

## VANNINI'S ARDENT LOVER.

(Continued.)

She told him, however, pretty nearly all that she heard, not been able to refrain from imparting such good news to all who cared to listen. Annunziata was in Paris—then in London—then in Paris again, she was studying hard, and getting on admirably. Her voice had been heard in several of the great private houses—the *milordi Inglesi* had been enchanted with her—in Paris she had sung before the Princess A., the Duc de B., and many others. Her appearance in public had been postponed, not from any incapacity on her part, but because Signor Sassi had wished to reserve for her a more brilliant triumph by withholding her from the public till the next London season, where she was to make her *debut* at the principal opera of that great city.

All this Luigi heard, and went away with a heavy heart. He greatly feared that the society of dukes and princes would turn the head of the simple peasant girl, and in none of her letters, so far as he knew, had she given any hint of a return to her home in the South.

But with November and the arrival of the cool season came great news. Luigi, on entering Marta's cottage on his usual errand one evening, was as astonished as he was delighted to be met with the intelligence that Annunziata was expected on a visit to her aunt, and that she would actually make her appearance on the following day. Luigi hardly slept a wink that night. He rose early in the morning, scrubbed himself carefully from head to foot—an operation which I am afraid it must be acknowledged that he did not go through every day—arrayed himself in his best clothes, and then sat in-doors doing nothing, till the hour which Marta had named as the probable time of her niece's arrival was past. With a great effort of will he succeeded in keeping within his own house half an hour longer—for he thought it would not perhaps be quite the thing to pay a lady a visit immediately on her reaching the end of a long journey. Then he set out on the familiar road, and found, to his surprise, that his heart was beating fast, and that his hands were damp and cold. "I never knew I was a coward before," thought poor Luigi, ruefully.

When he entered the well-known room there was such a buzzing in his ears and such a mist before his eyes that he scarcely knew where he was or what he was doing; nor did he, for a moment or two, recognize in the elegantly dressed young lady who was seated by the window the barefooted companion of his childhood. The young lady, however, recognized him, and, as she had no reason to feel embarrassed, was not slow in her greeting. She ran up to him, holding out both her hands, with the bright smile that he remembered so well.

"You dear, good Luigi!" she exclaimed, "I knew you would come as soon as you heard I was here. And how are you? and what have you been doing all these long, weary months? Has the fishing been good? Why have you put on your Sunday clothes, you foolish boy? I like you best in your every day dress. Do you think I have become such a fine lady that my own best friends must dress up when I come to see them? I have not got the clothes I used to wear, or I would put them on while I am here. *La Zia* has killed a fowl, and is gone out to cut salad for my supper—is it not silly of her? Now sit down there and tell me all the news from the beginning to the end. Where is your guitar? I thought you would bring it and and sing '*La Bella Sorrentina*' as you used to do. But perhaps you have found another bella Sorrentina now?"

Luigi was pleased, happy—perhaps, too, a little overpowered. He had hardly expected to be greeted so warmly. But he sat down, as he was bid, and presently began to talk in his deep, soft voice, answering the questions that were put to him in order.

"There is but one bella Sorrentina," he said, "and as for news, I do not think there is any to tell. You will have heard that old Giuseppe is dead of an apoplexy, and that Marco Naldi is betrothed to the daughter of Masucci, the blacksmith at Torre del Greco. For myself, I have done pretty well in the way of business, thanks be to the saints!—and that, I think, is all; except that the sun ceased to shine the day you left, signorina, and that we have had neither sunshine, nor flowers, nor song of birds since then till now."

Annunziata laughed. "Why a pretty compliment!" she said. "No one understands paying compliments as we Italians do. The French are too formal and forced; the Germans are too clumsy; and for the English, they never pay compliments at all. But you are not to call me '*signorina*,' if you please. Have you forgotten my name already?"

"I will call you Annunziata, if I may—I did not know whether you would like it. They paid you many compliments, then—those foreign counts and dukes?"

Annunziata burst into one of her old hearty laughs. "An enormous number!" she said. "Luigi, you are a true Italian! It is lucky you were not with me in Paris. If you get jealous when I mention that strangers have made pretty speeches to me, what would you have done if you had heard them made? I believe you would have been capable of thrusting your knife into some of those poor young men."

"That is quite possible," remarked Luigi, gloomily. "Annunziata," he resumed abruptly, after a short pause, "I have it on my mind to say something to you, and perhaps it had better be done at once!"

"Oh, no, dear Luigi—not if it is anything disagreeable! Do not say it—do not spoil my first day at home!"

"It is not disagreeable that I know of—only I suppose it will be of no use. I want you to say you will marry me some day—there!"

"Oh, but, Luigi, you know that cannot be."

"Cannot be? I do not know that it cannot be. Why should it not be?"

"Because I am, poor, too ignorant, too common for you? You did not always think so. But I suppose nothing less than a duke or a prince will suit you nowadays."

"Ah! now you want to quarrel with me; but I will not quarrel. Listen, Luigi, and try not to be so hard and unjust. My life is no longer my own to dispose of. Signor Sassi has given me money, clothes, teaching—everything, and I must go on the stage, if it were only to repay him. I do not say that I would give up my profession now if I could. I would not. But you must see that I cannot, and that it is cruel and absurd to ask me to do such a thing."

"But I do not ask you to do it now. I only ask you to give me hope. Only say that in two or three years you will be my wife, and I shall be the happiest man in all Italy. Annunziata, if you will not promise me that, I believe I shall go and drown myself!"

Annunziata burst into tears. "I cannot promise it—I cannot," she sobbed. "How can I tell whether I shall be free in two or three years to leave the stage? Very likely people will only then be beginning to listen to me. I don't want to marry anybody. Oh, dear! Oh, dear! I wish there was no such thing as marrying in the world!"

Luigi was very much moved and humiliated at her distress. He dropped on his knees before her, clasping his hands. "Forgive me, my dear, forgive me!" he exclaimed. "I was rough and rude; but you do not know how I have suffered. You may sing at the opera to the day of your death, if you will, if only you will give the right to go where you go, and live where you live. I need very little to live upon, as you know. I shall always be able to earn my own living, and no one need see me or hear of me but you. I could pass as your servant, if you wished it. God knows you could not have a more devoted one!"

Annunziata looked up, half smiling, through her tears. "As if I could let my husband occupy such a position as that! Believe me, dear Luigi, it is impossible. It is not your fault, nor mine; but our lives must be separate. I cannot come back to the old life here, nor could you be happy among the people I shall have to associate with."

"I know I am not fit to mix with your friends; but I can learn. I will take lessons in reading and writing—I will educate myself. Why should I not learn to be a gentleman, since you have become a lady?"

Annunziata saw a loophole of escape, and rushed at it. "If you really mean that, Luigi," she said, "if you could do that—but it will take a long time, you know—still, if you can learn to talk and behave as gentlemen do, so that you can associate with them without being unhappy—I might, in three years or so—but no! I will make no promises. It would be wrong to promise. Three years is such a long time, and so many things may happen—"

But this encouragement, slight and vague as it was, sufficed to transform the despondent Luigi into a radiant and exultant conqueror. He started to his feet, and paced to and fro in the little room, beaming with happiness. "Now I have something to live for!" he shouted. "Now I can face the whole world! And I will learn quick enough—oh, I am not such a stupid fellow as I look! Three years! What are three years? I would wait three centuries. Oh, Annunziata, dear Annunziata, what a happy day this is!"

And he stepped towards her, as if he would have taken her in his arms.

But she drew back. "Remember, I have promised nothing," she said. "And, Luigi, I make one condition—you must speak no more of this to me so long as I am here."

Luigi made no protest against the injustice of imposing conditions when no engagement had been entered into. He sighed and yielded; and so well did he keep his word that no further expression of love escaped his lips during the week that Annunziata spent in her native village. Some eloquent looks he did indulge in; but of these she either was, or affected to be, unconscious.

In spite of the restriction placed upon him, Luigi enjoyed to the full every hour of those glorified, but, alas! too swift-footed, seven days. Annunziata was so gracious, so kind, so merry, so like her old self; she seemed to take such pleasure in going over all their old haunts with him, and in sailing in his boat under the shadow of the cliffs that the orange trees and olives hung over, that the young fisherman felt himself in an earthly Paradise, and would gladly have consented to lead the same kind of life forever. Once, by dint of much pressing, he was induced to get his guitar out from its hiding-place, and sing "*La Bella Sorrentina*;" but he would not do so a second time. "You have learned music now and know that I have neither air nor voice," he said. And so the guitar was put away again.

The fatal day of departure came; and Annunziata, as she leaned back in the carriage, covering her face with her hands and sobbing as only an Italian woman can, almost wished that she never had been tempted to leave her tranquil home at Sorrento at all. It was a natural feeling; and doubtless it was equally natural that she should overcome it as soon as she was in the train flying northwards towards Signor Sassi and wealth and distinction, leaving Luigi, poverty, and peace behind.

She spent that winter at Milan, working harder than she had ever done yet, learning, practicing, and rehearsing over and over again, with the indefatigable Sassi to encourage her, and a host of critics, professional and amateur, to praise her and prophesy for her a glorious career. The manager of the English Opera came, in the course of the winter, to hear her, and expressed himself very strongly as to her improvement since she had left London. In the spring she was taken to England; and then, at last, the momentous day dawned on which, for the first time, she was to sing before a public audience.

The opera that had been chosen for her was Mozart's "*Flauto Magico*," and her role was that of the "*Queen of the Night*," a part which perhaps.