

## CHOICE LITERATURE.

## THE OATH-KEEPER OF FORANO.

A TALE OF ITALY AND HER ANGEL.

BY MRS. JULIA M'NAIR WRIGHT.

## CHAPTER I. LAST DAY OF THE CARNIVAL.

"Oh vows, oh convent, I have not lost my humanity under your inexorable discipline; you have not made me marble by changing my habit!"—*Edouard to Ann Arca.*

Behold the afternoon of the maddest day of the Italian year: the last day of the Carnival, the day when all the merry-making grows wilder and more frantic, until the bell tolls in midnight and the austere Lent. When the sun rose on this last day of Carnival, 1860, there rose also along the horizon a cloud like a man's hand; it grew with the growing day.

None of the merry makers heeded either the sun or the cloud; the business in hand was to prepare for the "Corso" in the afternoon; for this special occasion had been reserved the most gorgeous costumes, the quaintest conceits, and the most fantastic masks, wherewith to contest for the civic prize of buffoonery, and by three o'clock the "Corso" was crowded with nearly all the vehicles of the city, private and public, fine and shabby, all pressing toward the Piazza.

Among the carriages was one containing three nuns, evidently *bona fide* members of an order, not makers bent on a frolic, and just as evidently desirous of escaping the crowd. To do that was impossible, and finally their carriage was brought to a full stop immediately in front of the British Consulate.

One nun on the back seat leaned forward to calculate the probable length of the delay by counting the vehicles entangled before them; the nun beside her looked backward to see how near to her shoulders were the heads of the horses of the coach next in the rear; the third nun leaped at a bound from the front seat (which she occupied alone), to the sidewalk, and rushed into the Consulate. Evidently a woman of quick mind and equal to emergencies, she no sooner gained the office than she selected the Consul from his two subordinates, and grasping his arm exclaimed, with an unmistakable English accent:

"I demand your protection! I am a British subject unlawfully imprisoned in a convent. Here in your office I am in England, and I claim your aid, my lawful rights, the protection of my country's flag!"

At this instant the two other nuns ran in, crying in Italian:

"*Illustrissimo Signore*! pardon; our poor sister Theresa is insane; we are removing her to a hospital. Aid us in replacing her in the carriage and we will no longer trouble you. A thousand pardons for the poor unhappy ones intrusion."

"You see I am not insane," said the first comer eagerly, fixing an agonized look on the perturbed Consul. "I beseech your help as you are a gentleman; I claim it as I am unfortunate; I demand it from an officer of my own Government, sent here to aid those who are oppressed as I am. I am English and you must protect me!"

The other nuns not understanding her words, but well imagining their purport, began again, rather angrily, with "*Illustrissimo*," and asserted that their insane "sister" was an Italian, educated in England—demanding that she should be restored to their care. They were much excited, especially as the crowd outside had laughed and howled when their "sister" so unexpectedly deserted them. The Consul looked uneasily at the nun who held him by the arm.

"How shall I know that you are a British subject and have a right to my interference for you? Why not go with these ladies until I have opportunity to examine into your claims?"

"Because it would be to go to my death. I should never be heard of after I left your door. Indeed you know that I am English from my language. Six years ago I was Judith Lyons, of No.—Portland Place. My father was David Lyons, of No.—Ludgate Hill. I was seized while returning to England, and have been imprisoned in a convent five years. I must have your protection!"

"Lyons—1854—Portland Place," said one of the clerks, who looked deeply interested. "Here's a London Directory for '56; he has just turned over the leaves. The names are here, sir. Yes, Lyons of Ludgate Hill; three large establishments."

The Italian nuns, with a volley of "pardons," darted at their "sister" and endeavored to drag her away with them.

Holding by the Consul with one hand the fugitive strove to keep off her assailants with the other arm. Her bonnet and head wrappings fell away, and shewed a face which, though worn and marked by grief, was remarkably beautiful. The Consul by words, and one of his clerks by a gentle laying on of hands, interfered to protect the stranger, and the second clerk vouchsafed the remark that in his opinion it was a clear case.

The Consul, loath to quarrel with the holy Church, found that the refugee had two champions besides his own sympathies, and now inmutatingly addressing the defendants as *signorinas*, assured them that he was certain the affair could be satisfactorily explained, but that his duty compelled him to hear the prayer of one who was evidently an Englishwoman; and that he must certainly protect her until the matter could be laid before the right authorities, and a proper and legal decision arrived at. At this stage of his remarks a happy thought came to him.

"You know the excellent Father Salvatore Zucchi, of the Duomo?"

The nuns brightened. "He is the confessor of our convent."

"We can then settle the business speedily and amicably, I presume," said the Consul, "at least, I had better deal directly with the *Padre*. If you two would wait upon him and state your case, and request him to come at his earliest convenience to the Consulate, I trust we shall be able to

arrive at a proper understanding without any public scandal." The word scandal was well used. Mother Church objects to open scandals, and the two nuns began to feel that their best resort would be to Father Zucchi. The Consul took advantage of their hesitation, he gently pushed the claimant of his protection into an inner room, and begged leave to escort the *signorina* to their carriage assuring them that he should not leave the Consulate during the remainder of the day, and would not miss the expected visit from *Padre* Zucchi.

Bar-headed, and with the utmost deference, the Consul waited upon the irate nuns to their *fiacre*, the crowd had thickened—news of a nun's escape had spread—and as the two sisters appeared without the third, laughter, queries, and jibes met them. Happily this was but for an instant, for just then a rabble, carrying a platform on which was seated in state, crowned, and sceptered, and tinsel-decked, an enormous figure, appeared at a corner, and the easily diverted Italian crowd followed it with a shout—it was King Carnival going to the grand piazza, to be burned at midnight.

The disappointed sisters drove off in search of Father Zucchi, and the Consul returned to his *protégé*. As he opened the door of the inner room, he found that she had torn off her veil, kerchief, rosary, crucifix, all of the nun's gear of which she could free herself, and was trampling them under her feet in a fury.

"Ah!" she said, with a deep breath; "you think from this that I am insane. But consider these are the tokens of my captivity, my cruel slavery; of separation from my kindred, from my home, from my religion; these are the trappings of the accused woman-worshipper. May the God of Israel deal with you as you deal with me, and bless you as you protect me!"

"You are a Jewess," said the Consul.

"Yes, a Jewess, and by reason of that none the less an English subject, with English rights."

"Not at all," said the Consul, calmly; "and be sure that I will protect those rights."

"I shew very little gratitude for what you have already done," said the stranger, growing more quiet; "but when you know my history you will not wonder at my excitement."

"And I must know your history immediately, before Father Zucchi comes, that I may better understand how to deal with him. Let me hear what you can tell me, and be calm and explicit, I beg of you."

The junior clerk here entered with a glass of wine for the lady, and placed a chair for her. She accepted these attentions mechanically, with her eyes fixed on the Consul.

"Now, then," said the brisk official, "your name, age, birthplace—let us know what we are doing."

"My name, Judith Lyons—born in London; my age, twenty-six. Six years ago I married in London an Italian named Nicole Forano, a younger half-brother of the Marchese Forano. Nicole was a Roman Catholic—I, a Jewess; and as we were neither of us ready to change our religion, we were married by a magistrate. My family consented to the match, but did not prefer it. Soon after we came to Italy. You know that here by his Church a civil marriage would not be recognized, but Nicole hoped that before long I would unite with his Church, and we could be remarried by a priest. I might have made such a change in time; I cannot tell. I had then never seen the inside of a convent. A marriage at any time by a priest would have satisfied the clergy, and legitimated any children that might be born during the existence of the merely civil marriage. A year passed; we were very happy in a little mountain villa of our own. Forano had not presented me to his family; he was waiting for the time when I should belong to their Church. When the year ended, I had—as on; and alas! sir, before that son was a month old, my husband was dead. I had known all along that the priest near us was my great enemy. The Marchese Forano was elderly and childless; my husband was the next heir of the little estate, and after him our child, if our marriage was legitimated, or if the Marchese should see fit to adopt the child as his heir; without that, lacking an heir, he very probably would bequeath his property to the Church. Nicole had explained all this to me, and when he was dead, and I had no defender, my whole desire was to go with my child to my family; I knew I should be welcome, and their fortune was ample. I wrote them when I would come. A young man, the favourite servant of Nicole, a youth whose family had always served the Foranos, was to be my only attendant. I had made my preparations; we were to start at daybreak. After I lay down that night with my child in my arms, eager for the hour to come when I should escape from the scene of my great happiness and my great misery. I knew nothing that happened; when I again became conscious of myself I was in a narrow bed in a convent hospital, and nuns were about me; they told me that a month had passed, that my child was dead, and that I had been ill of a fever. I do not believe that, for fevers weaken and emaciate, and I found myself in my usual flesh and strength. I gradually learned that I was a prisoner. I was not allowed to communicate with the outer world, nor to go to England. They strove to convert me, as they said, but what Nicole's love might have done, could not be accomplished by their harshness. They made a nun of me, as they retained me against my will. All my desire now is to get to England to my friends. If my child is dead I have no tie here; if he lives I cannot find him if I stay. I wish you to send me to my friends."

A tap on the door. "The *Padre* Zucchi!" said the junior clerk. "Take him to my private parlour," said the Consul. Then turning to his companion, he said: "I, abiding by our own law and recognizing that your marriage is valid in England, must call you only Madame Forano, and be sure that I will defend your rights, and endeavour to accomplish all your wishes—"

"And—if you could find out anything about my child!" said Madame Forano, earnestly. The Consul bowed and left the room.

His first care was to send a particularly delightful collation to the parlour, as his avowed courier to the waiting priest; when he followed the collation which the priest was lovingly crying, he made his first words complimentary to an extent

that would have done honour to an Italian. Then drawing two chairs near the table he continued: "It is true that we have a little matter of business to discuss, but even business can be made agreeable over good viands and good *Chianti*, and as Carnival is going and Lent is coming, we will make the best of our time, and also reach a pleasant settlement of a little matter which I could not conveniently conclude with the ladies. I hope *Chianti* suits your taste?"

Father Zucchi replied that *Chianti* particularly suited him, and when his glass was filled proceeded with alacrity to empty it. Meanwhile the Consul was called from the room.

Mr.—had been in office but three years, his predecessor having died in 1857. The senior clerk, who had requested a moment's conversation with him, said that he had been looking over the papers of 1855 and 1856, and had found a letter from David Lyons, requesting the fact of his daughter Judith Lyons Forano's death to be inquired into. A note made by a previous clerk on the letter stated that the death had been attested by a certain parish priest.

The Consul returned to *Padre* Zucchi, and plied him well with food and wine, as they proceeded to the consideration of the question in hand.

"Of course," said the Consul, "you could affirm that this is not the daughter of David Lyons, of London. In which case, after application to the proper court, I must send for some one of the Lyons family to come and identify the lady, if they so desired. If you admit her to be Judith Lyons, you have two courses before you; either to yield the validity of the marriage, and put her in communication with the Marchese Forano, as the head of the family; or, rejecting the marriage, and taking no more trouble about her, simply to permit me quietly to send her to England, which I pledge you my word to do within three days."

"What she tells you is false," said *Padre* Zucchi. "She desired to enter a convent, and voluntarily assumed vows, and now yields to her evil heart and renounces her vocation."

"Then I am sure your convent would be well rid of her."

"But we have a duty to ourselves, to her, to the Church, to the family Forano—always very good Catholics."

"Perhaps we had better communicate with the Marchese."

"Not at all. He is feeble and elderly. I must consider his interest."

"And why not return the young woman to her friends? The sin of breaking a vow would be hers only; you would be free of the trouble of her, and the Forano family need never hear of her again, unless they make the first advances."

"But they would hear of her again, and be continually put to trouble by her. She is a very evil-disposed, ambitious young woman. In London, aided by her friends, she would begin to persecute the Foranos about her child."

"Then her child is living?" said the Consul, quickly.

"Not at all; he is dead; but she would not believe it."

"If you give me your word as a gentleman that you know the child to be dead, and I so assure her of its death, she will accept the fact, I am confident. I feel certain that she would hereafter annoy no one. I argue this matter thus, trusting that you may see, as I do, that a quiet settlement is best for all concerned. I have never had any disputes with your Government or Church; I desire none. If you will agree to hush all reports, and release all claims—another glass of *Chianti*—and the lady is only desirous to go home, and I promise to set her on the way to England at once—really you are scarcely tasting the salad (*Padre* Zucchi had eaten half of it)—then nothing further need be said. If this cannot be, I must communicate with the British Ambassador—try the truffles—and it is not needful that I should tell you that the world is full of people to comment on Church quarrels and Church scandals. I think you had better try some more *Chianti*, and agree to let this rebellious young lady return to the care of her parents."

"It is evident that her marriage with Nicole Forano is, in Italy, quite invalid," began *Padre* Zucchi.

"Then she can have no claim on the Foranos, if we accept that view," said the Consul; "and if her child is dead—"

"Oh, but her child is certainly dead," interrupted the priest.

"Then she has no tie here, and by all means had better return to her early home."

The Consul had no desire but to arrive at an amicable settlement with the priest. He must quiet his own conscience by securing the safety of the woman who had cast herself on his protection; and the more quietly he could do this the better satisfied he would be. To this end he mollified the *Padre* with *Chianti* and compliments, and urged him by logical reasonings which the confessor could not rebut. After a long discussion the priest agreed to release all claim on "Sister Theresa," and to tell the Consul, in the presence of the clerks, that he was quite willing that she should be sent to England, provided that the Consul would see to it that no rumours derogatory to the Church got abroad, and that nothing capable of establishing an evil precedent might happen; provided, also, that "Sister Theresa" should depart within three days. To this the Consul agreed, and the *Padre* then gave way to a fatherly anxiety as to the means to be provided for the departure of his recreant daughter, and the route which she should pursue. On these points, however, the Consul was reticent; all he would say was that by the evening of the third day Judith Lyons Forano should be out of Italy.

It was nearly sunset when *Padre* Zucchi left the Consulate. As the vexed ecclesiastic proceeded towards the Duomo for resper, a little boat upon the bay began to draw near the land, and the cloud in the sky, which had rapidly increased, hung like a black curtain over all the west. Beneath the edge of this curtain the setting sun shot a long level ray across the waters upon the little boat, as if it had nothing else to shine upon. Against the molten gold of this last blaze of sunset Gorgonia loomed like a black sceptre, the whole heaven gathered darkness, and a fierce wind rushed forth, with the rain on its wings.

The little boat which was speeding landward hailed from a small xebec bound for Corsica, a vessel with the sharply pointed, red, triangular sails peculiar to the Levant. The man who rowed the boat was in the costume of a Turcan