

SUORA MARIANNA.

In a convent, old and quiet, near a little country town,
On a chestnut shaded hillside, to the river sloping down,
Dwelt a few of those good sisters who go out among the poor,
Who must labor late and early, and much weariness endure;
And the one who did in patience and in all good works excel
Was the Sister Marianna, she whose story now I tell.
She was ever kind and willing, for each heavy task prepared:
No one ever thought to spare her, and herself she never spared.
All unpraised and all unnoticed, bearing burdens not her own,
Yet she lived as rich and happy as a queen upon her throne!
She was rich, though few would think it; for God gave her grace to choose,
Not the world's deceitful riches, but the wealth one cannot lose.
There are many heap up treasure, but it is not every one
Who will take his treasure with him when his earthly life is done.

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But there came a time—poor sister!—when her rosy cheek grew pale,
And her eyes, with all their sunlight, seemed to smile as through a veil;
And her step was weak and heavy, as she trod the steep ascent,
Where through weeks of wintry weather to her loving work she went.
'Twas a footpath, lone and narrow, winding up among the trees,
And 'twas hard to trace in winter, when the slippery ground would freeze
And the snow fall thick above it, hiding every sign and mark;
But she went that way so often, she could climb it in the dark!
'Twas to nurse a poor young mother, by fierce malady assailed,
That she made the daily journey, and she never once had failed.
Now the short, sharp days were over, and the spring had just begun;
Every morn the light came sooner, and more strength was in the sun.
Many nights had she been watching, and with little rest by day,
For her heart was in the chamber where that helpless woman lay;
There the flame of life she cherished, when it almost ceased to burn,
Praying God to help and keep them till the husband should return.
'Twas the old and common story, such as all of us can hear,
If we care to, in the mountains, every day throughout the year!
She who languished, weak and wasting, in the garret chamber there,
Had been once as strong and happy as the wild birds in the air,
She had been a country beauty, for the boys to serenade;
And the poets sang about her, in the simple rhymes they made,
And with glowing words compared her to the lilies as they grew,
Or to stars, or budding roses, as their manner is to do.
Then the man who played at weddings with his ancient violin,
With his sad, impassioned singing, had contrived her heart to win;
And one brilliant April morning he had brought her home, a bride,
To his farm and low-built cottage on the mountain's terraced side.
'Twas a poor, rough home to look at, and from neighbors far away,
But with love and health and music there was much to make it gay.
They were happy, careless people, and they thought not to complain,
Though the door was cracked and broken, or the roof let in the rain:
They could pile the fire with branches, while the winter storms swept by:
For the rest, their life was mostly out beneath the open sky.
Time had come, and brought its changes—sunshine first, and then the shade,
Frost untimely chestnuts blighted. Sickness came and debts were made;
Fields were sold, alas, to pay them; yet their troubles did not cease,
And the poor man's heart was troubled thus to see his land decrease!
Fields were gone, and bread was wanting, for there now were children small;

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Much he loved them, much he labored— but he could not feed them all.
So he left them, heavy-hearted, and his fortune went to try
In the low Maremma country, where men gain or where they die,
With its soft and treacherous beauty, with its fever-laden air;
But as yet the fever spared him, and they hoped it yet would spare.
'Twas a long and cruel winter in the home he left behind;
Lonely felt the house without him, and the young wife moped and pined:
Still her children's love sustained her, till this sickness laid her low;
When good Sister Marianna came to nurse her, as you know.
Week on week had hope been waning, as more feeble still she grew:
Marianna tried, but vainly, every simple cure she knew.
Then the doctor gave up hoping, and his long attendance ceased:
'I can do no more,' he told her; 'you had better call the priest.
To her husband I have written; he will have the news to-day;
If he cares again to see her, he had best be on his way!'
Now the priest had done his office; at the open door he stands,
And he says to Marianna: 'I can leave her in your hands,—
I have other work that calls me: if to-night she chance to die,
You can say the prayers, good Sister, for her soul as well as I.'
So they left her, all unaided, in the house forlorn and sad,
Still to watch and think and labor with what failing strength she had.
There was none to share her burden, none to speak to, none to see—
Save a helpful boy of seven, and a restless one of three,
And their little dark-eyed sister (she was five and came between),
And a baby, born that winter, which the father had not seen.
Two days more! Her friend lay sleeping, and she watched beside the bed:
In her arms she rocked the baby, while the Latin prayers she said—
Prayers to help a soul departing—yet she never quite despaired!
Might not yet the Lord have pity, and that mother's life be spared?
'Twas so hard to see her going—such a mother, kind and dear!
There was ne'er another like her in the country far or near!
(So thought Sister Marianna.) Yet to murmur were a sin.
But her tears kept rising, rising, though she tried to hold them in,
Till one fell and lay there shining, on the head that she caressed,
Small and pretty, dark and downy, lying warm against her breast.
She was silent; something moved her that had neither place nor part
In the grave and stately cadence of the prayers she knew by heart.
Then she spoke, with eyes dilated, with her soul in every word.
As to one she saw before her—'Thou hast been a child, my Lord!
Thou hast lain as small and speechless as this infant on my knees;
Thou hast stretched towards Thy Mother little helpless hands like these:
Thou hast known the wants of children, then—Oh, listen to my plea,
For one moment, Lord, remember what Thy Mother was to Thee!
Think, when all was dark around Thee, how her love did Thee enfold;
How she tended, how she watched Thee; how she wrapped Thee from the cold!
How her gentle heart was beating, on that night of tears and strife,
When the cruel guards pursued Thee, when King Herod sought Thy life!
How her arms enclosed and hid Thee, through that midnight journey wild!
Oh, for love of Thine own Mother, save the mother of this child!'
Now she paused and waited breathless; for she seemed to know and feel
That the Lord was there, and listened to her passionate appeal.
Then she bowed her head, all trembling; but a light was in her eye,

For her soul heard the answer; that young mother would not die!
Yes, the prayer of faith had saved her! And a change began that day:
When she woke her breath was easy, and the pain had passed away.
So the day that dawned so sadly had a bright and hopeful close,
And a solemn, sweet thanksgiving from the sister's heart arose.
Now the night had closed around them, and a lonesome night it seemed!
For the sky was black and starless, and for hours the rain had streamed:
And the wind and rain together made a wild and mournful din,
As they beat on door and window, madly struggling to come in,
Marianna, faint and weary with the strain of many days,
On the broad, stone hearth was kneeling, while she set the fire ablaze,
For the poor lone soul she cared for would, ere morning, need to eat.
'Now, God help me,' said the sister, 'this night's labor to complete!'
'Twas a meal she knew would please her, which she lovingly prepared,
Of that best and chosen portion from the convent table spared,
Which she brought, as was her habit, with much other needed store.
In the worn old willow basket, standing near her on the floor,
On her work was much depending, so she planned to do her best;
And she set the earthen pitcher on the coals as in a nest,
With the embers laid around it; then she thought again, and cast
On the pile a few grey ashes, that it might not boil too fast.
But the touch of sleep was on her, she was dreaming while she planned,
And the wooden spoon kept falling from her limp and listless hand.
Then she roused her, struggling bravely with this languor, which she viewed
As a snare, a sore temptation, to be fought with and subdued.
But another fear assailed her—what if she should faint or fall?
And to-night the storm-swept cottage seems so far away from all!
How the fitful wind is moaning! And between the gusts that blow,
She can hear the torrent roaring, in the deep ravine below.
And her head is aching strangely, as it never did before:
'Good Lord, help me!' she is saying: 'this can last but little more!
O my blessed Lord and Master, only help me through the night—
Only keep my eyes from closing till they see the morning light!
For that mother and that baby do so weak and helpless lie,
And with only me to serve them—if I leave them, they may die!
She is better—yes, I know it, but a touch may turn the scale.
I can send for help to-morrow, but to-night I must not fail!'
'Twas in vain; for sleep had conquered, and the words she tried to say
First became a drowsy murmur, then grew faint and died away.
And she slept as sleep the weary, heedless how the night went on,
With her pitcher all untended, with her labor all undone;
On the wall her head reclining, in the chimney's empty space,
While the firelight flared and flickered on her pale and peaceful face.
Was her humble prayer unanswered? Oh, the Lord has many a way
That His children little think of, to send answers when they pray!
It was long she sat there sleeping—do you think her work was spoiled?
No, the fire-wood kept burning, and the pitcher gently boiled:
Ne'er a taint of smoke had touched it, nor one precious drop been spilt;
When she moved and looked around her, with a sudden sense of guilt.
But her eyes, when first they opened, saw a vision, strange and sweet,
For a little Child was standing on the hearth-stone at her feet.
And He seemed no earthly infant, for His robe was like the snow,

And a glory shone around Him that was not the firelight glow.
And Himself her work was doing! For He kept the fire alive,
And He watched the earthen pitcher, that no danger might arrive
To the simple meal, now ready, with the coals around it piled;
Then He turned His face toward her, and she knew the Holy Child.
'Twas her Lord who stood before her! And she did not shrink or start—
There was more of joy than wonder in her all-believing heart.
When her willing hands were weary, when her patient eyes were closed,
He had finished all she failed in, He had watched while she reposed.
Do you ask of His appearance? Human words are weak and cold;
'Tis enough to say she knew Him—that is all she ever told.
Yes, as you and I will know Him when that happy day shall come,
When, if we on earth have loved Him, He will bid us welcome home!
But with that one look he left her, and the vision all had passed,
(Though the peace it left within her to her dying hour would last!)
Storm had ceased, and wind was silent, there was no more sound of rain,
And the morning star was shining through the broken window pane,
Later, when the sun was rising, Marianna looked to see,
O'er the stretch of rain-washed country, what the day was like to be,
While the door she softly opened, letting in the morning breeze,
As it shook the drops by thousands from the wet and shining trees.
And she saw the sky like crystal, for the clouds had rolled away,
Though they lay along the valleys, in their folds of misty grey,
Or to mountain sides were clinging, tattered relics of the storm.
And among the trees below her she could see a moving form;
'Twas the husband home returning, yes, thank God! he came at last:
There was no one else would hasten up that mountain road so fast.
Now the drooping boughs concealed him, now he came in sight again;
All night long had he been walking in the darkness, in the rain;
Through the miles of ghostly forest, through the villages asleep,
He had borne his burden bravely, till he reached that hillside steep:
And as yet he seemed not weary, for his springing step was light,
But his face looked worn and haggard with the anguish of the night.
Now his limbs began to tremble, and he walked with labored breath,
For he saw his home before him, should he find there life or death?
How his heart grew faint within him as he neared the wished-for place!
One step more, his feet had gained it, they were standing face to face.
'God has helped us!' was her answer to the question in his eye;
And her smile of comfort told him that the danger had gone by.
It was morning now, fair morning! and the broken sunlight fell
Through the boughs that crossed above her, where the buds began to swell,
As adown the sloping pathway, that her feet so oft had pressed,
Went the Sister Marianna to her convent home to rest.
It was spring that breathed around her, for the winter strove no more,
And the snowdrifts all had vanished with the rain the night before.
Now a bee would flit beside her, as she lightly moved along;
Or a bird among the branches tried a few low notes of song.
But her heart had music sweeter than the bird-notes in her ears!
She was leaving joy behind her in that home of many tears:
Hope was there, and health returning; there were happy voice and smile,
For the father at his coming had brought plenty for awhile.
And she knew with Whom she left them, for herself His care had proved,
When her mortal eyes were opened, and she saw the Face she loved,
On that night of storm and trouble, when to help her He had come,
As He helped His own dear Mother in their humble earthly home.

FRANCESCA ALEXANDER.