

## CHOICE LITERATURE.

## THE OATH-KEEPER OF FORANO.

A TALE OF ITALY AND HER EVANGEL.

BY MRS. JULIA M'NAIR WRIGHT.

CHAPTER VII.—Continued.

The Padre felt that he had obtained knowledge which would enable him to pursue inquiries at the Hospital degli Innocenti, and the next week he set out for Florence, ostensibly to see his Bishop, but really to visit that great establishment for foundlings, which, when the land was under purely Romish regime, is said to have received six thousand infants every year from Tuscany alone!

Although Padre Innocenza's secret heart had thrown off allegiance to Rome; although his enlightened mind rejected her tenets, he had not come to the point where he dared openly renounce her, and with that duplicity which seems ineradicably fixed in a heart trained as his had been, his first visit in Florence was one of outward cordiality and respect to the Bishop. The chief part of his interview was with the Bishop's secretary. Innocenza briefly stated that his people were docile, attentive at church; that he was thoroughly catechising the children; for the rest nothing was doing; there were not enough candidates for confirmation to make an episcopal visitation needful; many of the youth wandered to foreign lands as minstrels. Then Innocenza saw the Bishop, kissed his hand, got a benediction, and went away less at ease than ever.

His second visit was to the Innocenti, on the great Piazza Annunziata. That a priest should come making inquiries for a foundling was no new thing; and indeed he was in a much better position to get information than a layman would have been. The nuns in charge examined their books, searched their memories, questioned the oldest nurses. If a child is left at this hospital with the slightest token for its identification—as a name, initials, a jewel, even a ribbon or a peculiar garment—this is specially recorded; when the child is farmed out for nursing, or is given for adoption, or is apprenticed, this clue is associated with it on the records, so that it may in future be traced. But any physical marks of children, whose identity it is evidently desired to lose, are never heeded, unless they are so singular as to attract the notice of some nurse, and accidentally to remain in her mind associated with the further development of the foundling's fortunes. Such a reminiscence was all that Padre Innocenza could hope for, and he was assured that there was no possibility of such a trace as he mentioned being followed. However, the authorities of the house put down a name (fictitious) which he gave them, and promised to make inquiries. He on his part agreed to return after a few months to learn if they had made any progress toward the discovery of the lost infant.

It was nightfall when he left the Innocenti, and, having taken his supper in a trattoria, the Padre was about to seek his lodgings when he found himself in a throng of people all pressing toward one point. Idly following with the multitude, the Padre was drawn with them into a great hall, poorly lighted, but densely crowded, where some one had already begun an oration from a broad platform. The speaker was cast in a herculean mould; a magnificent head set on the shoulders of a giant; a voice of prodigious compass, yet capable of pouring forth the sweet, many-vowelled Tuscan in all its sweetest melody; the darning of the soldier, the fire of the true orator, the winning plausibility of a successful priest united in this man. By all these he stirred the hearts of his hearers to ecstasies of enthusiasm. They wept, they groaned, they shouted, they started to their feet. This was Alessandro Gavazzi, making to his countrymen a mingled harangue on religion and politics—uplifting *misu* *Victoria Emmanuel*, and preparing afar off the irrevocable downfall of *il papa*.

The impressive soul of Padre Innocenza responded to every sentence of Gavazzi as a harp responds to every sweep of some maestro's hand. Gavazzi, on that night, struck off Innocenza's political bonds and set him in the ranks of that increasing majority of the nation which was moving with mighty momentum toward the deliverance of the State from priestcraft, and to the liberation of Rome.

All night the echoes of the orator's voice resounded in the Padre's ears. He had meant to leave the city next day, but he could not go; held by some fascination, he clung to Florence, desiring only to see again the man who had so enthralled him. On the second day after, as he was wondering in the Boboli Gardens, he suddenly met Gavazzi under the shadow of *Gian Bologna's* statue of Plenty. The two fell into conversation, and, wandering away upon a wooded height above the city, Gavazzi the teacher and Innocenza the priest, the soldier-monk—himself delivered—Gavazzi awoke a new manhood in Innocenza, and set him free of an external subservience to a Church which his soul served no longer. Innocenza would now go back to his home, and teach his people what he had learned. When the hour came that the attention of the Popish Church was directed to them, they would not make a pretension of serving her.

The ancient poet tells us, the hour a man is made a slave, "observant fate takes half the man away." More than half the man had been taken from the priests of Rome, their servitude being the heavier burden, and directed primarily against the mind. Padre Innocenza had to that hour heard none calling him to a new manhood, to the enjoyment of a hitherto unknown freedom of thought and act.

The third day after, Innocenza was at the depot, about to enter the train for Pisa, when Gavazzi passed him. The Italian leader turned, and, grasping the hand of his new acquaintance, said, cheerily:

"How now, amico!"

"Mirabile!" replied Padre Innocenza.

A look of trouble came into the kind, bold face: the train was about to start; Innocenza's foot was on the step.

"Stay! Talk to the Vaudois if you have opportunity; they are the best comforters that I know for a mind distressed."

Padre Innocenza marvelled, but he did not doubt the word of the man who had captivated all his heart. He began to consider where he should find a Vaudois. Providence sent one to him. Nanni Conti found the lonely, arid, of *Sta. Maria Maggiore* among the hills, and, calling from house to house, sold or gave tracts and hymns, wondering much that here, instead of curses, contumely, stoning, he found a people prepared of the Lord. According to his practice, he sought for the priest. The ragged factotum directed the stranger to the chapel, and here Nanni found the Padre pacing up and down the aisles. After a few words as to the place, the priest said:

"I have thought that perhaps Noah's dove fluttered many times around the ark before the patriarch put out his hand and took her in; so my soul comes to this house of God, hoping here in some way at length to enter into peace."

"Howbeit," replied Nanni Conti, "the Most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands. In every lowly and contrite heart He is content to dwell, and where He is, there is peace."

"Tell me, are you a Vaudois?" asked Padre Innocenza.

"Yes, I am," replied Nanni. "Do you know what a Vaudois is?"

"He is the man I am looking for," replied Innocenza, and led his guest into the sacristy.

But all Nanni Conti's ministrations could not bring consolation to this perturbed spirit. The evangelist gave the priest some further light, some gleams of comfort, and felt assured that God was dealing with his soul, but left Innocenza still crying, "I am the man that hath seen affliction!"

It was now March of 1863, and Nanni Conti was bound to the Palazzo Borgosoia on a happy errand—nothing else than his marriage to Assunta.

While Nanni was preaching in the sacristy to Padre Innocenza, Assunta was sewing at her wedding dress, and Honor Maxwell, in the salon, was opening a letter bearing an American postmark. It was from Mrs. Bruce, who had been at her home in Philadelphia for six months. Honor was always pleased to read her letters to Uncle Francini; the genial, simple old gentleman listened with interest to news of the actual world, of which, withdrawn into his dreams of art, he seemed hardly to form a portion. The changes of life came to him something as a pleasing story would come to a recluse—just excitement enough to refresh, just pathos enough to stir pleasantly, just mirth enough not to weary, and a fixed assurance that all would be right at the last chapter. Thus Uncle Francini looked on life, and in this mood he now listened, holding Michael on his knee, his own snowy beard and locks mingling with the boy's black curls, his calm, pale, peaceful face contrasting with the high colour, life and excitement playing over every feature of his wife from Carnival.

So we hear Honor reading thus from Mrs. Bruce's letter: "I left poor Judith Forano with deep regret. She has singular capacities for suffering—one of those natures to whom life is all high tragedy. I fear she will soon lose her mother, who is very feeble. I bought one of our Bibles for her, and put it in a sandal-wood box, and with it a diamond ring—an odd mixture, you say? I gave her the parcel sealed, saying, 'Dear Judith, if great sorrow comes to you again, think of me and open this my parting gift.' Now I put the book up in this way in order to captivate her fastidious taste; and I put the ring with it, that when she opened it she might see that I did not merely give her what I liked, and what cost me little, but I gave her a jewel, and with it what I thought better than jewels. I hope, in some hour of grief, my note and my ring will disarm her wrath when she sees 'the book of the Nazarene,' and my remembered friendship will conquer her scruples, and she may find that which only can calm such a tempest-tossed heart as hers—the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."

"Now, Honor," said Uncle Francini, "I consider that act of Mrs. Bruce as one link in the chain of God's mercy that is to bind that poor woman's heart to Him. When such things are done with a true desire to do God service they are deeds inspired by heaven, and some day will be blessed; these are acts which shall not return void, but shall accomplish the thing that God pleases."

"I trust so," replied Honor. "I wish the poor mother might have found her child."

"Is loss can be ruled of God to gain. Evidently she is one to have earthly idols, so God has set the child away, and will so set away her other idols, one by one, until she can see but Him alone, so that good end will be worth all the present loss."

Uncle Francini did not often say so many words without something about art, or artists, the divine Michael Angelo. He was a simple, old-fashioned man, almost of one idea, and now he came back, not at all to Honor's surprise, to his favourite theme.

"I am thinking of a picture, Honor—THE VAUDOIS WEDDING, and I shall paint just that gloomy little chapel room, and these hard-worked, honest people gathered; and Assunta, so bright and gay in her mountain dress; and Nanni Conti, so fair-haired and pale; and you and the Polwarths, strangers, looking on; and this handsome boy contrasted with the gray, wrinkled old uncle in a corner. It will be a very pretty picture, my girl—that is, for these days when the old masters are gone."

In fact Assunta's marriage in the Vaudois chapel made just such a picture as Uncle Francini suggested, and after the marriage Miss Maxwell provided a supper for the bride's friends in the court of the Palazzo Borgosoia. It was St. Joseph's day, warm and bright, and the evening was almost as warm and bright as the day.

While the bride's party went off in high spirits to their supper, Dr. Polwarth returned home and found Padre Innocenza waiting for him in his study. With very little preliminary conversation Innocenza told the Doctor the whole story of Judith Forano and her child, so far as he knew it. He avowed that he had sent the child to the Innocenti, un-

named, and that he had drugged the mother and sent her with some nuns to a convent. He gave, also, his reason, namely, that he desired to secure the Forano property to his Church, and so to advance his own interest with his superiors.

"Now," he said, "what can I do? The woman has freed herself. I am trying hopelessly to find the child, with no clue at all but a white mark on its body. I don't know where the mother is."

"I do," said Dr. Polwarth. "I can give you her father's address in London"—and so told the astonished priest what he had heard, through Honor Maxwell and Mrs. Bruce, of Judith.

"I don't see as that will help me if I cannot find and restore her her child," said the Padre. "As for telling the Marchese, it would be possibly dangerous to him, for he is old and feeble, and the excitement might kill him, while he would not be so likely to discover the child as I am. This act has become a nightmare to me; I am pursued by a vision of Nicole making me promise to protect his wife and child. I broke my promise to the dead. I would devote my whole life to finding that child if I only might succeed. Then, every day I dread to hear that the Marchese is dead, and that the priest at the Assumption has wrung the estate out of his dying hand, and got the Marchese to retire to a convent. Thus I shall be compelled to see myself feeding a Church which I have now learned to reject. There is no man in all the world but yourself to whom I dared open my heart, and I felt as if my unshared secret would drive me mad."

"I think you should tell the Marchese that possibly his heir is living, and at least it would prevent his leaving his property to the Church, as you fear," said the Doctor.

The priest shook his head.

"His death might be hastened. Besides how many priests, monks, and nuns would at once be busy to secrete the child if it were living, to effectually prevent his finding it—to testify its death? I know better than to set the whole Church working against me. Ah me! little did I think when I took such means to prevent the child's ever being found that I was the one doomed to seek for it most bitterly."

Now, in telling his story, Padre Innocenza had, with the secretiveness characteristic of a priest, never mentioned the kind of mark whereby he sought the child, nor the name of Giulio Ravi. He also exacted a promise of silence from Dr. Polwarth, lest the Marchese should hear the story prematurely.

And now Assunta and Nanni have gone to their home in Barletta, and are living beside old Ser. Conti, in the house of the widow Mariana. The church in Barletta has by this time grown to twenty. Nanni is to spend half his time in Barletta working in this church, and the other half of his time travelling as a colporteur, going once in a year to Florence. The little church in Barletta is bound in the closest amity among its members, and is as a light shining in a dark place. The neighbours are becoming accustomed to the *Evangelici*. The Fari family, with wondrous caution, come secretly to the meetings, talk secretly with Ser. Conti and Ser. Jacopo, and attend diligently to all things prescribed in their own religion; thus "they feared the Lord and served their own gods." Among the members of this Vaudois church on the Adriatic is Joseph, second son of Ser. Jacopo, a lad who begins to talk of being sent up to the Valleys to the Vaudois school, and afterwards the Theological Seminary at Florence, to become in time a preacher of the truth; for the present he works at his father's bench, and makes diligent use of all his opportunities.

The Villa Anteta is still the summer home of Uncle Francini. He finds the air, the scenery and the society of the Marchese exactly suited to him. No one was happier in this arrangement of Uncle Francini's time in summer than the Marchese, as it brought Honor to cheer her for four months of her year; the meetings in the morning at the Pavilion were sunny spots in the Marchese's life.

"And so," said the Marchese to Honor, "your maid has married a Vaudois, and become a Vaudois, too. Who would have thought it! Our Padre here had nearly persuaded her to be a nun when she was but fifteen. Such girls in convents seem to me a perversion of nature. I look on convents as places for widows, the old, the heart-broken penitents. As for Assunta, I saw she was carried away, so I reasoned with her, and sent her to town, asking a friend to place her with some lady who would watch over her. She went to you—and is become a Vaudois—but she seems to me a good girl, and sincere, and I'd rather see her a Vaudois, married and happy, than shut up in a convent, and repenting her vow. I don't believe that all Vaudois are shut into hell; in truth, Signorina, if a Jew, or a Vaudois, or a heretic of any sort, serves God and loves his fellow-men, he seems to me likely to get to heaven—even more likely than some wicked Catholics who serve only themselves and prey on their fellow-men. My common sense tells me that merely being a Catholic will not take one to heaven unless his soul is in harmony with heaven."

"Then, Marchese, you do not think that I, as a heretic, am surely doomed to perdition?" asked Honor, with a smile in her eyes.

"Oh, Signorina cara! how can you! Did you not tell me that Ser. Jesus dwells with you? do I not see that it is so? and will Ser. Jesus dwell with you in this world and abandon you in the next? No, Signorina; Ser. Jesus is more faithful to His friends."

"And is that presence of Christ your own ground of hope, Marchese?"

"Ah, Signorina, I have not so much of that as you have; but I do my duty in my Church, and I love my fellow-creatures, and I hope by all these three things to get to heaven."

"Dear friend, it is by Jesus only that we enter into life."

"Then— But we will not argue; I have no argument; I only judge by my common sense. If by Jesus only we enter, no man has power to shut the gate on my soul; and there is one point where my Church is wrong. That reminds me of a thing in my Church which I hate—the Inqui-