

CHOICE LITERATURE.

THE OATH-KEEPER OF FORANO.

A TALE OF ITALY AND HER EVANGEL.

BY MRS. JULIA M'NAIR WRIGHT.

CHAPTER IV.—Continued.

The work that had been done in Nanni's soul pervaded all his life. He followed the motto he had explained to Jacopo: he was as tidy as industrious, and as kindly as tidy. The very day after Nanni reached home he rose betimes and swept the shop, washed the windows, scrubbed the brick floor, sorted the debris lying about, and set in order the day's work. In all this he was helped by Sandro. When the old father appeared he was affectionately brushed and dusted and given the best seat. Old Conti had become melancholy and careless from working alone; now three were busy in his shop, and one of them a superior workman.

"This looks like old times," said Conti, and his wrinkled hands moved briskly. The work long promised and often neglected began to be finished satisfactorily.

"I shall cut out a pair of shoes, a pair of slippers and a pair of boots," said Nanni, "and make them, as I have time, for sale. We will keep a bit of work in the window, just to shew the people what we can do for them."

But as days went by it was not merely companionship, increasing work, the sale of Nanni's boots, the neatness of the shop, which brought the peace to the old man's face, the light to his eye, the hopeful ring to his voice. His wife and Mariana shared these marks of changed feelings; a new life had come to them; their hearts God had touched; they heard and they believed. When Nanni Conti left his father's roof there were three members of an evangelical church in Barletta—the calzolaio, his wife and daughter. Not that there was any foundation of a church, or any formal profession of faith—the Evangel had only entered their souls, and they were living it.

Nanni Conti, feeling for his father's loneliness and weakness, was ready to remain with him; but to this the old man would not consent. Nanni's desire—in which his father united—was that he should spend his time travelling up and down the country, acting the part of a pedler, but making trade subservient to teaching the Gospel.

The old man, however, much desired that Sandro should remain with him. The boy had greatly improved, not only in reading and writing and accounts, but in shoemaking, under his uncle's instructions, and could be very useful to his grandfather.

Ser. Jacopa had told Nanni to write him, if there was occasion, and that he would get the public scribe, or letter-writer, to read the letter for him. This functionary still sits near the post-office of Italian towns, to read and write for the pupils of priests.

Nanni therefore wrote to Ser. Jacopo, and the calzolaio agreed to resign his son for the time being to the grandfather.

Nanni therefore left Sandro in Barletta when he himself set out for Florence to lay in his stock in trade, and especially some Gospels, tracts and hymns, which he should distribute as he had opportunity.

Sandro received from his uncle a New Testament, which he was to keep with care and read as his grandfather desired. Thus to the boy was committed the sole distribution of the Gospel in the whole town of Barletta. Sandro could read intelligibly the letter of the Evangel; but his grandparents and aunt could understand its spirit, and, taught of God, could teach the friends who, one by one, began to drop in of evenings to hear the wonderful good news.

Among these were a family named Fari—a man, his wife, a girl of sixteen, and a lad of Sandro's age. When old Conti talked to this man of his new light, he always received the same reply:

"It is good doctrine, but dangerous for us. Our priests will never let us hold it in peace, and we will come out losers if we oppose them."

Still the Fari family often came to hear Sandro's reading, and seemed to be especially friendly to all the Conti family.

On his way to Firenze Nanni stopped to see Ser. Jacopo and give him news of his son and parents. Ser. Jacopo and Lisa were very eager to hear more of the "little book" which Nanni carried, and the shoemaker questioned the young man very closely about the presence of God, the manner of serving Him, and the promises to the obedient. Nanni saw that his soul was troubled, and explaining to him the Gospel more fully than he had before ventured to do, left him, with a prayer in his heart, and a hint to some of his evangelical friends to stop betimes at the shop and teach as they had opportunity.

It was to Honor Maxwell, however, that Jacopo turned as to a safer counsellor. Italians have learned to be suspicious of each other; but Jacopo could trust both the wisdom and discretion of the young lady, and many were the errands he found for himself at the Palazzo Borgosio, and numerous were the fittings needful to the Signorina's new boots, while Jacopo spoke more of the Gospel than of his trade.

Meanwhile in the Palazzo Borgosio, Uncle Francini had painted Michael in various attitudes, and had lent him to his friend the sculptor as a model for an infant Jove, and for the juvenescence of the Archangel Michael (in which it would be very hard for most people to believe). Michael was learning rapidly to speak; his manners, now that training was added to their natural grace, so pleased Uncle Francini that he often proved "good family" from the manners, and the manners from "good family," in a manner not very satisfactory—to himself.

Easter had passed when Nanni returned from Barletta, and angered Ser. Jacopo by announcing that he was to travel up and down the country as a vender of small wares, and then mollified him by offering to sell for Jacopo many pairs of slippers and infants' shoes.

The spring grew into summer, and summer throve apace; and the Consul meanwhile had heard from Judith Lyons. David Lyons wrote, as well as his daughter, and while warmly thanking the Consul for his kindness to his child, he proceeded to press upon him the need of making inquiry for her son, whom she firmly believed to be living. True, the priests said the boy was dead, but so they had said that the mother was dead.

A controversy with priests is weary work; to get the truth from them is impossible. The Consul desired to avoid the inquiry; he tried in several letters to persuade the Lyons family that the child was dead, but they would not be persuaded. No; his mother's marriage had been ignored; his father's family rejected him; the Hebrew blood was up; a scion of the house of Israel was branded as illegitimate; his relatives must find him and repair the errors of unjust fortune to him. And this they were prepared to urge upon, not only the Consul, but the whole British Legation. They had money and to spare, and they would pour it out liberally for the attaining of their end. The Consul yielded to his fate. He tried to joke, and even told his senior clerk that "a man who falls among lions must needs be overpowered."

"Not if he is a Daniel," said the clerk.

The Consul was not a Daniel. He invited Father Zucchi to a supper, and made Mayonaise and Chianti his strong points.

When the Consul informed the priest that the Lyons family were disposed to press the question concerning the child, Father Zucchi did not know whether to be enraged at the ex-nun's presumption, or triumphant at the fulfilment of his own prophecy.

"I told you so," said Father Zucchi.

"I know you did," replied the Consul, mildly; "and you will consider that the fact that her own death was carefully certified to her parents has gone far to cause the mother to doubt the statement of the decease of her child."

"That little mistake about her death can be easily explained," said the priest; "and the death of the child can be incontrovertibly established."

"Then if your courtesy will grant me the proper references, we can doubtless finally conclude this business."

"Davvero!" cried the priest, "if women were allowed so many liberties here as in England we would be worse off than we are! What business has this woman with the child? I fancy children belong to their fathers; and if any one is to inquire about this *bambino* it should be the Foranos."

"Oh, you admit the marriage?" said the Consul briskly.

"By your pardon, excellenza; a civil marriage may do in your country, but my Church never admits it."

"Then you are shut up to assigning the mother the sole right to the child if he is not legitimate?"

"*Par troppo!* but a dead child is of little use. Come, excellenza, your courtesy, your Chianti, our cordiality must not be disturbed. The priest near whose church Nicole Forano lived during the last year of his life, who certified this woman's death—which, unfortunately, did not occur—and who can testify to the decease of the child, is the Father Innocenza, a most learned and agreeable young man, whom you will find at the chapel of the Sta. Maria Maggiore, about fifteen miles back among the hills. Let me give you a note to him, and you will understand all."

The Consul designed sending his senior clerk to Padre Innocenza; however, the weather was delightful, and cool for the season, the hill country was beautiful; the Consul had of late been busy—for a Consul, he loved horseback exercise; he determined to be his own messenger; therefore, one golden, fragrant morning he might have been seen pacing easily between vineyards and olive orchards, climbing gently by degrees far above the level of the shining sea, and reaching, before mid-day, the chapel of Santa Maria Maggiore, a namesake of the oldest church in Florence. Man had done little for the chapel and its surrounding village; nature had done everything. The chapel, a low, gray, blank-walled building, with an arched doorway and a small, square tower, stood on a bold hill, almost hidden in foliage, the road winding steeply down in front, and a yet sharper hill, chestnut-clothed, rising behind. The modest casette of the contadini clustered about. Lying in a wilderness of roses was the tiny villa where Judith and Nicole had spent one brief year of happiness. Higher up the slope, in a magnificent vineyard, stood a farm-house, inhabited by a *fattore* who farmed this estate. From the chapel porch one had an unbroken view for miles and miles: the Arno; the distant towers of Pisa, beauty's sanctuary; the blue line of the Carrara, the wide, unruddied expanse of the Mediterranean. The Consul had looked on many a lovely scene, but he drew his rein, forgot his errand, and believed that he had wandered within the borders of a Paradise.

The opening of a gate recalled him; a half-naked, brown urchin was offering him access to the Padre's garden, and Father Innocenza amazed at the appearance of a visitor, stood in his doorway.

Having read Father Zucchi's letter, Padre Innocenza seated his guest under a tree, and presently had placed before him a little table containing figs, the common wine of the country, and the dark, tough Italian bread. The wine, like bitter vinegar, and the black bread are not disagreeable, however, to those who are accustomed to them, and when Innocenza, waving his hand with grace, said, "Accept my humble refreshment; the contadini and their padre are poor; only the English are rich," the Consul was prepared to make a hearty refection. The Padre, with Father Zucchi's note in one hand, and a crust, which he dipped in wine, in the other, sat deeply musing: his square-set chin and firm mouth indicated a great strength of resolution; his keen eyes shewed rare quickness of apprehension; the noble development of the head gave promise of fine intellectual powers. Father Innocenza was thirty years old, and for twenty-five years he had been a pupil of the priests, who had kept his mind in swaddling-bands until he was fit to become one of themselves. And yet in spite of this dwarfing and repressing process, the young Padre was remarkably free from that, not merely animal, but markedly *swinish* appear-

ance, whereof Mrs. Browning took special notice in Italian priests. On our own part, we have often seen in the baptistry of Florence a young assistant, who not alone in form and countenance, but in the very tones of his voice, was more like a young porker in a surplice than anything else which the world contains. The Padre Innocenza was a type of a far nobler class, one of those sudden outbreaks in long priest-ridden generations of those high qualities, which once made Italians rulers of the world, and yet lie latent to be developed by more propitious circumstances into something of the pristine greatness of the race. And in Father Innocenza these better qualities, if he possessed them, were buried deep under lying, cruelty, hypocrisy, hatred, superstition, and under this superstrata of evil the god within, the conscience, buried so long ago that it had been quite forgotten, had begun strangely to stir and tremble like a seed bursting into life, for it had caught the distant warmth of a light that beamed, the softness of a dew that fell from heaven!

At last said Padre Innocenza, with a final glance at Father Zucchi's note, "You desire that I should explain the error concerning the death of an English woman, daughter of David Lyons, of London. May I inform your highness that Nicole Forano died of fever. This place is, at times, malarious—not a bit of it!—the times were evil; many were ill. It is not surprising that the young woman caught the infection; that her child also received it, and that they sickened nearly at the same hour. I had them conveyed to a convent hospital several miles from here. Many patients were brought there during that week—some foreigners—an English servant, a Swiss nurse, and so on. In the press of care the Sisters mistook the English servant for the patient I had sent them. She died; a few days after the child died. There was no mistake about that, for it was the only child in the hospital. The Sisters buried the babe in the grave of its supposed mother. Not until the young woman, who had been with Nicole Forano, recovered did the Sisters discover their mistake, and they spared her the recital of it. In her desolation she begged to take the veil, and for two years was content. Then I suppose memory faded, and her evil heart desired to go into the world and find a new lover; or, her maternal passions blighted in her babe's loss, her filial love revived greatly, and she longed for her parents. Had she confided this to the Superior all would have been well; instead, she took the violent scandalous method of public escape. That is her whole story; her child is dust long ago."

Well, it looked a reasonable, consistent story, and Innocenza told it impressively. The Consul conveyed it to David Lyons, but Judith was not satisfied. Mr. Lyons wrote again, stating that his daughter based her conviction of her son's life on a sign made her by Giulio Ravi, an old servant. Let Giulio Ravi be found and his testimony taken. The Consul inquired for Giulio for some time unsuccessfully, and then advertised for him. "Would Ser. Giulio Ravi, formerly attendant on Ser. Nicole Forano, kindly call at the British Consulate?" Newspapers were not frequent nor well studied at Villa Forano, but at last Giulio became aware of the oft-repeated advertisement. He ignored it carefully.

Not so the Marchese, that chevalier *sans reproche* he summoned Giulio to his presence.

"Are you aware, Giulio, that you are advertised for?"

"No, Signore, it is quite impossible!"

"But here is the advertisement—read it. True, there may be several of your name; but this means you, as the attendant of my lamented brother. Giulio, you must go there."

"Impossible, illustrissimo! I cannot spare time."

"It may be to your advantage, Giulio."

"Signore, I despise my advantage when I consider your vines."

"But I must consider for you, then, Giulio; you must go to the Consulate—go this week."

Giulio prudently kept out of sight of his master for several days, but did not leave the estate. Again the advertisement. Giulio was Giulio summoned.

"Giulio! here is this advertisement again; why have you not been to answer it?" demanded the Marchese, sternly.

"Cospetto, ten million pardons; I forgot it, Signore."

"There must be no more forgetting. The Foranos live without shadow on their names; you were born among us; you are in a measure a Forano; you cannot be advertised for as if you were ashamed to appear, as if you were hiding for a crime. Mind, I know that there is no error can be proved against you, and I am prepared to defend you from every charge; but answer this you must to-morrow, or I will go in your place the day following."

"Illustrissimo! You make too much of it; but ecco! I obey you. I go to-morrow at daybreak. Consider me gone!"

Thus was Giulio compelled to report at the Consulate, if he only made a pretence, that abominable advertisement would continue, and the Marchese would go himself. With the first yellow dawn Giulio was trotting northwest on a good horse, and by noon he entered the Consul's private room. Who doubts that Giulio made the best of himself—he had but last night observed the advertisement of the illustrious Signore, and hastened to obey. The Consul was brief. "You were with Ser. Nicole Forano in London, and knew of his marriage? You accompanied him on his return to Italy? You knew of the birth of his child? Of Ser. Nicole's death? Of Madame Forano's intention of returning to England?"

To all these queries Giulio could only reply, "Sì, Signore;" he had never told so many truths before.

"You last saw Madame Forano on the second day of Lent, in a boat on the bay, and you made her a gift that her child lived?"

"O ten million pardons, illustrissimo Signore, nothing of the kind!" exclaimed the ingenious Giulio.

"Do you deny seeing Madame Forano that day?"

"Signore, I did indeed see a Signora who called me by name. I leave it to your Excellenza if it were Madame Forano. I could not tell after so many years and changes."

* Small boy.

† "Only too clear!"

‡ Country people.

* The Italians use *excellenza*, *milord*, *illustrissimo*, etc., very freely.