

A CHILD OF THE BASILICA.

BY EUGENE DAVIS.

I.

"For God and for Rome!" she cried enthusiastically, as she pinned a tiny cross on the breast of a tall, stalwart youth who looked to the best advantage in the uniform of a Papal volunteer.

"For God, for Rome, and for the Pope king!" she added in that sweet Tuscan tongue, which rang over the piazza like the chime of a silver bell. Hundreds of the Pope's soldiers, some of whom were veterans, whose faces had been bronzed by the hot southern sun, and prematurely furrowed by the toils and privations of many a forced march and the brunt and anxiety of many a battle, were gathered in the piazza of St. Peter's, Rome, awaiting orders to fall into line for the defence of the city.

"Pray, who is that enthusiastic little girl?" asked a zouave of one of the Pope's guards; "how handsome she is! If she were in France she would make an excellent *cantiniere*."

"Everybody here knows her," exclaimed the guard, looking at the girl with evident admiration. "Her name is Paola Rudini. Ever since she was a child in bib and tucker, she has lived in this locality, and is a favorite with everybody—she is so amiable and so good!"

"And who is the cavalier to whom she is speaking?"

"Well, he is a certain Giovanni Cavallotti, a young artist by profession, to whom she is betrothed. Paola is proud of him. You can see it in her face that she is—can you not? Other women parting with lovers who are going to the battle-field, and whom they may never see again, blubber and whine a good deal. They sometimes even become hysterical; but Paola is made of sterner stuff, I tell you. She is a brave and intrepid little girl—is Paola. And with all that there is no more womanly heart in all Rome than hers. *Feco!*"

"Fall into line! Present arms!" shouted the commander's voice, and all the soldiers formed into at once one complete battalion on whose serried ranks the autumn sun shone brilliantly down, reflecting its gold rays on their burnished helmets and gleaming scabbards.

As they marched with military precision in the direction of the old fortifications, raising herself to her full height in the crowd of spectators, nodded farewell to her lover, who smiled a cordial acknowledgment in return.

Meanwhile the groups of civilians, mostly aged men, who could be of no use in the present crisis, waved their hats in the air and cheered the departing soldiers.

"May the Madonna guard your banners!" exclaimed one. "Long live the Pope-king!" shouted another! "Down with Victor Emmanuel!" ejaculated a third.

And the cries were taken up and repeated till the square in front of the church rang with their echoes, as the multitude swayed hither and thither around the fountain, and at the base of the big Egyptian obelisk that looked down on the scene with a mute grandeur peculiarly its own. Women, wearing variegated headgears, and holding Rosary beads in their hands, stood under the colonnades invoking the benediction of Heaven on the defenders of their homes.

When the soldiers had disappeared on the other side of the castle of St. Angelo, and the crowd had dispersed, Paola entered the cathedral, and knelt for some time in prayer before an altar in one of the side chapels. A solemn silence reigned through isle and transept, contrasting vividly with the clamor of the excited crowd that had

but a few moments previously made the welkin ring on the square outside with its enthusiastic plaudits.

In front of the high altar which gleamed rich with gold and lapis lazuli, the sacred lamps lay burning around the marble balustrade, beneath which was situated the tomb of the apostles. The massive roof of stucco overhead seemed to the maiden, as she gazed upward, a vision of perfect loveliness; while the statues of saints, looking from their niches on the side walls, seemed to her to be sentinels who kept watch and ward over the Holy of Holies. She glided noiselessly from the chapel up the aisle, and having knelt for a moment in front of the bronze figure of St. Peter, she left the basilica, and penetrated into one of the quaint, narrow streets that are to be found in the vicinity of the Vatican.

Her step was light and graceful as that of a fawn. There were no traces of tears on the long lashes of those dark eyes, large, round, and liquid, but with the light of innocence, full of candor, and hallowed with a certain mystic gleam that spoke the innate holiness of her heart. Her jet black tresses were half covered with a striped red kerchief, her sun brown features were ruddy with the hue of health, and her neat, trim figure was a model of perfection.

On one of the side walls of the narrow street into which she penetrated was a niche containing a statue of the Madonna holding in her arms the child Christ. The figures were from an artistic point of view unpretentious and ordinary. The clay was rough and uneven, and the rain, and Tramontana winds, that swept down from the Alban hills in the winter and early spring-time, had given it a weather-beaten appearance; but it was all the more dear on that account to Paola, who out of her own little earnings as a seamstress purchased regularly, week after week, the oil that fed the lamp which was perpetually burning at the Virgin's feet. Every morning, going to her work, she would murmur a fervent "Ave Maria" as she bowed to the statue, and the same reverence was paid it by her on her return home in the evening. She lived close by in an attic on the sixth floor of a tenement.

Paola had at this time neither father nor mother. Her earliest recollections went back to a picturesque little hamlet on the banks of the Arno where the turquoise sky of Tuscany shimmered over her head, and a sword of the richest emerald lay at her feet. She remembered how, when a mere child, she used to pass the hours away, gazing dreamily on the wide canopy of heaven; creating in imagination so many battalions of armed knights out of the occasional fleecy clouds that used to assume very fantastic shapes on the western horizon, particularly at sunset; seeing the glitter of angels' wings in the golden sunshine; hearing the mystic voices of cherubs in the low, sweet zephyrs that played as on an Æolian harp through the blossoming mulberry groves; listening with a rapt and infinite wonder to the rustling of the vine leaves on the hill-side, and the swish of the rushing river as it half dived its way along the valley, under the wild flowers that bloomed in profusion on its banks. The piping of the shepherd's reed in the dim twilight broke, betimes, on her ears, like the shrill cry of a heavenly choir. The roses that grew in such beauty by her old homestead, the ivy that sheltered its walls, the balmy fragrance of the air, impressed her with a keen sense of pleasure and delight. A child of nature, she actually revelled in nature's choicest treasures.

There was, however, a rude awakening from the Juliet day-dream. Somewhat hazily she remembered her mother, a fragile, delicate woman, the widow of Carlo Rudini, who had died a month or so before little Paola was

born. After her husband's death, Paolo's mother did her best to make a living out of the vineyard. Fortune favored her the first year, but owing to her want of practical knowledge of vine dressing the second year's crop was a failure. A laborer, who was formerly in the employ of Carlo Rudini, came along about this time, and after some weeks easily induced her to become his wife, for the poor woman was quite helpless to look after her property, and Riccardo Rienzi—such was the name of her second husband—was a skilled hand in taking care of the vines. That was, however, his only good quality. Once he had become the master of what was once the Rudini farmstead, he showed himself in his true colors. He was a big, brawny brute. His features were red and blotched, due to the copious libations in which he used to indulge; and his manners were as uncouth as those of any denizen of the city slums, in the purlieus of which he had spent the early years of his life.

He maltreated his delicate wife to such an extent that she sickened and died; and he afterwards turned his rage on his step-daughter, who, however, being of quite a contrary temperament to that of her mother, rebelled against him, and eventually fled from the Tuscan vineyard, and walked on foot to Rome. The journey took her two months to accomplish, and she received kindly shelter and good, plain food at the various houses along the route.

She was twelve years old just then. A good and charitable lady, a cousin of her mother's, took charge of the child, and taught her a trade—that of a seamstress—in which she was earning a livelihood at the time this story opens. All Paola's spare moments since her arrival in Rome were spent in the Basilica of St. Peter's, or in bringing oil and flowers to the base of the statue of the Madonna in one of the neighboring streets. She soon became so well known to the sacristan and the other officials of the church that at the former's suggestion they, by unanimous consent, called her a "child of the Basilica."

II.

Those were dark days for Pius IX. and the government of the Church. The French garrison, which had been the only bulwark of the temporal power of the Pope against the encroachments and intrigues of King Victor Emmanuel, was withdrawn from Rome. The Papal authorities had, owing to this perfidious conduct of Bonaparte, to fall back on their own resources, which, of course, proved utterly inadequate to cope with the overwhelming forces commanded by the usurping Piedmontese. The conflict was brief, but sharp. Despite the daring attitude and brave, intrepid conduct of the Pope's troops, Rome was captured by Victor Emmanuel's soldiers, and thus the capital of Christianity was handed over to men who had no respect for religion of any kind, and who immediately commenced to put their theories into practice by exercising a fierce despotism over the Catholics of the city, and by levelling to the ground many of its proudest Christian memorials.

On the evening after the entry of Victor Emmanuel's troops into Rome, Paola, sad at heart, left St. Peter's, and subsequently gathered a bouquet of roses to lay at the feet of the Madonna. She had just twined the flowers round the pedestal in the niche, and was about to offer up her usual evening prayer to Our Lady, when she saw a group of men staggering down the laneway in her direction.

"Contadini!" shouted one of the group who seemed to have less control of his legs than any other of his companions, and who spoke in thick guttural accents, "contadini, see you that monument of superstition yonder!

Suppose we go and send that Madonna's statue shivering into atoms to the ground! *Vivva il re!* We are all soldiers of the King—are we not?—and we can do just as we please," he continued, looking stupidly at his friends, who did not appear so anxious as he was to outrage a memorial to the Mother of God.

No matter how anti-religious the Italian revolutionist may be, there is still a sentiment of respect for the Virgin lurking somewhere in one of the nooks or corners of his bleak and desolate heart.

The men turned pale on hearing the abominable suggestion of their comrade. Their fear was, however only momentary. The few score of bottles of white wine which they had emptied at a neighboring trattoria some short time previously, had mounted to their heads, inflaming their worst passions, and letting loose that insane and bigoted hatred of everything that reminded them of Christ and His Church.

Moreover, their chief, in the shape of the tempter, was still shouting in their ears:

"Are you cowards—you others? You who have driven Pio Nono's battalions from the walls of Rome—you who scattered the Papal Zouaves before you, as the tempestuous Tramontane scatters the chaff from the meadows—are you—are you, I say, going to let all your courage ooze out through the pores of your catiff heels at sighting a mere statue of clay? Ah! if Garibaldi could only see you now, how he would curse you for poltroons! Well, if you will not do the job, contadini my faith! I must only do it myself!"

His invective lashed them with all the stinging force of a knotted whip. Their eyes glared like those of wild animals in quest of their prey, their hands were clenched in anger, and their voices rang uproariously through the winding laneway:

"We are with you, Riccardo!"

"With you to the death, Riccardo!"

"Long live the King, and down with the Pope and his Church!"

Staggering up to the wall from which the statue, lit with an oil lamp and decked with flowers, overlooked the street, they indulged in a peal of brutal laughter prior to making an assault on the memorial.

The man called Riccardo, a tall, rough, herculean monster, drew the sword from its scabbard, exclaiming in mock-heroic accents:

"With this blade shall I slay her! Word of honor, I shall!"

"You shall not!" cried a shrill voice, that of a girl whose presence had owing to the denseness of the evening, escaped the attention of Riccardo and his friends. In the yellow, flickering light of the oil lamp that lay at the Madonna's feet they saw the lithe, slender form, the resolute face, and the gleaming dark eyes of the child of the Basilica. She stood with folded arms before him, proud and dignified as a daughter of the Vikings.

At sight of the determined girl they awoke from their semi-drunken stupor. Her audacity took their breath away.

Riccardo, however, was the first to speak.

"Who are you, woman?" he asked; "what right have you to interfere with the King's troops in their destruction of yonder statue? If you do not answer me at once this blade shall pierce your bosom."

He held the point of his sword to her breast as he spoke. Not a nerve moved in the girl's face. She looked at the big, burly soldier with the contempt of a noble woman who defies and despises any or every punishment she might suffer for the principles which she cherishes.

"Lower that sword, and then I will answer you!" she exclaimed; "otherwise you must only carry out your threat, if you are cowardly enough to do so."