

## CHOICE LITERATURE.

## THE OATH-KEEPER OF FORANO.

A TALE OF ITALY AND HER EVANGEL.

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CHAPTER VI.—Continued.

Gulio fled out of his master's presence, ran to his room like one distraught, began to search through his possessions; tore from his neck the bit of silver hanging on a cord, tramped it under foot, and cried, "I will reveal all!" but as he turned to go from the room, a fit of trembling seized him, a sweat of horror broke forth from his whole body, a superstitious agony rent him, he saw his soul imperiled—as it could never be by lies, or other vice—he seemed in the clutch of a demon, his head reeled. He dashed into the open air, then to a height in his vineyard which looked toward "Sta. Maria Maggiore of the Hills," and there Gulio shook his fist, and foamed, and, we are loath to write it, cursed and swore about Padre Innocenza until he was hoarse. Padre Innocenza held Gulio's soul in awful chains, the falling tears of his good master had almost sent them off, but now they were riveted closer than before.

The Marchese recovered his outward serenity, and Gulio by degrees forgot the impression which had been made.

And so the winter came, and we find ourselves in all its chill, watching Padre Innocenza coming from the hills.

By the time that the priest thus comes from his parish, it is indeed the beginning of another year, for it is February, 1862.

Caution is largely developed among priests, and Innocenza has a superabundant supply. Reaching the city he pays his first visit to Father Zucchi. Now that a priest should do no work in his parish is legitimate; that he should labour among his people is suspicious; and presently Father Zucchi says:

"I think I have heard something about your people coming out to church lately."

"So they do," replies Innocenza. "I don't know any better place for them than the church, and so I make them come. If I'm teaching them, I know what they're learning."

"That's right," says Zucchi; "there is a deal of heresy and fanaticism abroad now-a-days. I wish we had the Grand Duke back; we'll be starved out else. Do your folks pay their dues?"

"Yes; they pay more than usual, and they all keep right to me and the chapel. I don't hear of any straying off."

"Very good," replies the cathedral priest; "I must look to my people about that. Here we have the Vaudois undermining on the one hand, and that heretic Polwarth, bold as brass, on the other, and *Liberalism* preached on every corner, to mean throwing off religion altogether. That Polwarth is a very vile man—did you ever see him?"

"Yes; I've handled him pretty roughly once or twice."

And then Innocenza had a glass of wine with his brother ecclesiastic, and, night having fallen, he left him, as Padre Zucchi supposed, to get his supper at a trattoria. On the contrary, Innocenza darted along in the shadow of the houses until he found himself once more in Dr. Polwarth's study. He seemed less fluent than usual, but in a moment or two asked for the Doctor's Italian Bible, and stood reading different parts of it for nearly a quarter of an hour. Then he dropped it on the table, saying:

"Yes, that's a true copy. Tell me, do you accept all that book?"

"Every word of it," said the Doctor.

"And you hold such principles of honour, truth, humanity, as it teaches?" he asked, nervously.

"Certainly I do, and try with all my heart to practice them."

"There's one good in your heretic priests," said Innocenza. "one can trust your word." He stood with his back to the Doctor looking into the fire for some time, then turning suddenly, he exclaimed: "I come to you a man distressed, miserable, hopeless, torn by a thousand doubts—"

"Perhaps for that I should rather be glad than grieve," said the pastor. "If God has troubled you He can also console you."

"And how can I get that consolation?" urged the priest.

"By prayer—prayer to Jesus only, without any intermediary."

"And is that all the help you can offer me?"

"It is all, and enough. If you truly desire help, fully believe that Jesus can give it to you and go directly to Him, that is all."

"Foul that I was to hope for help!" cried Innocenza. "You send me to dry streams and broken reeds. What! do you count me an idiot? Do you suppose I did not see this way? and would I not be likely to try it before I humbled myself to come to you? Why, I tell you I desire help, with a very passion of desire! I do believe Jesus is able to help! I have gone to Him only, a thousand times; but what better am I for going? He will not hear me, will not help me; He is as cold as our dead saints."

Dr. Polwarth looked at his visitor fixedly some moments; then said, sternly:

"I see; you are not willing to pay the price."

"What price? Ha! have I not heard that *ours* was the religion of price? of earning things of God? and *yours* was the religion of free grace, of unthought salvation? and now you say—price!"

"But do you know," persisted Dr. Polwarth, "what it will cost you to get this help of Christ?"

"No!" shouted Innocenza. "I thought it was something free, and I wanted something free."

"Listen to me. You wanted Christ's peace, on your own terms, not His, you demanded amity with Him while your bosom booded unrighteous gains, while your hands were full of forbidden fruits. Peace comes from being filled with Christ. We must be emptied of self. We must re-

linquish the wages of ungodliness before there is room within us for Him. God has dealt with you; He has opened your eyes to see a need of Christ; He has given you a desire for Christ; He may have even shewn you by what things you keep Christ out of your heart, yet you will not yield them."

"No, no. I protest to you I would give up everything," said the priest.

"You may have evil practices; you may have certain falsehoods, certain self-indulgences, certain practices forbidden in God's law, which you will not relinquish, which you desire to keep, while you have Christ."

"No," said Innocenza; "I am honest in my speech, moderate in my wishes, decent in private life. I am willing to give up all evil habits which God may shew me, which you may search out."

"Perhaps you know that you have been teaching errors of doctrine. You may have taught as God's Word, what now you see not to be in God's Word, and you are not willing to alter your teachings, to provoke the wrath of your Church. You want to be secretly for Christ, but outwardly as you have been. And this is what it must cost you to get peace; you must prove the sincerity of your desire for Christ by readiness to have none but Him. Have you bargained that you must keep what you have, and get Christ too?"

"No. I have begun to teach as I have had light, and if I could only get this peace I would willingly abandon my position. I would cease teaching error—I would publicly retract error."

"Perhaps you have had some plan for your future spiritual life. Will you tell me what it was that you wanted and expected?"

"Your letter," said Innocenza, "stirred the very depths of my soul; your teachings commended themselves to my mind. I said: Here is a religion worthy of God as its propounder; he is a religion which, while loftier than our reason, does not contradict reason. In the light of the truths which you presented I saw what untruths I had held as sacred. But then I could not understand what my Church was, and how it had grown, and been held as the Church, if, instead of being the exponent of God on earth, it was His antagonist. Your second paper sent me to the Scriptures for explanation of this. When once I opened the Bible I read on as one fascinated. I have gone through the Holy Book three times. I felt that I lacked true piety, the real peace of God. This I must get from Christ only. I besought His help. I thought I should receive assurance of my pardon and acceptance and have joy in Him; this would make me strong. I should then call my flock together and tell them what errors I in my darkness had taught, and what was the true way; I would exhort them to try and search the Scriptures and examine their faith. Then I meant to go to England and America, where I could be more fully taught, and get something to do—for of course I could not stay in my parish, and I could get no work in Italy, where the priests would be ever on my track."

"Padre Innocenza," said Dr. Polwarth, "I will deal plainly with you. I know in a measure what priests are. I must fear that in the ten years of your life as parish priest you have been a partner to some evil deeds. Look back; are there lives which you have ruined? are there any whom you have distrained of liberty? is there any prisoner of your making? any family broken up by you? means? any soul persisting in sins which you have pretended to condone? Will Christ give you peace while you refuse actual repentance, withhold restitution? If you are now continuing any deception by silence, God will not hear you. If you thus hold back part of the price, evidently you are not ready to give up all for Christ—you are uselessly, hopelessly lying to the Holy Ghost. Christ never rejects the soul which seeks Him in sincerity and truth. If you cry for help, and are unhelped, believe me, the fault is not Christ's, but yours; you are not ready to yield all on your part, but you want all on His part. Look back on your life and consider this question."

"What?" said Padre Innocenza, "must I not only cease from sin, but go back to undo the past? I thought Christ would atone for that. And do you ask me to repair these errors myself?"

"Christ will atone—you cannot. But if there is anything which, in outward act, you can do to make restitution, He demands it. He will not pardon a man for theft while the man resolves to live on the proceeds of that theft. Remember how Zaccheus proved his sincerity; he said: 'If I have taken anything from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold.'"

"But there are some deeds which I cannot now undo."

"God only demands the possible, but He demands that absolutely. Consider that for years you have lived in darkness; God has enlightened you: these desires, these strivings of soul are His divine gift to you; they are an earnest of what He is able and willing to do; but you know what David says: 'If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.' Ask God to search your heart for these sins that are between you and Him; ask His help to do what He demands. Cease asking selfishly for peace; up and do your duty, and peace will come."

"Well," said Padre Innocenza, "my life, in God's light, looks bad enough; but let me tell you, that most of my sins have been of the heart, and not so much of outward act. Many of the crimes common to my order have been unsharred by me. Some sins I would repair, but death has come between. My chief error has been a passionate zeal for my Church, and an ambition to rise in her honors; and the greatest sins of outward act have been committed to serve myself in my Church—and perhaps I cannot repair them."

"Are you willing to try faithfully, continually, disregarding your own comfort, pride, profit, to do what is right as in the sight of God?"

"Perhaps there is a way," said Padre Innocenza, half to himself, "in which I can set one matter right privately."

"Privately or publicly, you must be willing to do your utmost."

"Farewell," said the priest, starting from his seat; "I wanted salvation, comfort, peace, for nothing. Instead, you

talk of what it will cost—of restitution, of duty. I am much disappointed."

The priest hurried along the street toward his albergo, his soul in a greater tumult than before. At a crossing he ran across Nanni Conti, who had just left the Palazzo Borgosoia, where he had been paying a visit to Assunta. Nanni's heart was happy—happier than ever; a little song was on his lips. The priest was most miserable; ready to mutter a curse. Their ways in life shook a cross more than once.

Nanni was happy as a humble follower of Christ; striving to live honestly with all men, and also to do good to all as he had opportunity. He rejoiced also in fruit of his labour; he had brought the Gospel to his father's house, and they had received it, and in their turn were working in Christ's service. Nanni was, moreover, hopeful in regard to the future. He expected within a few years to be ordained as an evangelist in the Vaudois Church, and perhaps to make his home in Barletta, with Assunta for his wife. Such were the visions which filled his mind when he ran against Padre Innocenza in the little dark street.

At the same time Assunta, in the Palazzo Borgosoia, shared Nanni's hopes and joy. Her present home was very pleasant, and she trusted, by Miss Maxwell's instructions, to become more fitted for the life which seemed to lie before her. While Nanni was studying in Firenze and travelling about as colporteur, Assunta would improve mentally, in housekeeping, in sewing, and use her liberal wages in preparing the plenishing of her future home. So all seemed to be prospering well; and when June came, with its oppressive heats, the household of Uncle Francini again took up their abode in the Villa Anteta.

Of course, the first visitors were the Marchese Forano and his wife, who rejoiced greatly in the return of last summer's pleasant friends, although the sight of little Michael tore open the old wound about Nicole, and the loss of the little child. The Marchesa expressed a hope that she should see Honor, as before, at the Pavilion: "I so enjoy our morning talks," she said; there was evidently some new trouble or anxiety in her mind. This anxiety exhibited itself the next day when she met Honor.

"Do you know, Signorina, I have never got out of my mind what you said about the constant presence of Christ and every-day religion. I see, now, religion should be in our daily lives, in all our thoughts. I desire to have Jesus continually with me; but how can I when I know almost nothing of Him? It would surprise you, Signorina cara, to be told how little I know of Ser. Jesus. I have heard that He was born in a carpenter's house, and was very poor; and yet in the pictures the Madonna looks magnificently rich."

"The pictures, you know, are a painter's fancy, and are painted for ornament, and to shew his skill. It is true that Jesus, for our sakes, became poor, and for us left the glory of heaven."

"And He really did have twelve Apostles? and His mother lived as long as He did on earth—is all that so, Signorina? And then, of course, He lived in Rome, and spoke Latin?"

"Your pardon, Marchesa; He was never in Rome. He lived in Palestine, and died at Jerusalem. He was born at a village near that city, and His grave, for three days, was in a garden of the city."

"And was He never at the Holy City of Rome? And you think, Signorina, He did these miracles and good deeds we hear of?"

"I am sure that He did—and very many more."

"How I wish I had some way of knowing all about Him!"

"Signorina, why not read His life, written fully and truly for us in the four Gospels?" said Honor, taking an Italian Testament from her pocket and holding it toward her.

The Marchesa drew back.

"Oh, no, no! That would only involve me in confusion. You educated women may be able to read such things safely—not Italian women like me. No, Signorina—but do you tell me what you know."

"And yet, Marchesa, I draw all my knowledge of Christ from this very book. I only tell you what is here."

"But you are wise to know what to accept, what to reject."

"But I reject nothing of it. I take the whole as God's truth."

"Nevertheless, I cannot read it; but I have confidence in your word, and will be glad to hear what you tell me."

Honor sat in silent distress at finding her word regarded as safer, more truthful, more reliable than God's Word. The Marchesa's eye fell on the picture of the Virgin. She said:

"Here is the Divine Mother, set by God for the especial help of us women; I do know something of her. Do you pray for her, eh?"

"I have found no command to do so in the Bible," said Honor.

"Ca, ca! that proves it, you see. The Bible don't tell all we need to know. That, I understand, is why Christ came: to teach us what had been, by carelessness or evil, left out of the Bible; and the worship of His blessed mother was one of those things. You see, the Jews were the holders of the Scriptures, and they, being wrong, made some of the Scripture wrong. To this day, poor things, they don't worship Madonna; but do you do it?"

"But how could I expect her to hear so many prayers, from so many people of different tongues and countries, all at once?"

"Surely you believe that God can?" said the Marchesa, earnestly.

"Oh, to be sure," replied Honor.

"Then," said the Marchesa, triumphantly, "Mary can. She is divine, divine like God and Christ. God can do all things. He made Mary for His helper, and she can do all things."

"Tell me, do your priests teach you that?"

"Surely. They tell us she can do all things; they make her just like God in hearing and helping; they say she has all the power of divinity. Then my common sense tells me she must be divine, as God. Their teachings mean nothing