

CHOICE LITERATURE.

THE OATH-KEEPER OF FORANO.

A TALE OF ITALY AND HER EVANGEL.

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CHAPTER VI.—Continued.

But how different is the character of Gu'io Ravi! How can we discover in his crooked soul yearnings toward a straight path? It is only as by accident that Gu'io surprises us with such indications. The Marchesa sends him to the city on business, and Gu'io is roving about on the bay, waiting to catch the little boat of a steamship to whose captain he has an errand. As Gu'io thus hangs about the anchored steamship, he falls into conversation with Luigi, the man who rows him, and who is, indeed, an old acquaintance, having lived at Sta. Maria Maggiore, on the hills, in Ser. Nicole's day; and Luigi says:

"Dante, Gu'io, two years ago I was on a steamship myself, as waiter. Our ship went to England, but I could not get used to the sea so I left her. However, one trip, I am sure we had on board the Englishwoman whom Ser. Nicole brought to Italy. So, the Marchese never found out about her? Poor thing, she was very beautiful!"

"I wish the Marchese had known of her; she would have saved the most of her trouble," said Gu'io.

"Alto! he would not have recognized the marriage."

"Indeed, he would," said Gu'io; "he would have felt bound as the head of the family, and as a gentleman, to do so."

"But, *sicera*, the woman was a Jew!"

"The Marchese don't hate Jews; says we should like 'em same as other men; *sicera*, perhaps more, for he says they are our human brothers, and also that the blessed Ser. Jesus was a Jew."

"O, *cospetto*! Ser. Jesus a Jew; am I an idiot?" cried Luigi.

"Its true. The Marchese explained it all to me, and he is a man of letters; besides he is very curious in some things. He would not tell a lie for any price. But that is quite proper for him; he is a noble and in the Gold Book: no need for him to lie."

"But, Gu'io, Ser. Jesus a Jew; *che, che*, then the adorable Virgin must have been a—Jewess."

"Exactly, Luigi, the Marchese explained that to me. They were the Jewish kings, born in the land of the Jews, and always lived there, died there, were Jews entirely, I assure you."

"What, then, was Ser. Jesus never in Italy, never in the Holy Rome, never using the Latin tongue sacred to Mass?"

"Believe me, I have the word of the Marchese for it."

"And since he is a gentleman and in the Gold Book we can take his word any day before those fellows, the priests. There's another item in my score against them. Why they teach us to hate and abuse Jews, because they are Jews, and hold the Church right to slay them for their race, when if Ser. Jesus is a Jew, and is bodily reproduced in the sacrament, he comes in Jew flesh. Then they say Rome is the holiest city, when if Ser. Jesus was never there, the city where he was must be holiest. Beggar the priests, *sicera*!"

"But Rome, you know, is so holy as the seat of St. Peter, Luigi."

"Tut, *altro*, but Peter was only somebody because he was the apostle of Ser. Jesus, and got from Him the keys to keep."

"We weary ourselves about too high questions," said Gu'io, "and yet you make me think of what I heard from a young heretic named Nanni Conti, who has come about the Villa Forano these two years. He said, may the saints preserve us! that holiness is not in places nor in things, but is of God, and is something from Him set in our souls. As, for instance, Luigi, it is not possible for a coat to be holy, as at Treves, nor for a footprint to be holy, as on the Appian Way; but that we, our hearts, yours and mine, Luigi, may be holy, that God has commanded holiness, and so expects it. I shall never forget his words, 'Be ye holy.' *Bene, bene*, they are very troublesome to me. The idea that Gu'io Ravi, whose outside may look well enough," said Gu'io, with a fresh flash of conceit, "but of whose inside the less said the better, must be holy before God, or meet God's anger. *Ecco*, I wish I had never met that disastrous Nanni Conti."

This was the way the awakening Word spread slowly in Italy from lip to lip. This enfranchisement of religious thought began in Italy after the promulgation in 1848, of the statute for the "Emancipation of the Waldensians" by King Charles Albert, father of Victor Emmanuel. For twelve years the Word worked almost imperceptibly—and had its martyrs; then Victor Emmanuel entered Florence, and for ten years the Word spread more evidently—and there were also martyrs. The year eighteen hundred and seventy saw full religious freedom, a free Gospel in the streets of Rome, streets voluntarily abandoned by the Pontiff, let us hope there will be no more martyrs.

So it was that, in this decade, we see such divers characters as the Marchesa Forano, Ser. Jacopo, Assunta, Gu'io Ravi, and the Padre Innocenza all wrought upon in different fashions by the same truth. The Marchesa closed her ears voluntarily, lest she should depart from her old faith. Ser. Jacopo and Assunta received the Word with joy. Gu'io's shallow nature could not be deeply stirred. As for Padre Innocenza the experience of Jacob at Penie! was reversed. Jacob held the angel and would not let him go until he received a blessing; the angel rasped the soul of Innocenza and would not relax the hold until his heart would yield to receive the benediction. Thus for months from February to October—Padre Innocenza struggled in an overmastering clasp.

The priest looked back over his life and saw sins past his helping, and rejoiced to leave them with God; he saw other

wrongs which it would cost his pride little to repair; he saw a wrong to Judith Forano, a sin by which he could now gain nothing, but which it shamed him sorely to confess or endeavour to remedy. Finally Padre Innocenza resolved to compromise the matter—poor fool, he thought he could compound his offence with God—he would make a restitution and save his own pride.

Padre Innocenza went, therefore, to Forano, and as he did not desire to meet the family of the Marchese, he sent privately, on the edge of evening, to bid Gu'io Ravi come to him at the shrine. Gu'io went, not knowing whom he was to meet. Of all men he feared Padre Innocenza, the only priest with whom he had had particular dealings. Superstition held Gu'io with awful chains, which intercourse with the Marchese had not unloosed. To Gu'io, Padre Innocenza was a man able to bind his soul in hell, to cut from him all hope of heaven, to call demons from the pit if he so chose, to pursue him to madness; a man who could, if angered, blight all his hopes and comforts, smite him with plagues, and by the mighty power of his cursing make him an astonishment to his fellow-men. Cold terror shook his soul when the voice of Innocenza bade him—

"*Buona sera*."

"Well met, *reverendissimo*," said Gu'io. "I have long been too busy to go to you for your blessing. I hope you are well, Excellenza?"

"Gu'io, do you remember that several years ago, I gave you a commission—a bit of work to do for me?" said the priest, abruptly.

"Pardon, *reverendissimo*! Did you not bid me obey and then forget all about it? I obeyed—so much that, as you ordered, all is forgotten."

"*Figaro*! Ravi, you promised—swore to obey strictly my orders!"

"Si, si Padre! but swearing was needless; my word is good as an oath."

"*Bene*, Ravi, I gave you a babe to take to the Innocenti at Firenze. Tell me, Gu'io, did you do it?"

"*Reverendissimo*, you had my assurance of it when the affair was fresh in my mind," remonstrated Gu'io.

"And I told you to leave no name, no token, no slightest clue."

"Your words refresh my memory. *Ecco*, Signore, I took the child to Firenze. At the depot there I gave the woman who nursed it her ticket back. The child was in common folks' swaddling bands, and wrapped round with red flannel. I made haste to the Hospital of the Innocenti. I rang the bell with fury; a holy sister appeared at a small window; I thrust my basket in at the window. The sister began to speak—I turned; the porter cried Signore!—I fled; the porter's wife shrieked Ser. Ser.!—I lost myself in a great crowd pouring from the Annunziata."

"Then, Gu'io, there was no clue, no possibility of discovery?"

"*Reverendissimo*, not the least. *Cospetto*! was I likely to disobey you?"

Padre Innocenza, heavy of heart, walked two miles to his albergo. How could he know that what Gu'io had told him was entirely fiction?

CHAPTER VII.—FALLEN INTO HIS OWN TRAP.

The wind bloweth where it listeth, as thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit."

Early in the morning after his interview with Gu'io, Padre Innocenza mounted his horse and set out from his albergo toward "Sta. Maria Maggiore." He rode slowly along, his head sunk on his breast, and his heart as downcast as his head. Like Job, he cursed his day; he cursed also his training at the hands of that Church which brings up her children in the paths of deceit. He appeared to think that, as a nursing of that Church, his spiritual case was utterly hopeless, his sins past forgiveness, his condemnation written. But in mind as in matter nature seeks equilibrium; and, as a rule, the soul which most swiftly and deeply descends into despair will in the rebound most illogically and unexpectedly reach heights of self-confident joy. Thus Padre Innocenza, from considering himself the undeniable heir of perdition, suddenly began to ask himself what, after all, had he ever done that was so very evil? As for badness, he was not half so bad as other priests; while they were sensuous, besotted, superstitious, ignorant, he had been thoughtful, studious, active, decent. "That Polwarth fellow merely undertook to condemn me, that he might elevate himself," quoth Padre Innocenza; and so saying, he held up his head and chirruped to his horse.

In this more comfortable frame of mind the Padre began to reach the boundaries of his own parish; and as he passed, looks from the men, friendly and honestly respectful, from the women of adoring reverence, and the little children of awe, as gazing on a superior being, cheered his very soul. He thought of the church, well filled each Sabbath with attentive audiences; of the good counsels which he gave in private and in public; of his recent diligent care for souls; and, reviewing these things, he held his head higher yet, and felt that he merited something of God—enough, indeed, to quite wipe out any errors of ignorance or misguided zeal which were in the past. In the light of these imaginations of his heart, Padre Innocenza braced himself to be henceforth the architect of his own spiritual fortunes. He did not expect, as some less acute minds have done, to regenerate the Church of Rome, but he meant to regenerate himself and the parish of Santa Maria Maggiore of the hills. To this end Padre Innocenza began a series of visitations of his flock. He went from house to house, to set all in good spiritual order. He insisted on having the children of the church gathered together for instruction, and when they so gathered, on Sabbath afternoons, he taught them earnestly in Bible history, and had them learn the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the seven Penitential Psalms. In the pulpit the Padre became more diligent in inculcating moral duties, and more particular in discourses on Bible history and biography (though the word Bible never passed his lips). He also undertook to be the rival of Hercules, for he set himself to purge the Augean stables of the confessional.

As soon as a Romanist becomes a little stirred in conscience, gets a little light, he betakes himself more rigorously to confession; this is his only known outlet of spiritual pain and inlet of religious instruction and consolation.

Since Padre Innocenza had begun to preach truth, even in his partial manner, to his people, attendance at the confessional had been more diligent; indeed the Padre was obliged to sit in the stall all of Saturday afternoon and for several hours of Sabbath morning to accommodate his penitents.

In the confessional the Romish priest is afforded by his Church the largest liberty in the exercise of his natural characteristics. If he is of a depraved, sensual, gross, inquisitive nature, the Church offers him ample scope for the indulgence of his depravity; if he is of a temperament more refined, delicate, and devoid of petty curiosity, he can limit his subjects of inquiry, ignore the liberties his Church accords him, and confine himself to set or general forms.

Padre Innocenza had always possessed more decency of mind than is common to Italian priests, or perhaps to priests anywhere; but hitherto he had been content to leave confession as a form. He now considered that he might make it a means of good. He set himself, therefore, to ferret out all deceit and dishonesty practised in trade or in ordinary dealings, and demanded instead truth and fairness. He sought out all quarrels, to insist upon reconciliation; all disobedience to parents, to enforce subordination. Had Padre Innocenza undertaken this rigorous use of the confessional before he began to teach his people, they would have resented it and rebelled against it. Active morality inculcated in the confessional was a mere monstrosity in the Church of Rome. But these peasants now added to their customary veneration of the priest an intense devotion to Padre Innocenza personally, as a learned man, an almost saint, who treated them as rational beings, and really cared for them; therefore they submitted with some degree of grace to his unheard-of use of the tribunal of penance.

Actively pursuing the path which he had marked for himself, our new reformer reached Christmas; and of course there were at his church the usual mummeries—the manger, the babe, the waxen madonna; all the gewgaws which decorate a Popish Christmas. There was a sermon also, and here Padre Innocenza outdid himself. That Spirit which seemed to have left him for a time to his own devices again strove within him; a new life flooded his own soul, and perforce it shone upon his people. As he told of the Christ forsaking the abodes of glory and being born in low estate, not because the Virgin prayed, not because love of Mary wooed Him from celestial heights, but from love alike to all His people, to save the souls of all who should believe in Him; as he painted Christ now ready to dwell in contrite hearts; as he set forth a holy life inspired by the Babe of Bethlehem, his hearers, who had never before been told such wonders, and to whom his feeble half-utterances were a glorious revelation, wept aloud. As he left his pulpit the people crowded near him for his blessing; the women strove to touch his garments; they reached out to touch his hand, and then kissed their own hands in homage.

Now by this adulation was Padre Innocenza swept to some giddy height of self-assurance? No. By the grace of God the very reverence done him gave him a new view of his own defiled heart, and he shuddered back from the sight, crying, "Unclean, unclean! How shall man be just with God?"

And still, in every new strife within him, in every renewed soul conflict, inexorable conscience stood sternly pointing to his cruelty to a helpless stranger, his betrayal of the dying charge of Nicole, his treachery to a widow, his robbery of a babe from its mother, his designs on the Forano estate, which designs, if he could not repair his wrong-doings, would ripen until Forano swelled the riches of the Church which he now knew to be Anti-Christ.

Thus, while on Christmas day the people of his flock talked one with another that their priest was surely holier than any bishop; that he would soon be able to work miracles; that after death he would surely be canonized; that perchance he would advance from Sta. Maria to the Pontifical throne; or even that some day, in the midst of one of his eloquent sermons, he might be rapt away from their eyes in some act of consecration, and their chapel henceforth become a shrine—while they spoke thus, Innocenza, cast down in the sacristy upon his face, mourned before God. "My confusion is continually before me, and the shame of my face hath covered me."

And yet so strong and pitiless is the bondage of Rome, so warped and hard is the heart which she has trained, that Padre Innocenza was not yet willing to give up all to God; the hand which he would hold out to receive the ineffable grace was yet closed fast over the wages of unrighteousness. This heart, in some things so obdurate, in others so gracious, passed through another tremendous struggle of some weeks' duration, and then Padre Innocenza made a further effort to set himself right with his past and make himself just with God. We find him, on a warm, bright February morning, riding toward Pisa. He did not go quite to the city of Beauty, but entered a tract of wild land which lies between Pisa and Leghorn. He was seeking a little hovel in this neighbourhood when he came upon its owner herself, an old woman, out in the wood gathering brambles, twigs, dead weeds, every possible form of dry vegetable rubbish, which she bound into small scraggly bundles, called *fachirs* by the poor. These bundles she sold for an infinitesimal price to some peasant a trifle better off than herself, through whose intervention they reached the dismal shop of some town *fachino*, fuel seller, and were used as fuel, bringing finally part of a cent per bundle. When the Padre came upon this old woman she had raised a great pile of *fachirs*, and having bent for his benediction she sat down on the heap of brush to rest while she talked with him. She had once been his parishioner, but had abandoned the hills for the swampy plain, following the fortunes of her son.

"*Bellissima giornata*, Padre," said the old woman with a doleful whine. "I hope your *reverendissimo* is better off than I."

"I am sorry to hear you are in distress, *mea amica*."