having a copy of the Evangel. He had also the Evangel in his heart. He read to me in the book, and I found it good; he taught me much which I felt to be the TRUTH. But this truth was something different from that I had before heard and practised, and there arose a contest in my heart. I did not wish to draw enmity upon myself; I did not wish to endanger my business, myself, my family, by provoking the priests, and especially, I did not wish to sacrifice a few lire by changing certain habits in my business; I did not wish to speak truth and act truth at all times; so I shut my heart to the Evangel. But, my brothers, we may shut the gates of our city to our friends or our foes, but thereby we cannot shut out the sun of heaven, he still shines on us; so though I shut my heart, I felt the eye of God like a burning sun, look down into my soul; and as our locked gates do not keep out the air, I felt a new knowledge stirring within me. I cannot tell you *why* I went for relief to the Evangel, instead of to the priests; God alone knows *why* I went to the Signorina Maxwell, and she read me the Evangel. At last, my brothers, what did I feel? I saw Ser. Jesus leaving His throne of glory to live on earth for me, I saw Him poor, weary, despised, homeless—for me; I beheld Him dying, buried, risen—and my soul said, What then, cannot I leave a Church which hides his Evangel, cannot I suffer loss and scorn, cannot I give up a few lire for Ser. Jesus, who did all this for me? Ah, my brothers, when I did feel that I could even lose the lire for Ser. Jesus, then all was done. I no longer feared the priests, I no longer withheld anything. 'This is my wife, Lisa.' I said to her, 'Lo, I am become an Evangelical for Ser. Jesus; must I therefore lose you and my children? Ever so, I am content to give up all for Him.' But my wife replied, 'Ecco, Jacopo, what has Ser. Jesus done for you that He has not done for me? What do you owe Him that I do not? No, we will be Evangelicals together.' 'In that case,' I said, 'there is no division; we will take all our eight sons with us into the service of Ser. Jesus, for

that cause He gave us the eight.' And then finally, my brothers, I said to the maiden Assunta, who had read the Evangel to me, 'Do you fear to confess Ser. Jesus before men?' and she replied 'No; therefore she is with us to-night. Take us—we belong to you—because we belong to Christ!' Ser. Jacopo spread out his brawny arms as if he would embrace the whole assembly; tears were falling from many eyes; the Vaudois pastor sobbed aloud; Mrs. Polwarth and Honor Maxwell thought of the maid Mercy, who went to the heavenly city with Christiana and her sons; and they remembered the good journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial Gate—but they forgot that Vanity Fair lay across their road.

The winter came clear, bright, with a beauty of its own; the last olives were gathered; the roses disappeared with Christmas, but along the hills the hawk-weed with its golden eye defied the frost, and bloomed the winter through. During these months Nanni, with a pack on his back, travelled up and down Tuscany; the pack held the usual light wares of a pedlar, but he had a wallet of gospels, and Testaments, and copies of hymns, and his heart was stored with the truth which his lips dispensed.

When the spring came, Nanni left Tuscany by "reedy Trasimene," crossed Umbria, passed through the Apennines north of Mount Corno, and travelled along the Adriatic coast to Barletta. The evangelist found the country people, as a rule, less accessible, more under the dominion of the priests, less realizing the possibilities of liberty than the people of the cities. Arriving at Barletta, he found his parents well, and indeed bearing fruit in old age, for several Bible meetings were held at their house weekly, Sandro reading, and his grandfather explaining the Scriptures, and the number of believers had already increased to eight. Sandro seemed to have reached a very remarkable degree of experience for his age; the Fari family were still hearers but not doers of the Word. The eight believers of Barletta rejoiced greatly in Nanni's visit of a month, he left them to go to Ser. Jacopo with an important proposition. Signore Conti was not likely to be able to continue his business for many years, and desired that Ser. Jacopo should remove to Barletta, and keep the bottega in his stead. A calzolajo in the town had just died, and his widow was willing to sell out his interest and stock in trade for a small sum, which frugal Ser. Conti was able to pay in behalf of his son-in-law.

Italians are accustomed to crowding in their houses, and by using one of the widow Mariana's rooms in the house next door the Jacopo family could be accommodated with the old man's home. Not only would a family thus be united, but a household of believers would be established in Barletta, to strengthen each other's hands, and set an example of Christian domestic life.

Charged with this mission of bringing Ser. Jacopo to comfort the declining years of his father-in-law, Nanni turned his steps towards the north.

Ser. Jacopo readily accepted the proposal; it would unite him to his son, his wife to her parents: they would be placed in a little community of converts like themselves; the work of God promised fair to progress in the southern city: they might not only share in the seed-sowing, but help to gather in the harvest.

More than fifteen years have passed since then. I am writing history. I look back and see how indeed they sowed the seed, and how they gathered the harvest and brought home the vintage. I see, and a great blackness falls over Ser. Jacopo and Monna Lisa and their seven sons, going toward Barletta; and, as in the vision of Abraham, after the darkness, a smoking furnace and a burning lamp moving up and down.

So Ser. Jacopo was gone south, and Easter had come; and in Easter week Father Innocenza—from whom Dr. Polwarth had heard nothing for the year since his first visit—suddenly reappeared at the pastor's study. Padre Innocenza was even in more of a passion than before; his frame quivered with excitement; he was angry with himself, his lot in life, his Church, with Dr. Polwarth and his letter; and after the first courtesies of meeting trembled on his tongue his suppressed rage broke forth at the minister's mild question:

"Have you honoured me by bringing your answer to my letter?"

"No, I have not brought an answer. You must explain yourself. Your letter is dishonest and unfair. I must know what you mean and why you mean it."

"I am ready to explain my meanings. I had hoped my letter was so simple as to need nothing to make it clearer."

"Charlie! Answer me this: I hear that you have called my Church Anti-Christ's Church, my Pope Anti-Christ, our spirit Anti-Christ. Tell me—have you?"

Now, Dr. Polwarth had never thus spoken to Romanists, but he had said many things in the course of his life.

"Yes, I have said so," he replied.

"And why did you say so?"

"Because I believe it to be true."

"On what authority?" roared the Padre, in a white heat.

"On the authority of God's own Word," replied the pastor, coolly.

"I will tell you what you shall do," said Padre Innocenza, nearly choking with rage; "you shall sit down here and you shall draw me out those references in God's Word whereon you base that opinion. I go to prove them. If you do not make them plain, if it is not as you have said, then, son of infamy, preacher of lies, first-born of Satan, you are Anti-Christ yourself!"

Dr. Polwarth at first felt those risings of the natural man which tempted him to thrust the abusive ecclesiastic into the street; but he had learned of Him who when He was reviled, reviled not again. Moreover, he looked into the priest's eyes and saw, under all this passion, a man divinely troubled. Therefore, instead of becoming excited, the Doctor said, quietly:

"I will write out these references and send them to you."

"You shall not!" cried Innocenza. "I will have them now. There is your paper, your pen, your book; sit there and write, and I will wait for it."

He at once began to pace up and down the study, like an excited wild beast restive in its cage.

Dr. Polwarth placed himself at his table and opened his Bible. He had the Scriptures in his head and in his heart. He had studied this question, and found the prophecies of the great apostasy in the Old Testament as well as the New.

He began turning over the leaves of his Bible and placing on a sheet of foolscap the references in fair script, writing out, not the whole verses, but their first and concluding words. Thus he went rapidly on, gathering from the Prophets, the Gospels, the Epistles, the Apocalypse, the portrait of the Roman heresy. After more than an hour of incessant labour on his part, incessant walking on the part of Padre Innocenza, the minister said:

"I have done. You have now to search out and verify these passages. If I offer you an Italian Bible, you will not consider it reliable. Where will you find the Word of God with which to compare these Scriptures?"

Padre Innocenza grasped the paper, and, folding it small, thrust it into an inner pocket.

"E basta!" he cried; "don't trouble yourself, Signore, I will see to it that these are properly compared with a true Bible—one that I accept as no garbled product of heresy." And hardly waiting for a parting salutation, he rushed away.

It was late in the afternoon when Padre Innocenza's weary and dripping steed climbed the last steep ascent to the Chapel of "Sta. Maria Maggiore of the Hills." He gave the rein to the half-naked sprite who acted as his valet, stable-boy and general factotum, and as the lad turned to the stable the priest entered his chapel. The air was chill—all Italian churches have the cold of the grave. The floor was brick paved; the benches were backless and worn, like the seats of country schools a hundred years ago; along the walls were sea tablets, bearing the epitaphs of the richer parishioners of Sta. Maria Maggiore for the last two centuries; here and there a more ambitious memorial had marble festoons, scrolls, cherubs' heads and skulls wrought about it.

Above the altar was a Virgin borne by angels, a work of Aurelio Lomi; beneath it was a tabernacle wrought in brass, and a worm-eaten crucifix, by a pupil of Giotto. On the altar were the usual tall candles and faded bunches of artificial flowers. To the left, and partly behind the altar, lay along the floor the marble figure of a man in a priest's robes. Padre Innocenza walked over this monument to his predecessor of three-quarters of a century back, and then, drawing aside a faded and dusty crimson curtain, entered his sacristy and locked the door behind him. The sacristy had one window high up in the wall: it was a lonely room, and Padre Innocenza looked lonely standing therein. The stone floor had sunken and twisted unevenly; the table in the centre of the room was dusty and time-eaten; against the door swung a long rusty cask, something like a murderer hanging from a gibbet in chains. There was a delf pitcher and basin, with a towel slung thereon, but the half-clad factotum had failed to put water in the pitcher or bring a clean towel, a server with several little cups and glasses for holding salt, oil, water and such things, for mass, stood on a shelf, and beside it a cwer, a broken glass and two or three empty bottles. Under the shelf were two rows of large drawers. Father Innocenza knew well what each one held, yet could not prevail upon himself to go directly to what he wanted.

He opened the first drawer; there, in a careless heap, lay a great curtain of purple velvet embroidered in gold, but the velvet had grown dingy, threadbare, moth-eaten, the embroidery was blackened with age, a little cloud of dust rose as the priest turned over its folds. Beneath the curtain was a huge missal, with great brass clasps and leather bindings; the book and the curtain were alike worn out with a century and a half of use. The second drawer which Padre Innocenza opened was full of ancient stoles, surplices, and altar veils; the muslin was yellow with time, full of rents and darns; the lace and embroidery were frayed and torn away. In this drawer was a book, a volume of "rites and ceremonies." Still to another drawer went the Padre, here were more vestments—purple vestments for Lent, white vestments, glowing with embroidery and golden with great crosses; scarlet vestments, black vestments; they were not yet beyond using, and were folded with some little care; the psalter and prayer book lying with them were evidently yet in service. The fourth drawer held various basins, crucifixes, an old tabernacle, a *grie-dus* cover, a cap or two, a rosary, a bent salver. Then the Padre came to the last drawer of the treasures which had been gathered here during two hundred years. He opened the drawer more reverently. Here was a priest's rusty frock, a shabby hat, an hour glass, a skull, a stole, and under all a purple Lenten altar-veil. This was wrapped into a large package; Padre Innocenza unfolded it, and lo! a book. The volume was square, had been bound in white sheepskin, which was now brown with age, riddled with holes, and cut with winding lines by worms; the clasps were dull and bent. He opened it; the page was yellow, clouded, and had marks as of a book that had been in the water, or long buried in the earth. The paper was like parchment in finish and thickness, the type huge, black, antique—a wonderful and precious book, not only to the enthusiastic collector, but yet more to the man who held it in his hand. It was a complete Bible, and on the front blank page was written: "This is the true and unadulterated Word of the Lord God of Heaven and Earth," and the name signed was that of the priest who had worn this rusty robe and faded stole; who had counted by this hour-glass the time of his prayers; who had kept this skull by his bedside as a *memento mori*; whose head this battered hat had covered; who had served at the altar which this veil had draped; who had gone down to dust three-quarters of a century ago, and over whose grave Padre Innocenza had walked when he came into the sacristy.

What had been the history of this Bible? It must have been very old and defaced when it came to the dead priest's hands; it was marked with notes and comments in faded