LEGENDS AND STORIES OF ITALY

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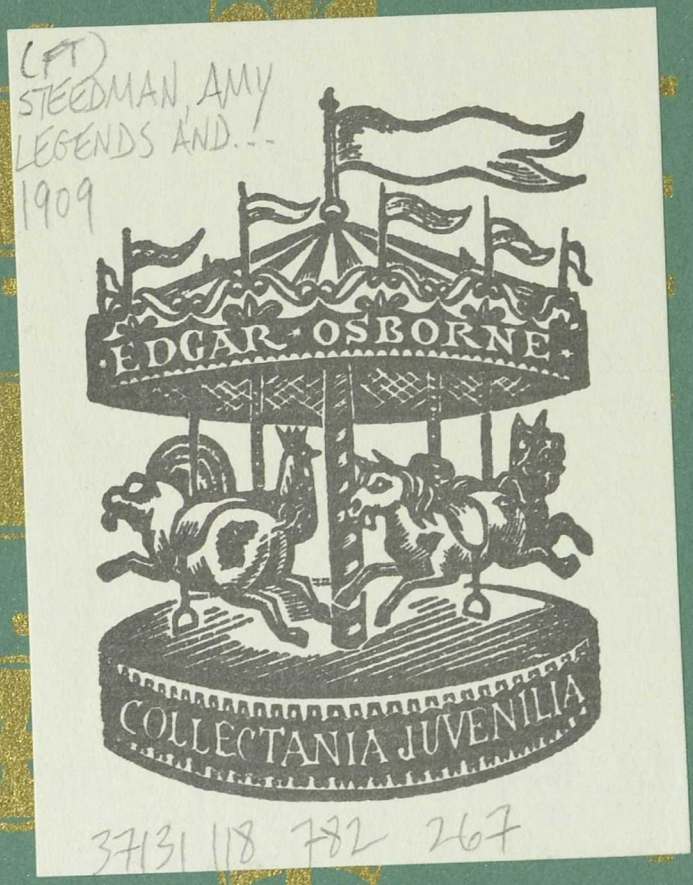
·PICTURES·BY·
KATHARINE·CAMERON.



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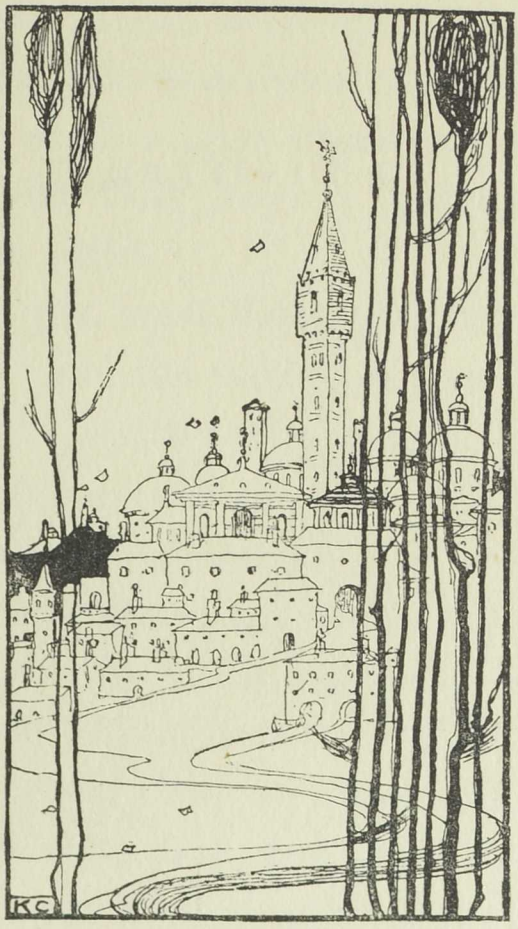
FOR CHILDREN

BY

AMY STEEDMAN

PICTURED BY

KATHARINE CAMERON



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TO WINIFRED

ABOUT THIS BOOK

'I WANT a hidden pearl story to-day,' said the child.

'What kind of a story is that?' asked the saint. She was a real saint, although every one could not see the golden halo that shone round her dear head.

'One of the old stories which you say are like the common shells that have a pearl hidden inside,' answered the child.

'Ah, then you must listen with your heart as well as your ears,' said the saint, 'or you will not find the pearl. Mother Earth takes care to hide away her gold and precious stones deep down in the earth. The diver, too, must seek in the depths of the sea before he gathers the rough shells in which the shining pearls lie hid. So it is with the hidden treasure which lies wrapped up in these old legends and stories. Those who would find it must seek carefully and patiently, for only thus can it be found. For just as the sweet green grass and common flowers cover the earth where treasure lies hid, just as the rough shell holds in its heart the soft, shining pearl, so these

stories may seem at first but simple, common tales, but those who look beneath will find at the heart of them a living truth more precious than gold or shining pearls.'

'I will listen carefully,' said the child, 'but I love even the rough shells of your pearl stories.'

AMY STEEDMAN.

FLORENCE, 1909.

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PART I

LEGENDS OF ITALY

THE LEGEND OF THE CHRISTMAS ROSE

It was the night on which our Blessed Lord was born, and the angels had brought their message of peace and goodwill to the shepherds upon the lonely hillside.

The glory of that heavenly vision had left the men awed and silent as they gathered round their fire. The news of the birth of the long looked for Infant King filled their hearts so full of wonder and of joy that for a while they could not speak. But ere long they roused themselves and in low tones began to talk of what they had seen and of all that the message of the angels meant. There was surely but one thing to be done—they must set out at once to seek the new-born King. So they began to plan how they might safely leave their sheep, and to pile the fire high with dry branches that the blaze might keep away all evil beasts.

So intent were they on their preparations, and so filled with the wonder of that night, that none of them gave a thought to the little child who lay in the warm shelter of a rock close to the fire. She had been helping her father tend the sheep all day, and had crept into the bed of dry leaves to rest, for she was very tired. The shepherds never noticed her as she lay in the shadow of the rock, and even if they had, they would

have deemed her far too young to understand the glorious vision of that starry night.

But the little maid had seen the opening of heaven's gates and heard the angels' message. With wondering eyes she had gazed upon those white-robed messengers of peace and listened to their words. There was much that she did not understand, but this at least she knew, that a little Baby had been born that night in the village close by, that He was the King of Heaven and had brought God's love and forgiveness to all the poor people upon earth.

Now as she lay in her warm corner watching the bright flames as they rose and fell, a little lamb nestling close at her feet for warmth, she had but one thought in her heart, How could she see this Bambino, this new-born King. Very anxiously she watched the shepherds and tried to hear what they were saying. She saw one lift a lamb in his arms, another take a home-made cheese from their little store, another a loaf of barley-bread. Then there was a movement away from the fire, and she saw they were preparing to set out down the hill. They were going to seek the King, and if she followed she would see Him too.

In an instant she had left her warm corner and was speeding after the men. Quickly and silently she crept along behind them, trying always to keep out of sight lest one of them should turn his head and bid her go home. But the shepherds were all too eager to think

of aught but the wonderful quest which lay before them, and they never thought of looking back, nor did they hear the patter of small bare feet upon the frozen ground.

It was a bitterly cold night. The moon shone down on ice-bound streams and fields white with hoar-frost. Not a sound was to be heard but the soft sighing of the wind passing gently through the bare branches of the trees. Not a light was to be seen in any of the huts they passed, for every one was fast asleep. But overhead there shone a wonderful star like a silver globe of light going before them as they went. So the little company passed on, and the child kept bravely up behind, although the ground was rough and hard and sorely hurt her bare feet. It was not easy to keep pace with the men's swift stride, but she never stopped to rest until she had entered the village street of Bethlehem, and the shepherds paused before a little shed over which the silver star was shining down.

Here they halted and talked together in low tones, while the child drew aside into the shadow of the house to watch what they would do.

She saw them take out from their wallets the things which they had brought, and realised for the first time that they were presents for the Infant King. There was the loaf of barley-bread, the home-made cheese, a handful of dried fruit and the fleece of a lamb, white and soft, fit to wrap around a baby's limbs this cold wintry night. There were other things besides, but all were

poor simple gifts, and the shepherds looked at the array half sadly.

'They make but a poor show,' said one with shame.

'They are indeed but simple offerings,' said another; 'but He will understand that it is our best we give with the true love of our hearts.'

'Ay, surely,' said a third, 'and poor though they be, they are better than nothing. It would be a sin indeed to come empty-handed to greet our King this night.'

Those words fell on the listening ears of the child, and when she heard them, all hope and joy died out of her heart. She had no gift to offer. She looked down at her little empty sun-browned hands and a great sob rose in her throat. If it were a sin to go in without a gift, then she must stay outside. She had come so far and longed so greatly to see the Infant King, and now it was all no use, the sight was not for her. Perhaps if she crept near the door she might peep in when it was opened and catch if it were only a glimpse, while she herself remained unseen.

The shepherds knocked at the door and reverently bared their heads. A low sweet voice bade them enter, and the door was opened. Pressing forward, the child tried to look in. There in the soft light she saw a fair young mother with head bent low, and behind her an ox and an ass feeding from a low manger. She tried to see the Bambino, but the forms of the kneeling shepherds

came between, and even as she looked, the door was shut and she was left outside.

Then it seemed as if her heart would break. She was so weary and so footsore, and all her trouble had been for nought. The King was so near, only a wall between Him and her, and yet she was not to see Him. She threw herself down on the hard gravel and buried her head in her arms, while the sobs came thick and fast and her tears made the very ground wet.

Presently the door opened and the shepherds came out with slow and reverent steps. They did not see her, for she had crept close to the wall, and when they started on their homeward way she did not move to follow them. She was too tired and sorrowful to care what became of her now.

But presently as she lay there, with the tears still dropping one by one, she started and looked closely at the ground. What were those pale-green shoots that were bursting up between the cracks of the stones? Now they were growing into glossy leaves. She held her breath with wonder, but true it was that wherever a tear had fallen and thawed the frozen earth, a bud had begun to swell. The pale-green shoots grew taller and taller, the glossy leaves unfolded and showed pink-tipped buds hanging between, which, as she gazed, opened into blossoms with petals as silver white as moonbeams upon the glistening snow.

A glad thought came into the child's sorrowful heart. Why, here was the very gift she was seeking, and she

yet might see the King. Eagerly she stretched out her hands and gathered the open blossoms and pink flushed buds, with one or two glossy leaves to place around them. Then she went close to the door and timidly ventured on a very little knock. She waited, scarcely daring to breathe, but no one answered, and so putting both hands against the door she pushed it a little way open.

The Madonna was sitting in the poor stable by the little bed of hay on which the Gesu Bambino slept. She was bending over Him and softly singing a lullaby, her eyes still shining with quiet joy over the thought of the wondrous tale told her by the simple shepherds. Suddenly a draught of cold air came sweeping in, and she turned her head to see who had opened the door. A little child stood there with flushed cheeks on which the tears were scarcely dry. Wistful eyes were raised to hers, and two small hands held out a bunch of snowy blossoms.

The Madonna needed no words to tell her what it meant. Her mother-heart understood at once what the little one wanted. Very gently she drew her in and led her to the little manger-bed and bade her lay her flowers there in the little, helpless hands of the new-born King. The child knelt and gazed at the sleeping Bambino. She forgot her tiredness and weary feet, she forgot her tears and disappointment, and she dimly felt that the happiness that filled her heart would live on and on for ever.


·THE·LEGEND·OF·THE·CHRISTMAS·ROSE·
K·C·

And now when winter-time comes and the days are dark and the nights are long, when the snow covers up all the sleeping flowers and the Christmas bells ring out, the white blossoms of the child's flowers appear above the cold, dark earth. We call them the Christmas roses now, in memory of the little one who had no other gift to offer that first Christmas morning, but the gift of her sorrowful tears.

THE MERCIFUL KNIGHT

In the long-ago days, when the clash of arms was often heard in the streets of Florence, and when the sons of the great families were brought up early to learn the use of sword and lance, men thought more of a strong arm and brave deeds than of kindness and compassion for the weak. It is true that the knights were gentle and courteous to fair ladies, and truth and honour were as dear to them as their swords, but they had learnt to repay evil for evil, never to forgive an injury, and to take vengeance into their own hands.

In such a time as this, then, the story of the Merciful Knight shines out like the steady gleam of a single bright star, set in a dark sky. The beauty of its clear light is the more precious because of the darkness around.

It was in one of the proudest of the great Florentine families that the two little brothers, Giovanni and Hugo Gualberto, were brought up. The boys were taught all that noble children were expected to learn in those days, especially how to be skilful and quick in the use of all knightly weapons, so that they might be trained to be brave knights and courageous soldiers.

But besides this they were taught the lessons of

their creed, for it was the duty of a Christian knight to hold in reverence all holy things. Together the two little brothers would kneel in the great dim church at Christmastide when the story of Bethlehem was pictured once more. The little waxen Bambino lying in the straw, guarded by the gentle mother and S. Joseph, taught the old lesson of humility and God's goodwill towards men. The ox and the ass too, that stood by the manger looking on with such wise eyes, would help them to remember that God's dumb creatures have also a share in His merciful kindness.

Then when Holy Week came round and all the city bells had ceased to ring, because it was Good Friday, the boys would kneel again beneath the crucifix and gaze with awe upon the sad scene of suffering. That was a difficult lesson to learn, why the King should suffer so at the hands of His servants. It was easier to understand the joy and brightness of Eastertide, when the bells rang out once more, and the world seemed full of joy because the King had triumphed over His enemies.

So the boys grew up, learning their lessons together, and loving each other with a deep and special love. They were the only children in the old grey palace, and shared with each other every joy and sorrow that came into their lives.

Then when all was sunshine and joy, when life was spreading out all its pleasures at the feet of the two young knights, suddenly the blow fell which seemed

to blot out for ever the light from Giovanni's life. His brother Hugo, setting out one morning full of life and gaiety, was brought back ere nightfall pierced through the heart by an enemy's dagger.

There had been, perhaps, some hot quarrel, but the boy had been cruelly done to death by treachery, and no more than that was known.

It seemed impossible to believe, but it was only too true. Hugo was dead, and a deep wail of grief went up to heaven and a wild cry for vengeance upon the murderer.

The old father seemed turned to stone in his grief. The broken-hearted mother wept until she could weep no more. And then both turned to Giovanni, their one hope, and bade him avenge his brother's cruel death.

It was little urging that Giovanni needed. His heart burned within him like a red-hot coal in his wrath. No softening tears quenched the light of vengeance that glowed in his eyes. With his strong right hand he grasped his sword, and looking up to heaven he vowed that he would rest not, night nor day, until he had killed the murderer of his brother. He would hunt him down, no matter where he was hid. Nothing should save him from the vengeance which was his due. So Giovanni set out on his search, and it seemed as if in a few hours the light-hearted boy was changed into a stern-faced man.

It was springtime, but to Giovanni all seasons

seemed alike. The sky was blue and the earth was bursting into flowers, but it might have been dead winter for all he knew. There was no sun in his sky. All was black before his eyes, lightened only by the glow of that one desire for vengeance. Day by day and hour by hour he searched, but no sign of his enemy could he find, and at last he turned wearily away from the city, and set out for the country-house, outside Florence, where his father and mother were waiting for news.

It was the evening of Good Friday, and a solemn stillness seemed to brood over the land. But Giovanni never noticed that the bells were silent and that there was no sound to tell the passing hours. Slowly he began to mount the steep hill which leads from the city gates to the church of San Miniato, which he must needs pass on his way home.

Half-way up the hill, a little road turns off sharply to the right, and there at the corner Giovanni suddenly came face to face with the man he was seeking, the enemy who had so cruelly killed his brother.

Quick as lightning Giovanni drew his sword, and a wild rush of joy filled his heart. Here was his enemy, given into his hand, alone and unarmed. There could be no escape. Vengeance had triumphed.

The wretched man saw too that all chance of escape was hopeless. Neither could he fight for his life, for he had no weapon. He was indeed given into the hand of the avenger. There was but one thing he

could do, and throwing himself upon his knees he pleaded for mercy.

'For the love of Christ,' he cried, 'I beseech thee to spare my life. He who on this day hung upon the Cross to save mankind, would He not have us show mercy to one another? For the love of Him, our Saviour, have mercy upon me!'

And as he spoke he spread out his arms in the form of a cross, and looked upwards beseechingly into the eyes of the avenging knight.

There was a moment's pause. The uplifted sword was stayed. A terrible struggle was going on in Giovanni's heart. Could he forgo the revenge for which he had thirsted so long? The man was a murderer and deserved punishment. But had not Christ upon the Cross prayed for forgiveness for His own murderers? The meaning of the old lesson, so hard to understand, became clear. This was the higher devoir. Was not He, the perfect Knight, the example of all true courage and knightliness?

The struggle was fierce, but a prayer rose from his heart for help to overcome, and slowly he lowered his sword. Then as he gazed at the trembling wretch at his feet, a great pity began to flow into his heart, and he bent down and raised the man from his knees, and embraced him in token of forgiveness. There they parted, and Giovanni, still trembling after the fierce struggle that had gone on in his heart, went slowly on his way up the steep hill, until he came to the church

door. Turning aside he went in, and found his way in the darkness to the high altar where a great crucifix hung. There he knelt and hid his face in his hands, and the great hot tears forced their way through his fingers and dropped on the marble floor.

He saw now that revenge was but a cruel black act, which no Christian knight should take into his own hands. He thought how often he had offended and grieved that gentle Master Who had hung so uncomplainingly upon the Cross to save his soul. And in the silence, the prayer rose to his lips: 'O Christ, Who hast taught me to be merciful to mine enemy, have mercy upon me and forgive me, as I have shown mercy to him.'

And surely the prayer was heard, for as the words fell upon the stillness, lo! the figure of the Christ above bent down, and in gracious answer kissed the bowed head of the Merciful Knight.

THE SAINT-MAID OF LUCCA

Up among the marble mountains of Carrara there are beautiful glens where many a little village clings to the side of the hills or nestles in the valley below. Lower down in these glens are fruitful vineyards and olive woods, while higher up the chestnuts and pine-trees grow, with little patches of cornfields between. But high and low there are always flowers springing up to make the world beautiful with their colours of purple, white, and gold.

It was in one of these little villages among the hills, nine miles north of the city of Lucca, that one of the fairest flowers in God's Garden blossomed long years ago. She was only a poor little peasant baby, born in a humble home, and she never became rich or grand or powerful. But the story of her life, laid by now and almost forgotten, has still the sweet perfume of those hidden flowers which never fade.

It was to a very poor home that little Zita came, poor at least as the world counts poverty. Her father and mother worked hard, but even then there was not always enough to eat, and in winter-time Zita was often cold and hungry. But there are other things that count more than gold, and the little home was rich

in goodness and kindness and honesty. There was not a better man in all the countryside than the father, Giovanni Lombardo, and the mother, who was called Buonissima (which in Italian means very good), early taught her little daughter all that was good and true.

The child was easily trained, for she was so sweet-tempered and obedient and thoughtful for others. She was quick and merry too, and very helpful in the house. It was only when she knelt in church that she grew quiet and dreamy. She loved to think of the Gesu Bambino who was born in just such a poor little place as theirs, and of the years He walked on earth. She pictured Him going from one little village to another, helping all the poor people she knew, and then on to the great city below where rich and powerful people lived, who still needed His help. The charm of that life seemed to fill her whole heart.

The little mountain maidens very quickly leave their childhood behind and learn to be helpful women, and Zita was only twelve years old when she began to think it was time she should try to earn her own living. Her father worked so hard and her mother too. She could not bear to think that she was doing nothing, and she prayed that the good God would send her some work to do.

'Little daughter,' said her mother that very day, 'thy father and I have found a place for thee with a noble family at Lucca. I know thou wilt do thy best

to be a good servant, for in serving thy master thou wilt be serving God.'

'I am ready to start at once,' said Zita cheerfully, 'and I will do my very best.'

There were not many preparations to make, and the little maid soon set out with her father to walk the nine miles that lay between them and the city of Lucca, where her work was waiting for her.

It was to the Casa Fantenelli that they were bound, and Zita thought herself most fortunate to be engaged to serve such a noble family. But it must have been very hard for the little maid, in spite of the twelve years which made her feel so grown-up and womanly, to keep back the tears as she said good-bye to her father. It felt so lonely to be left standing at the door of the Casa, in a strange town, among strange people.

But Zita seldom wasted much time thinking of herself. She was always looking for the work that was waiting to be done next, and had no thought to spare beyond the desire to do that well. So, although there was perhaps a mist of tears over her dark eyes as she watched her father turn and go down the street, she did not watch for long, but passed through the great door, anxious to begin work at once. She was but a child when she entered that service, but she never left it again, and served the family well and faithfully until her death.

Never had there been a more hard-working little

maid. No one knew how early she got up, and how much work she got through before the sun began to rise. There was only one favour she asked, and that was to be allowed to go to the early service at the church close by. And as she always came quickly home and worked twice as well when it was over, she was allowed to go each morning as she wished.

All the family grew fond of the cheerful, busy little maid who served them so faithfully, and as the years went by, everything was left in her hands, for they knew she could be trusted.

There was no waste in the kitchen now, for Zita had always a thought for the poor, and nothing was thrown away that could with care be used for them. Even her leisure time she spent in helping others, and many a sick and lonely person was cheered and fed by the little maid, who often went hungry herself that she might share her food with them.

It was indeed seldom that Zita neglected or forgot a duty, but one morning a strange thing happened. It was the day when the bread was to be baked, and the loaves should have been ready before Zita started for church. She could not think afterwards how she had forgotten, and it was only when she rose from her knees after the service that she suddenly remembered that she had left her work undone. In great distress she hurried home, and was quite breathless with running when she entered the kitchen.

But as she looked towards the table she stood quite

still and her eyes grew round with wonder. There lay a row of loaves, all evenly shaped and ready to be baked, with a white cloth laid over them to keep them from the dust. Could it possibly be her mistress who had come down and done her work ? But no, no one was stirring in the house, every one was fast asleep.

Then a great feeling of contentment filled the heart of the little maid. Something told her that it was God's good angels that had done this kindness. Their helpful hands had not scorned the lowly service, that they might help a little hard-working maid-servant while she prayed in church.

Zita had always loved her work, but the thought of the angels' help seemed to make the common duties of life beautiful in her eyes, and she felt more than ever that it was the service of the King.

That winter was a hard one for the poor. The cold was bitter and lasted long. Zita had given away all the warm clothes she had, and still she grieved for the poor souls who shivered in the keen wind and whom she could not help. And when Christmas morning dawned it was the coldest day of all. The air was thick with snow, and the icy wind swept every thought of warmth away. The people who were hurrying to church were wrapped up to their ears in their cloaks, and walked with their heads well down to escape the sting of the bitter mountain wind.

Zita as usual was ready to start, never giving a thought to the cold, though her dress was thin and

she had no cloak to cover her. But she had not gone many steps from the door when she heard her master's voice calling to her.

'Zita,' he said, 'it is madness to go out in such weather as this. Thou hast no cloak and thy garments are but thin. Be content and stay at home to-day.'

'O master!' she cried, and the tears started to her eyes, 'bid me do anything but that. It is the festa of the Christ-child, and I go to greet Him in His church.'

'Nay, but thou wilt be frozen,' said her master.

'The church is near,' said Zita pleadingly, 'and I shall scarce feel the cold.'

Her master smiled and bade her take her own way, but as he spoke he took off his own warm cloak and wrapped it round her shoulders.

'I will lend thee this,' he said, 'that it may keep thee warm whilst thou art in the church. But remember it is but lent and thou must bring it safely back to me.'

Never had Zita felt so warm and comfortable before. The thick soft cloak kept out the piercing cold and sent a glow of warmth down to her very toes. She said to herself that now she knew what the young birds must feel like when they creep under their mother's wing.

But with the warmth and comfort came another thought. This was the day when Christ was born in a poor bare stable where all had been cold and hard for

Him. No fine soft clothing had covered Him, and it seemed scarcely right that she, His servant, should fare so much better than her Master.

'Forgive me, Lord,' she prayed. 'Thou knowest I did not ask to wear this cloak, and I would gladly suffer far more than cold for Thy dear sake.'

She reached the church door just as her prayer was ended, and there she stopped for a moment to look with pity upon a poor beggar-man who stood leaning against the wall. He was very poor and thin, and he shivered as he stood there, as if half dead with cold. Zita's heart was filled with a great pity as she looked at him, and she went closer and gently touched his arm.

'Brother,' she said, 'art thou so very cold? See here, I will lend thee this soft warm cloak. I cannot give it thee, for it is not mine. But while we kneel together in church it shall keep thee warm, and afterwards thou shalt come with me and warm thyself at my kitchen fire.'

So Zita and the beggar-man knelt together through the service, and though the stones were cold on which the little maid knelt, she never missed the soft warmth of the fine cloak. Her heart was warm with her great love and the worship she had brought. But presently, the service ended, people began to stream out, and Zita turned to where the man had knelt beside her to bid him once more come home with her. But the beggar was gone. Up and down the church she went seeking him, but he was nowhere to be found. At last

'I·WILL·LEND·THEE·THIS·
SOFT·WARM·CLOAK.

the sacristan crossly bade her begone, for it was time to shut the doors. Poor Zita! she scarcely knew what to do.

'I had no right, even in my pity, to lend the cloak,' she sobbed. 'How can I face my master now?'

And with a heavy heart she turned at last and went slowly home.

Her face was white and she trembled with fear as she entered the house and stood silent before her master. He looked her over and his eyes grew stern.

'Where is the cloak I lent thee?' he asked. 'Did I not bid thee bring it back to me most carefully?'

His voice was loud and angry, for he was in a terrible rage, seeing that the cloak was gone. His angry words thundered out, and Zita stood silently weeping before him with bowed head.

But who was this that stood at her side and touched her arm so gently? She looked up. Could it indeed be the beggar-man? It certainly was her master's cloak which he placed in her hands, but round the face that smiled so kindly down on her there was a wondrous light, which seemed to lighten all the place. She tried to speak, but before the words would come he was gone.

'Who was the man?' the master asked in low, awed tones.

'I thought at first it was the poor beggar-man, to whom I lent thy cloak,' said Zita, 'for, see, he hath

brought it safely back. But when I saw his face, I knew it was the Angel of the Lord.'

The master was ashamed of the anger he had shown. How could he blame her now? From that day his words grew more gentle, and angry tones were seldom heard in the house. Indeed, it seemed as if all evil things, all unkind thoughts, and selfish deeds were banished at the presence of the faithful serving-maid.

It was one day in summer when the heat was so great that there seemed no air to breathe, that, as Zita went to draw water from the well, a poor pilgrim passed that way. His throat was parched and he was faint and weary, and seeing Zita, he stopped and begged for a draught of water to quench his thirst.

'I only wish that it was wine,' said Zita, for she knew that it was not wise in the great heat to drink that water.

But what could she do? She had nothing else to give him, and he was so thirsty. There was only one thing she could do to guard against the danger, and so she silently prayed the Lord that He would bless the water and not suffer it to hurt His poor servant.

The pilgrim smiled at her words.

'I, too, wish that it was wine,' he said, as he raised the cup to his lips.

Then he started and looked at the lowly servant-maid who had handed him the water.

'See, but it is wine,' he said, 'the most delicious

wine that I have ever tasted.' So Zita knew the Lord had heard her prayer.

The years went by and Zita grew old in the service of her master, working well and faithfully until the end, when the angels came and bore her gentle soul to heaven.

She was only a poor serving-maid, but the people of Lucca knew that a saint had lived among them, and they crowded to her funeral that they might kiss her hand and touch her garments. It was said too that a bright star shone above the house the day she died, but her pure life shone out more brightly than any star, and shines on even now with a soft radiance wherever her memory still lingers.

S. MARK AND THE FISHERMAN

NEAR the Palace of the Doges in Venice there is a wide marble bridge which is crossed by hundreds of busy feet all day long. But few of the people who pass that way ever notice a little marble picture, close to the pavement, tucked away into a corner of the bridge. It is the picture of a gentle-faced Madonna with her Baby, and underneath are two quaint-looking boats, with some words cut out in the marble.

Sometimes when a gondola goes gliding under the bridge some one with noticing eyes will see the little marble picture and ask the gondolier why it was put there.

'Signorina,' says the gondolier, 'there is a wonderful and true story about that little Madonna. I cannot tell you the story now because there is so much noise and confusion in these little canals. But some night when we are out on the great lagunes I will tell you why the Madonna and the boats are there.'

And this is the story which the gondolier tells under the stars, out on the calm, still water of the lagunes. The far-away lights of Venice shine like a circlet of diamonds with their long reflections in the calm waters. The world seems to our eyes like a

crystal globe, for who can tell where the sky begins and the water ends, or which are the most real, the stars overhead, or their twin reflections below ? The fireflies come out and breathe and vanish and glow again. A little flame of blue fire breaks the surface of the water as the oar dips down. There is magic in everything around, which well befits the telling of the old Venetian legend.

Long years ago there lived an old fisherman in Venice. He was an honest, hard-working old man, who had nothing in the world but his nets and his fishing-boat. But what more would you have ?

At night he tied up his boat under the wide, white bridge, and slept there snugly until the morning. It was as good as a marble palace to him.

Of course there were storms in winter, but his boat was always safe in the shelter of the bridge until one terrible night.

The winter was almost past, for it was in the month of February, when a storm burst over Venice, such as no one had ever seen before, and no one has ever seen since. For three days the storm raged, and the waters rose higher and higher until it seemed as if Venice would be swept from her foundations.

The old fisherman in his little boat was moored as usual under the bridge, but the mad swirl of the waters broke the moorings and he was swept out into the open, and only managed with great difficulty to reach the steps by the Riva of San Marco. There he landed

wet through and greatly fearing what would happen next. There was nothing to do but to sit down and wait patiently for the storm to cease, while the angry waves beat against his little boat, and the night grew darker and darker.

Presently, as he sat there alone, a man came down the steps and stood beside him. The old fisherman knew most of the Venetian people by sight, but he had never seen this man before.

'Fisherman,' said the stranger, 'wilt thou row me across the water to San Giorgio?'

Now the island on which San Giorgio stands was not far off, but between was a grey belt of raging waves lashed ever higher and higher by the fierce gathering storm.

The old fisherman pointed to the waves and then to his little boat.

'How can I row thee across?' he shouted, for he needs must shout to be heard above the roar of the wind; 'my boat would be dashed to pieces in a moment, and we would both be drowned.'

'I must reach San Giorgio to-night,' said the stranger, 'and I will pay thee generously.'

Well, seeing it was the will of heaven and hearing that he would be well paid, the old fisherman entered the boat with the stranger and managed to push off from the shore. What then was his amazement to find that it was quite easy to guide the boat. The tempest still raged around him, but the waves seemed

to spread themselves out in a smooth pathway before them.

It was not long, therefore, before they reached San Giorgio, and there the stranger landed, bidding the old fisherman wait for him.

Presently the stranger came out of the church again and with him came a young knight. He was straight as an arrow, upright as a dart, and his face was very good to look upon, it was so brave and beautiful.

Both the men entered the boat, and the stranger, turning to the fisherman, said quietly, 'Now, thou shalt row us over to San Niccolo di Lido.'

'But how is that possible?' cried the old fisherman, throwing out his hands. 'Even were it fair weather it would be impossible to row so far with but one oar.'

'It shall be possible for thee,' answered the stranger calmly, 'and remember thou shalt be paid generously.'

Well, the fisherman looked at the wide stretch of angry waters and then at the quiet face of the stranger, and took up his oar again.

'We shall certainly all be drowned,' he said. But he pushed off once more and set out in the direction of San Niccolo di Lido.

And just as it had happened before, the waves spread themselves out smoothly under the little boat, and the fisherman rowed without the slightest difficulty until they came to San Niccolo di Lido.

Then both the men got out, again bidding the fisherman wait for them.

This time they came back with an old man, dressed in the robes of a bishop. He had a kind, gentle face, and even to look at him comforted the heart of the frightened old fisherman.

'Now, row to the gates of the two castles,' said the stranger, when all three were safely in the boat.

'But that is the open sea,' said the fisherman, trembling with fear; 'we shall be certainly overwhelmed.'

'Row boldly,' said the stranger, 'and fear naught.'

The winds howled and the waves roared, and the tempest shrieked louder than ever. It seemed impossible that a little boat could live in such angry waters.

And lo! when they came to the gates of the sea, a terrible sight met the eyes of the old fisherman. Sweeping down upon them, full in front, was a huge ship or galley with all sails set. The ship was crowded in every corner with black demons whose shrieks rang even louder than the scream of the wind.

On and on they came, tearing through the waves, and the old fisherman fell on his knees and began to say his prayers, for he thought in another moment his boat would be swallowed up.

But the stranger and the knight and the old bishop rose to their feet, and with uplifted hands they calmly made the Sign of the Cross as the demon ship came near. Instantly the waters grew still, the wind

dropped, and the demon ship disappeared with a sound like the crack of thunder.

'Now row us back from whence we came,' said the stranger.

And the trembling old fisherman obeyed, wondering greatly what all this could mean. One thing he felt sure of. That demon ship had been on its way to overwhelm and destroy Venice, and he rejoiced to think his beloved city was now safe.

So back they went to San Niccolo di Lido, and there they left the old bishop; then on to San Giorgio, and there the brave knight silently landed.

But when the old fisherman rowed back to the Riva di San Marco, and the stranger was about to land, he began to bethink himself of the promised payment.

'Miracles are wonderful things,' he said to himself, 'but I want something more than miracles.'

So he stood with his hat in his hand, and asked the stranger to pay him as he had promised.

'Thou art right,' said the stranger. 'I must not forget thee. Thou shalt be well rewarded. Dost thou know for whom thou hast worked to-night? I am Saint Mark, the patron saint of this city. The young knight we took with us was the brave Saint George, and the bishop was none other than the good Saint Nicholas. Together we have saved Venice. For had it not been for us the demons would utterly have destroyed her. To-morrow thou shalt go to the

Doge and tell him all thou hast seen, and how Venice was saved with thy help, and he will reward thee.'

The old fisherman shook his head.

'And how will the Doge know that I speak the truth?' he asked. For though he held Saint Mark in great reverence, and felt how great an honour it was for the saint to talk with him, he still felt a little anxious about the payment.

Then Saint Mark drew a ring off his finger and handed it to the old fisherman.

'Take this ring,' he said, 'and show it to the Doge, and tell him I gave it to thee. Then should he still doubt thy word, bid him look in the treasury of San Marco, and he will find the ring is no longer there.'

So the old fisherman took the ring and thanked the Saint. And the next day he went as early as possible to the Doge and told him the whole story of what had happened, showing him the ring.

The Doge sent quickly to search in the treasury for the Saint's ring, which was always kept there, but they found it had disappeared. So they were sure that it was Saint Mark himself who had given it to the old fisherman. Whereupon there was a great thanksgiving service held in Venice, and a solemn procession went to each of the three churches, where the bones of the saints were enshrined.

The old fisherman was not only rewarded with gold, but a certain privilege was granted to him. He alone was allowed the right of selling the silver sand from

the shore of the Lido. So he grew richer than any fisherman in Venice, but in spite of his riches he always lived in his little boat under the white marble bridge. And when he died the city rulers ordered that little marble picture to be made, with the boats carved beneath it, in memory of the old fisherman who had helped to save Venice that terrible night from the vengeance of the demon crew.

DOMENICA

Not many miles outside the city of Florence, in the fertile valley of the Arno, there is a little village called Bagno a Ripoli. Here, many, many years ago, there lived in one of the poorest of the village houses a little girl called Domenica. Her father and mother were poor contadini or peasants, who worked in the fields all day, and the little Domenica early learned to take care of herself during the long hours she was left alone. Her mother knew it was not likely she would come to any harm, although she was but five years old, for she was a wise little maid and seldom got into any mischief. She would play about the house or go out to gather flowers in the fields when the sun was not too hot, and when she was hungry she knew where to get the slice of good black bread and handful of fruit which had been put aside for her dinner.

Domenica never thought about being lonely. Her head was always full of busy thoughts and plans. And then, too, the picture of the Madonna and Gesu Bambino always seemed to keep her company. It hung high up on the wall of the little room, and the lamp that hung before it threw a faint light upon the mother's face.

How Domenica wished that the picture hung lower down that she might see it better. Even when she climbed on the old wooden chair and stood on tiptoe, she could not see it clearly. The picture was blackened by smoke and age, and the light was so bad. She could see the sweet smile on the Madonna's face as she looked downwards, but the rest of the picture was dark, and Domenica could only just trace the faintest outline of the Holy Child.

But how she loved that picture! The Madonna and the Baby were her friends and companions all day long. Kneeling upon the wooden chair, she would tell all the thoughts that came into her head to the gentle mother, for she was never tired of listening, and always smiled so kindly and always understood.

Every morning the first thing Domenica loved to do was to wander out into the fields and gather flowers for her Madonna. There was a little shelf below the picture which she could just reach, and there, in an old cracked jug, she placed her offering. She was very particular which kind of flowers she gave to the Madonna, and if possible she always gathered a bunch of the small pink-tipped daisies. They were the flowers she loved best herself, and she was sure the Gesu Bambino must love them too, just as all babies did. They did not make a very grand show, for their stalks were often very short and they would not hold up their heads, but the Madonna knew the ways of

daisies and would not need any excuses made for their waywardness.

It was just the one drawback to Domenica's happiness that the picture should hang so high, and every morning she told the Madonna how hard it was for her.

'My Lady,' she said, looking up with folded hands, 'thou art holding the Gesu Bambino in thy arms I know, but I cannot see Him at all. Thou art so kind and good, and thou knowest how much I long to see His face. Wilt thou not some day bend down and show Him to me, if I am very good?'

Her face grew very wistful as she prayed this prayer over and over again. It almost seemed as if the Madonna never meant to show her the Baby, for she never came nearer, and the shadow over the Bambino never lifted.

Domenica had gathered her daisies as usual one morning, and was playing quietly by herself in the little room, when a gentle knock sounded at the door.

She trotted across the floor and opened the door a very little way, and then peeped out to see who was there. She knew that it was not wise to open the door too far and allow any stranger to come in. A poor, tired-looking woman was standing on the doorstep, and wrapped in her old shawl was a little bundle which Domenica was sure must be a baby.

'May I come in and rest awhile?' the woman asked, and she smiled at the little eager face peeping through

the half-open door. ‘ The sun is very hot and I cannot find shade in which to rest.’

‘ Come in, come in,’ said Domenica, opening the door quite wide. ‘ Come in and rest.’

She dragged forward the wooden chair and smiled a shy smile of welcome as the poor woman sat wearily down and began to undo the little bundle wrapped in her shawl. Domenica loved babies, and she stood watching with intense interest while the shawl was being unfolded. Then the woman spoke again.

‘ We have come a long weary way,’ she said, ‘ and have tasted nothing to-day. I would be very grateful for a mouthful of bread, and the baby too is hungry. For the love of the Gesu Bambino, little maid, give us something to eat.’

‘ You shall have my dinner,’ said Domenica joyfully. ‘ How glad I am that I have not eaten it yet.’

She ran to the cupboard and reached down the thick slice of black bread, and brought too the bunch of sweet white grapes, which had been set aside for her by her careful mother that morning.

‘ It is all I have,’ said Domenica ; ‘ but how I wish there was some milk for the bambino.’

‘ Thou hast given us all thy dinner, little one,’ said the woman very gently ; ‘ thou couldst not do more. But if I might have a drink of cool water from the well, it would do instead of milk.’

The copper water-pot was heavy to carry, but Domenica struggled bravely with it down the path to

the spring close by, and before very long came panting back with as much of the water as had not been spilt by the way. She put the pot down on the floor and then stood upright to take a long breath.

But what was it that had made the little room suddenly so bright, brighter even than the sunshine outside? Domenica gazed at the mother and child. A soft, bright light shone round the mother's head, and a still brighter light made a circle round the head of the sleeping baby. Domenica caught her breath almost with a sob of fear, but the mother stretched out her hand and drew the little one close to her knee.

'Dost thou not know me, little maid?' she asked.

And Domenica, looking up, was afraid no longer. It was her own Madonna who was looking down so kindly at her.

'I have come to grant thy prayer and to show thee my Baby,' said the gentle voice again. 'But first I had to prove if thou wert worthy. Thou hast given thine all for the love of the Gesu Bambino, and now thou shalt look upon His face.'

Then the Mother folded back the shawl, and Domenica, with hands clasped tight together, bent over and looked with all her heart in her eyes.

'He is more beautiful even than I thought He could be,' she whispered, 'but, my Lady, tell me why He is so small.'

'He is small because the love for Him in thy heart

is still but small,' said the Mother gently. 'As thy love grows bigger, He will grow too.'

Domenica knelt down and pressed closer to the Madonna's knee.

'Now that thou hast indeed come, thou wilt not take the Bambino away again,' she said. 'Or if thou must go, take me with thee that I may be always near Him.'

But the Madonna shook her head.

'I cannot take thee now,' she said, 'and I must not stay. But some day thou shalt see Him again. If the love grows ever greater in thy heart, if thou wilt learn to do His work here, to care for His little ones, the poor, the sick and the sorrowful, for His dear sake, then thou wilt always belong to Him, and by-and-bye, when He is ready, He will return and take thee home where thou wilt ever be near Him.'

The tears had gathered in Domenica's brown eyes, and for a moment everything looked dim. Then she quickly raised her hand to brush the tears away, that she might look once more on the face of the little sleeping Child.

But the room was dim again. There was no one sitting in the old wooden chair by which she knelt. High above her the lamp cast its light on the pictured Madonna, and the heavy shadow lay dark as ever over the outline of the Gesu Bambino.

Domenica knelt on there, gazing at the empty chair, the tears all dried, and her eyes shining like two stars.

She had seen the Christ-child, and that vision would never again fade from her heart.

In after years, when she told this wonderful story, people asked her reverently to tell them what He looked like as He lay upon His Mother's knee. But Domenica would only shake her head and say she could not tell. There were no earthly words that could describe the beauty of that face. But perhaps the look on her own face, and the wonderful light that came into her eyes when she spoke of the vision, told more than words could have done.

She grew to be a great saint, this little Domenica, and in the convent where she went to serve her Lord they called her 'The heavenly sister.' Then when her work on earth was done she saw once more the vision of the Lord she loved. Not this time did He come as a tiny, helpless Baby, but in the fulness of His strength, just as the love for Him had grown great in her heart. Did she know Him again? Ah! yes. The look that she had seen in the face of the Gesu Bambino had never faded from her memory, and she knew Him at once, knew that He had come to fulfil the promise made on that sunny morning years ago when He lay a helpless Baby in His Mother's arms—'He will return and take thee home where thou wilt ever be near Him.'


SHE·HAD·
SEEN·THE
CHRIST·
CHILD··
N·CAMERON

THE LEGEND OF THE CASTELLANO

THE Count of Castellano sat in the banqueting-hall of his castle thinking deeply. He was growing old. Very soon, he knew, his life must come to an end, and the thought of that end made him feel uneasy and afraid. All the wicked deeds he had committed seemed to rise up and stalk past him like grim ghosts, and they were so black and terrible that he hid his face and dared not look at them.

'We are the poor you have robbed,' cried a crowd of grey ghosts as they swept wailing by.

'We are the wicked passions you have allowed to dwell in your heart,' shrieked an evil-looking band.

'We are your lost days, lost opportunities, and all the good deeds you have left undone,' sighed a train of sorrowful spectres.

It was all quite true. He had riches and all that heart could wish, but what good had he ever done? How often had his gentle wife implored him to repent. But the more she urged him the worse he had become. He knew that the demons were rejoicing to think they had his soul in safe keeping.

The door of the banqueting-hall was cautiously opened and a servant looked in.

'Signor,' he said, 'a holy father, on his way from Rome, begs for hospitality to-night.'

'Let him come in,' said the Castellano, much to the surprise of the servant who had scarcely dared to bring the message.

The priest entered and the old Count received him courteously, and ordered meat and wine to be placed before him.

'I have done but few good deeds in my life,' he added; 'I can at least show hospitality to one of God's servants.'

Then he began to tell the priest all that he had been thinking about as he sat there alone.

The priest sighed deeply, and looked earnestly at the old man.

'What will be the use of all your gold, your splendid castle and your feasts and pleasures, when the demons come to carry off your soul?' he asked.

'I would it were not now too late to repent,' said the Castellano, gazing with troubled eyes at the earnest face of the holy father.

'It is never too late,' answered the priest. 'Make your confession now, and I will pray God to have mercy.'

But as the good father listened to the long list of black sins he was almost too horrified to speak.

'Indeed, you have but little time in which to repent for such a long, wicked, wasted life,' he said at length.

'But perhaps if you do penance for two whole years God may have mercy on your soul.'

The Count shook his head when he heard those words.

'How can I do penance for two years?' he asked, 'I who cannot pass one day without committing some sin? I will not begin by making a promise to God which I know it will be impossible for me to keep.'

'Well, your sins are certainly grievous,' said the priest, 'but perhaps the good God will be satisfied with a year's penance.'

'Neither is that possible,' answered the Count. 'A year would be a long, long trial. My penitence would not last half that time. No, it is no use giving me a month or even a week. I am not strong enough to trust myself. I can but promise to do penance for one whole night, and if that is no use, I must give up all hope of pardon.'

Then the priest saw that the Count was truly in earnest, and he longed that his soul should be saved.

'God alone can give true penitence,' he said, 'and with Him time is as nothing. Go, then, to the little ruined chapel which I passed on my way hither, and spend the night in prayer before the altar. But see that nothing draws you away or interferes with your prayers. For this one night you must belong only to God.'

The Count rose with a lightened heart and prepared

to set out for the little chapel. He was strong in his purpose to pray for pardon for his sins.

But as he knelt in the chapel saying the prayers which had not passed his lips since he was a little child, the demons, who were never far off from him, gnashed their teeth with rage and anger.

'What is all this?' cried the chief diavolo. 'Here we have worked for years and waited for this man's soul, and now at last he seeks to cheat us of what surely is our own possession.'

'Oh! leave him to me,' laughed a little demon; 'I have always known how to tempt him, and I will not fail now.'

'Be off then!' said the chief diavolo, 'and do not rest until you have done your work.'

So the little demon made haste, and took the form of the Castellano's sister and came hurrying into the chapel where the Count knelt before the altar.

'Brother, brother, help, help!' cried the demon. 'Our castle is surrounded by enemies. They have spoiled all your lands. Your servants have fled, and your wife and daughters are helpless in the castle.'

'My sister,' answered the Castellano, 'I cannot come. I dare not break my word to God. I have promised to spend this night in penitence in the chapel, and here I must stay.'

'But, brother,' cried the demon, 'do you not care for your wife and children? Do you not mind that

your castle will soon be in the hands of your enemy and all your riches gone ? '

' My gold and silver, my castle and lands are nothing compared to my honour,' answered the Count, ' and as to my wife and children, God will protect them.'

The demon saw it was no use, and returned to his master very sad and crestfallen.

' I can do nothing with the man,' he said gloomily.

' You are but a useless little diavolo,' said his master, ' and I shall no longer send you on earth to do my work.'

' Then let me try,' said another demon eagerly; ' I have great cunning which never fails.'

So the cunning demon made it appear as if a great fire was raging in the castle, and the glare of the flames lighted up the windows of the little chapel. Then he called loudly to the Castellano to escape, telling him that the castle was on fire and the flames were spreading.

But the Count only answered quietly, ' I am in God's hands and He will allow no harm to come near me.'

Then the red glare died away and the Castellano went on with his prayers.

The demon looked on in despair. Soon it would be morning, and when day broke the Count's soul would be saved unless he could be forced before then to leave the chapel.

So as a last hope the demon took the form of a

priest and came solemnly into the chapel. A little diavolo walked in front of him, pretending to be a server and swinging his censer of incense.

The demon touched the kneeling Count on the shoulder.

'It is time for the morning Mass,' he said, 'and you are too great a sinner to stay here. Begone ere I begin the service.'

'I know I have been a great sinner,' said the Castellano, 'but since God has promised to pardon me, you need not seek to thrust me out.'

At these words the whole crowd of listening demons gave a howl of rage, and rushed in upon the Count to drag him out of the chapel by force.

But what was that faint light in the east, and what sound was that which stilled the demons' cries? Surely it was dawn and the little chapel bell was ringing out the Ave Maria. The day had come, and with the darkness the whole evil crew must flee before the light.

So the Castellano had saved his soul, but there he knelt on silently, never moving. And when, later on, the real priest entered, he found the Count still kneeling there with a peaceful, happy smile upon his face. The pardon he had prayed for had been granted, and he would never more fall into the hands of the evil demons, for the angels had carried his soul safely home to God.

STELLA MARIS

BLUE and still lie the waters of the Bay of Naples, blue as the sky above, with only a dainty ripple on their surface, where the summer wind comes wooing from the land and the water trembles at its kiss. The little fishing-boats that busily flit to and fro look like gay butterflies enjoying life in the sunshine and warmth. But the waters are not always quiet and blue. Sudden storms sweep down and change the smiling bay into a black swirl of angry waves, rising mountains high, and hissing under the lash of the furious wind. Alas for the little fishing-boats then when night comes on, and there is no friendly light to guide them to home and shelter, nothing but the angry glow of the fiery mountain, shining red against the stormy sky.

Then it is that the fishermen, huddled together in fear, and driven before the lashing wind, send up a prayer to their Madonna Stella Maris, star of the sea. Her picture it is which hangs in the convent church high on the hill above, and they feel sure she will protect them in their danger and guide them safely home. Has she not always been their friend? How could one doubt that, knowing the old story of her wonderful appearing?

Long years ago, before the monastery was built, the hillside was a waste and desolate place. It was said that evil spirits had their dwelling there, dwarfs and mountain gnomes, and imps that worked mischief to peaceable folk. No one dared pass by that way, especially after dark, and yet, strange to say, night after night a beacon fire was lighted on that wild hillside.

It could not be the work of evil spirits, neither could it have been lighted by human hands, but every night the light shone up, and shot steadily over the bay, warning the boats to steer clear of the peril of the rocks below.

The grateful sailors, steering their course by the friendly light, thanked heaven for the kindly aid, but no one dared go near the spot to see what the light might be.

Then it happened that one dark night, when a company of fishermen were drawing in their nets, full of the silvery fish which shone in the light of the friendly beacon, one of the men, looking up, gave a great cry of fear and astonishment.

There, upon the path of light which shone from the hill over the dark waters of the bay, came a wondrous vision. It was the Madonna herself, clothed in shining garments of light, coming towards their little boat. Her eyes looked kindly upon them with the mother-love that ever fills her heart, and she smiled as she drew near.

'My children,' she said, 'you knew not that the guiding light from yonder hill was lighted by me. A mother must always care for her children in peril. But to-night I come to bid you do me a service. Where that light burns nightly on the wild hillside there is an old well, and there hidden away is an image of myself. Go, therefore, to the bishop and bid him search, and place it in a safe spot where my children may do it honour.'

Then the light faded, and the Madonna vanished from their sight.

The fishermen gazed at one another in trembling fear.

'Has the spell been cast upon us?' they asked. 'What can this vision of the night mean?' and they were too frightened to speak of it to any one, and never once thought of going to the bishop, as the Madonna had directed.

But the next night again the vision came to them, and again they were told what they must do, but still they doubted and did nothing.

Then on the third night the Madonna appeared, not as the gentle mother, but as the Queen of Heaven, sternly reproving them for their disobedience.

This time they did not dare to disobey the vision, but when morning broke they left the boat and journeyed with all speed to the good bishop.

'But who will believe our story?' asked one, as they climbed the steep road and pushed on their way.

'Even if the bishop receives us he will think we are mad when we tell our tale.'

'Better that than risk once more the frown of the Madonna,' said another.

'We have only to do as she bade us, and leave the rest,' said a third.

But when they reached the bishop's house it almost seemed as if they had been expected. No one asked what was their business there, but they were treated with great courtesy and taken at once into the good bishop's presence.

'Ye are welcome,' said the bishop, when the three rough, poorly clad fishermen had knelt to receive his blessing. 'Tell me your errand quickly. It has been shown to me in a dream that ye would come as bearers of a heavenly message, so speak without fear.'

Then the fishermen, one by one, took up the tale and told of the lonely watch on the dark waters, of the friendly beacon which shone from the deserted hill, and of the wondrous vision that had come to them over the silent sea.

'Never before have our eyes beheld such beauty,' they said. 'Her garments were of woven light and her eyes like the stars. Her voice sounded in our ears as the music of the distant church bells whispering over the sea to welcome us home when our nightly toil is o'er. At first we thought it must only be a dream, but for three nights now we have seen the vision, and dare no longer disobey her command.'


STELLA MARIS
STAR OF THE SEA

The bishop asked no more, but at once made ready to set out. He bade his priests robe themselves, and with the fishermen as guides the procession started. Chanting the psalms as they went, they wended their way over the rough road and climbed the wild, deserted hill, until they came to the spot from whence the beacon had shone, night after night. There, as the Madonna had said, they found an old ruined well, and hidden away at the bottom was the beautiful picture of the Madonna, which now hangs in the convent chapel.

This is the tale of long, long ago which the fishermen repeat to each other to-day. Never again has the Madonna been seen in the lonely night watches, coming upon the golden path across the dark waters. But the fishermen look up to the light shining from the monastery on the hill, where her picture still hangs, and the thought of her beautiful face comforts and cheers them in their peril. 'Our lady, Star of the Sea,' they still call her, in memory of the friendly beacon that was once lighted there to guide poor mariners home.

THE ANGEL AND THE DIAVOLO

'WHERE shall we go to-day?' asked the Saint.

'Oh, take me to some place that has a story,' said the child. 'I want a new story to-day.'

It was early morning in Venice, and the Saint and the child came hand in hand out of the dim old church into the pearly light of the great square. Every morning they wandered together through the narrow byways, before the bustle and business of the day began. Sometimes they went to watch the sunrise over the lagunes, sometimes they found their way to the old mercato, where the heavily laden boats brought in their heaped-up treasures of yellow pumpkins, purple artichokes, pale-green salads, shining piles of crimson cherries, and little, long-shaped baskets with strawberries peeping out of the narrow necks. But wherever they went they would find some curious tale, or legend, which the Saint would tell to the listening child.

Slowly now they turned their steps out of the great square, underneath the dim archway of the Clock Tower, into the narrow street beyond. They always walked slowly, there was so much to see, and those who hurry, miss much in Venice. Then at last, after

many bewildering turns leading over as many little bridges, they came out opposite an old palace, which stood at the corner of the two broad waterways. Every window, every niche was reflected clear below as if in a mirror, and the white marble of the sculptured figure which was let into the house above had its twin in the green water below.

'Here is our story,' said the Saint. 'Tell me, child, what do you see carved above that window?'

'It is a beautiful angel,' said the child, looking across at the marble figure with its clasped hands and peacefully folded wings. Then she looked up into the sweet face of the Saint and waited eagerly for the story.

The Saint smiled down on the listening child. 'It is only a strange old legend,' she said, 'which most people have forgotten. But I will tell you why the angel is there.

'Many, many years ago, a clever lawyer of Venice lived in that house. He was known all over the city as the wisest and most learned of men, and was very rich and powerful. But although men praised him for his wisdom, they would always end by shaking their heads and lowering their voices when they spoke of him. For it was said there was no man as wicked as he in all the countryside. Strange tales were told of wild and wicked deeds done in the old house, and gradually one by one his servants left him, frightened by his evil ways. At last the lawyer was left all alone in the great house, and never a friend came nigh him.

'"He has sold his soul to the Evil One," said the citizens in whispers one to another. And even as they spoke they started and looked round swiftly over their shoulders, half afraid lest the clever lawyer or the Diavolo might be standing there listening to their words.

'Now it was very uncomfortable to live in a great house all alone, and the lawyer did not like it. There was no one to wait on him or prepare his meals, and he began to think it would be better to mend his ways, and persuade some of the old servants to come back.

'Just as this thought entered his head one evening, the door of the room where he was sitting was pushed open. With a bound there sprang into the room a large furry animal, which stood grinning and chattering before him in the most friendly manner. It was a very large black monkey, as tall as a child and as strong as a man, and as it gambolled about and uttered its queer chattering cries, the lawyer laughed more heartily than he had done for years.

'"Come," he said, "here is a merry companion arrived just when he is most needed."

'The monkey grinned as if he understood his welcome and began to make himself quite at home. In a short time he learned to do anything which the lawyer taught him. His hands were so deft and his head so intelligent that there seemed no end to his usefulness. He could sweep the rooms, light the fires, cook the food, and indeed do more than all the trained servants

had ever done. Wherever the lawyer went he boasted of his wonderful monkey, and was never tired of telling stories of its clever and amusing ways.

'But the fact was that this monkey was none other than the Diavolo himself. He had made up his mind to come and live with the lawyer that he might be quite sure of securing his soul. For there was still some good in the lawyer, and the Evil One thought it wiser to be always near him, ready to stamp it out.

'Now, although the lawyer had often and often grieved his good angel and driven him away, still the angel watched over him from afar, and longed to help and protect him. Time after time he had tried and failed, until it seemed quite hopeless. But now when he saw with sad, grieved eyes how the Evil One, in the form of the monkey, was always present, he made up his mind to try once more.

'So one evening the good angel took the form of one of the lawyer's friends, and went to call at the old lonely house.

'The lawyer was somewhat surprised when the visitor came in. It was many a long day since any friend had cared to cross his door. Strangely enough, since the monkey had come, people seemed to avoid him more than ever.

'"I hear you have a wonderful servant," said the angel visitor, after they had talked together for a little. "I would like to hear all about him."

'Nothing pleased the lawyer more than to talk of his

strange pet, and he began at once to tell of his clever ways.

'"He would seem to be a most wonderful animal," said the visitor. "I would greatly like to see him."

'"There is nothing easier," said the lawyer in high good-humour. "I will call him at once."

'And going to the door he shouted, "Babbuino, Babbuino, come hither, thou rascal, and show thyself."

'But the Diavolo knew all too well who it was who had come in the guise of a friend to sup with his master. Instead of running as usual at the lawyer's call, he had fled away with all haste, and hidden himself in the furthest corner of the old house.

'"Babbuino, Babbuino!" called the lawyer again. Then he began to grow angry, and stamped his foot in a great rage.

'"Let us go and look for him," said the angel quietly.

'So together the lawyer and his guest went and searched each room carefully, but no signs of the missing monkey could they find. At last, however, in a little dark cupboard they saw a crouching form, and the angel went forward to touch it.

'But as soon as the Diavolo caught sight of the angel he gave a great cry and sprang headlong against the outer wall of the room. At his touch the wall gave way, stones rattled down, and a great hole was made. Then, in the midst of a cloud of smoke and dust, the Evil One disappeared.

'The lawyer looked on in terror and amazement, and

then turned to his visitor. But the visitor too was gone, and instead there stood an angel looking at him with sad, pleading eyes.

'"I have returned once more to try to save thee," he said; "see that this last time be not in vain."

'Then he spread his great white wings, and he too flew out into the starry night.

'The lawyer trembled from head to foot, and fell upon his knees, thanking heaven for his deliverance from the wiles of the Evil One. And as he grew calmer he prayed earnestly that his good angel might never leave him, but evermore might guard and bless him.

'So happy times returned to the old corner palace. Servants and friends came back to the lawyer, and evil whisperings ceased.

'The hole in the wall was built up with new stones, but lest it should be forgotten the lawyer caused the figure of an angel to be carved in white marble and placed over the spot.

'There through all the years the figure of the angel has stood with folded hands and peaceful, happy face. There it still stands to-day, silently teaching the old lesson that good shall triumph in the end, telling the happy tale "of evil conquered and wrong made right."'

LITTLE LEGENDS OF THE MADONNA

In the lonely country places of Italy, where the people live a struggling life of toil, where comforts are few and hardships are many, the poor often tell to each other the stories of our Blessed Lord and the Madonna. These stories never fail to bring comfort and cheer to their weary hearts, for they love to remember that the Lord was just as poor as they, and that His dear Mother knew what it meant to toil and care for her Child. It seems to lighten their burdens and make them more content, when they think that the King of Heaven once shared their lot.

And sometimes when the children complain that they have only lupin beans to eat, and say that lupins leave them just as hungry as they were before, the mother will tell them this old legend, which the children never tire of hearing.

We all know how the Gesu Bambino was born in a poor stable with no royal servants to guard Him, although He was King of Heaven. But we must remember, that He had something better than royal servants. He had His own dear Mother, and she was the best guard of all. She needed to be brave and watchful, for very soon danger drew near. The wicked King of

that country sent out his cruel soldiers to kill the new-born Child, and the guards were soon on their way to Bethlehem to do his bidding. Then the Madonna wrapped the precious Bambino in her shawl, and set out swiftly and secretly by night, to save Him from King Herod's fury.

Early in the morning, when the faint light was beginning to dawn over the hills, and the olive-trees showed silver in the morning dew, the poor Madonna sat down to rest by the wayside. She was very weary, for she had walked all night. Her heart too was heavy with fear, though her precious burden felt light.

So far she had escaped, but even now as she rested she heard the tramp of feet close by, and saw a company of soldiers wending their way down the long white road. It was useless to think of hiding, for they must already have seen her, and it was useless, too, to think of flight, for the men would so easily overtake her. There was nothing to do but to sit still quietly and pray to the good God for help. So she did not move or start, but gently and carefully she laid the Bambino in her lap and covered Him with her apron, tying the corners together to hide what lay there.

'Sleep, Little One, sleep,' she whispered. 'Thy Mother will see that no harm comes near Thee. Only sleep.'

Then up came the guards heated and angry with

their fruitless search. Very roughly they spoke to her.

'Hast thou seen a woman and child pass by this way?' they asked. 'Answer truly or it will be the worse for thee.'

'I have seen no one pass by,' said the Madonna, lifting her gentle eyes to their scowling faces.

'What hast thou got in thy apron?' shouted one of the men.

'Gran' Signor,' she answered, and by the way she said those words it sounded as if she meant that her apron was full of grain. But what she truly said was 'the great lord.' Then one of the soldiers rudely caught at a corner of her apron and shook it. And lo! a stream of golden grain trickled out.

The men seemed satisfied then that this was but a poor peasant woman who could tell them nothing, so they turned back grumbling to seek some other road.

The Madonna bent her head over the sleeping Child and thanked God for the miracle of the grain, and then she once more lifted Him in her arms and set out on her way. But she had not gone far before she again heard the tramp of soldiers' feet, and turning aside she hurried through a field of lupins. The lupin beans were dry and ready to be cut, and their tall stalks hid her as she passed. She stepped as lightly as she could and held her breath as she sped on noiselessly, holding her Treasure in her arms. But these lupin beans were

senseless things, and instead of keeping very still and quiet as she passed, they rattled so loudly and made such a busy, bustling noise that it was a wonder the soldiers did not hear.

The Madonna stopped, trembling, to listen, but the tramp of feet grew fainter, and she knew that the pursuers had passed on and the danger was over for the time. Then she turned back to the field of lupins and shook her head over the noisy beans.

'Could ye not be silent when the Gesu Bambino was in danger?' she said. 'Henceforth when men eat of you, ye shall not satisfy their hunger, and this shall be your punishment.'

So that is why the lupin beans leave ever a hungry, empty feeling within us.

But the Madonna journeyed on, and when the sun was high in the heavens and she was faint with heat, again she heard the sound of pursuing feet. She was passing through a field just then where the peasants were sowing their corn, and the kind people seeing her tired face came round her and asked if they could help her on her way.

'I have a great favour to ask,' she said. 'A guard of soldiers will presently come up, and should they ask if ye have seen a woman and child pass by this way, only answer, I pray you, that one passed by when ye were sowing your corn.'

The men were puzzled, but promised to do as she asked. And lo! when she had crossed the field, the

corn in the furrows began to sprout, the green blades shot up, and the ears of corn appeared, swelled and ripened before their eyes, so that by the time the soldiers arrived the men were in the midst of the harvest.

'Have ye seen a woman and child pass by this way?' shouted the soldiers.

The peasants stopped their cutting and looked up, answering quietly just as the Madonna had bade them.

'We saw a woman and child pass by when we were sowing this corn,' they said.

'What use is that to us?' stormed the soldiers. 'Keep thy foolish jests for those that are in the humour for such things.'

'It is no jest,' said one of the reapers, 'we only speak the truth.'

'Well,' said the soldiers to each other, 'these men are too stupid to deceive us. It is no use going on. We must search in some other direction.'

So the Madonna and the Bambino escaped unhurt, for the good God has many ways of saving His children.

The poor Madonna! She had but a sad, anxious life to the very end, and even now one can see the traces of her tears. It was when she stood all trembling and weeping beneath the Cross that the swallows, swooping and darting overhead, longed to comfort and help her. Even the birds were sorrowful at that sight, and they flew closer and closer, circling round and round until


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MADONNA

at last they swept her breast with their soft feathers as they passed. The great tears were dropping slowly from her eyes, and fell on the upturned breasts of the little birds, and wherever a tear fell the feathers turned from black to pure white. And so the swallows have worn their white badge ever since in memory of the comfort they longed to give.

THE LITTLE COUNTESS

THERE lived in Venice in the year 1288 a nobleman and his wife, who had one little daughter. They had only this one child, and they did not wish for any more. They thanked heaven for the precious little daughter, who was dearer to them than anything else in the world. She was fairer than any child in Venice, a little white lily with a heart of gold. Wherever she went people were gladdened by the sight of her fair face, but the sunshine she carried with her shone from her golden heart which was so kind and loving and true.

There was one thing that the little Countess loved above all others, and that was to go to the daily service in the church close by. At first she could only go when her mother took her on Sundays and saints' days, but when she grew a little older, she would often go by herself. Every one in Venice knew the little Countess, so she was quite safe, even when she went out alone.

Now the church which the child loved was on the other side of the canal, and there was no bridge across. So those who wished to go over were obliged to take a boat at the ferry. But the boatmen were always ready to row the little maiden across.

After a while the nobleman began to think that his daughter went too often to church. He was glad she was such a good child, but he did not want her to become a saint. He meant her to marry some rich, great lord, and live a gay life in the world. He was afraid that if she went to church so much she would think too much of heaven and too little of earth.

So one day he told her she must no longer go each morning to church.

The little Countess had always been as good and obedient as a child could be, but now she told her father that she could not obey him. God was her Father too, and she must try to please Him. The father did not wish to seem harsh, for he loved his little daughter dearly, so he said no more. But that very day he went to the boatmen at the ferry and told them they were on no account to row the little Countess across the water when she wanted to go to church. He slipped some gold pieces into their hands to help them to remember his command, and they promised faithfully they would do as he directed.

Early the next morning the child came to the ferry as usual, and was going to slip into the first boat when the boatman told her he could not take her across. She went to the next boat, but there, too, the boatman said the same. One by one they refused to take her across the canal.

The little Countess gazed at the men with her innocent, questioning eyes. She wondered what it

could mean. But the men looked shamefacedly away.

For one moment her lips began to tremble and her eyes filled with tears, but then she wiped the tears quickly away and smiled as happily as ever.

Stepping down to the side of the canal, she took off her little blue apron and laid it upon the water. Then quite fearlessly she stepped down upon it. The boatmen started forward, but the child was in no danger. Not only did the apron float like a boat, but it began to be wafted gently across the canal, until it landed the little Countess safely on the other side The boatmen stood looking on in amazement while the child quietly entered the church.

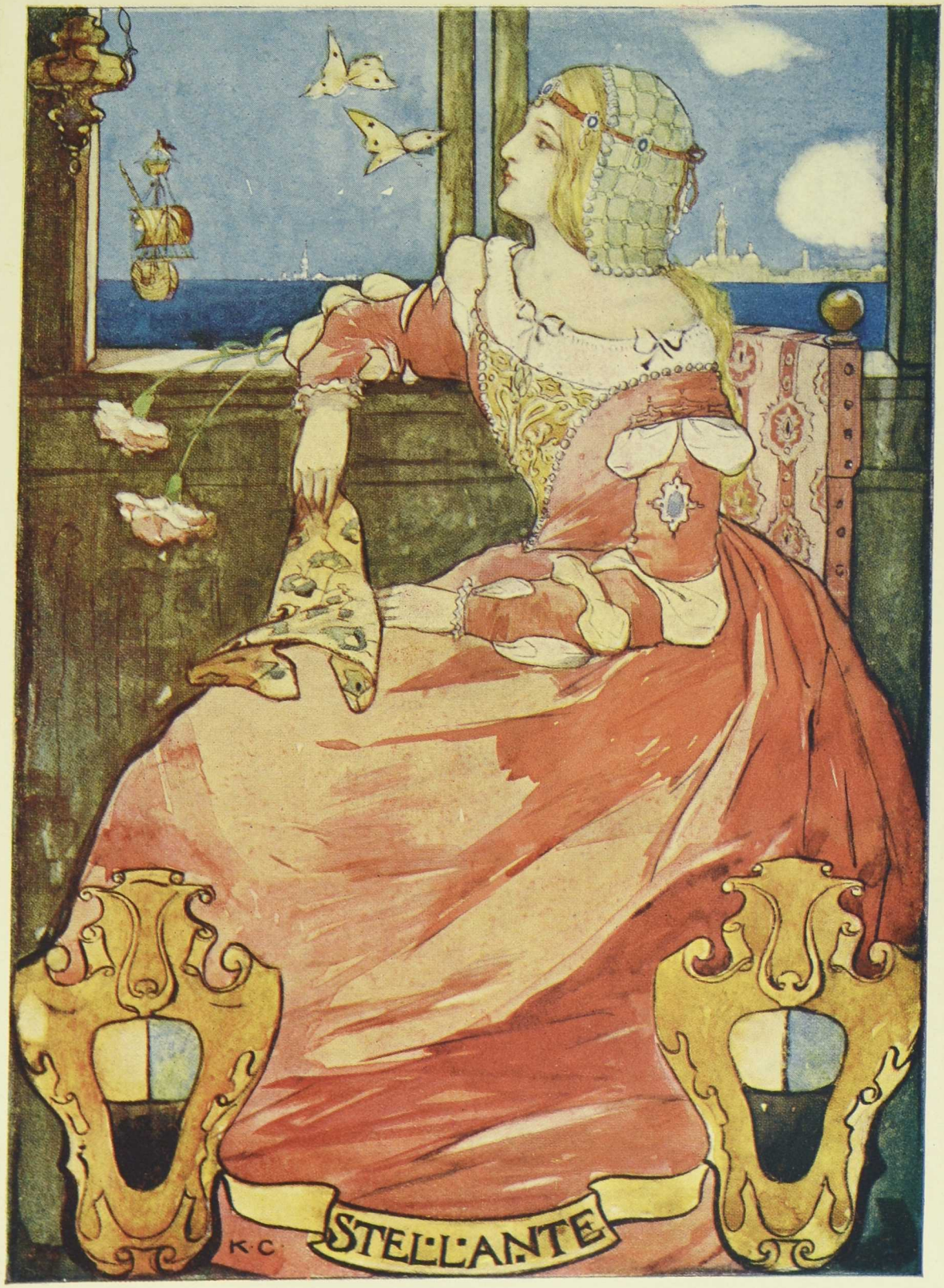
The story of that wonderful crossing on the frail little boat was soon told all over Venice, and the people talked in reverent tones of the child-saint who dwelt among them. The young nobles begged for her hand in marriage when she should be old enough, and her father found that he could choose from among the richest and noblest of the land to wed his little daughter.

But God had chosen something better than earthly honours for the little Countess. Before very long His messenger came to carry her across the dark river of death to the golden city of heaven. She was not at all afraid to go. Just as gladly and with as perfect a trust as she had stepped upon that frail little boat to be carried across to God's house, she now set out to go to the heavenly city.

All Venice mourned for the little Countess, and they buried her in the church she loved so well. In after years mothers, carrying their babies in their arms, would often go and pray by the tomb of the little saint and ask her to protect their little ones and save them from the perils of the water, just as the good God had protected and saved her, when she was a child.

PART II

STORIES OF ITALY


STELLANTE
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STELLANTE

In the long-ago days, when Venice was as rich as she was beautiful, there lived in one of her marble palaces a great and powerful merchant. Year after year he had heaped up his riches until the people said he had more gold than any one else in the city, and that he cared for nothing else but the pleasure of making money. But there they were wrong, for there was one thing the merchant loved almost better than his gold, and that was his only son, Bartolo.

Bartolo was very different from his father, and in many ways was a great disappointment to the old merchant-prince. The child never seemed to have any sense of the value of money. Give him a handful of pennies, and instead of saving them up they would be all gone before an hour had passed. It was always the same story.

'Such a poor old beggar asked alms of me at the church door, my father, and he gave me such a goodly blessing for but two small coins. And then I found the little Beppino weeping since his only penny had slipped through his fingers and rolled plump into the canal. Thou wouldst not have left him uncomforted, and besides, his thanks were worth many pennies.'

'Thou art but a fool,' growled his father. 'Blessings and thanks indeed! Much good may they do thee, and far may they go towards filling thy empty purse.'

But in spite of many scoldings Bartolo could never learn to hoard his money or refuse to help those who asked for his aid. Even when he grew to be a young man of twenty, it was ever the same.

'It is now time that thou shouldst learn to make money, as well as to spend it,' said his father one day. 'I shall send thee forthwith on a trial trip in one of my merchant ships. See, here are three hundred gold pieces with which thou shalt trade. They are not thine own but given thee on trust, and thou shalt not lend them or give them away, but shalt bring back to me something in exchange. Look to it that thou prove worthy of my trust.'

Bartolo took the money gladly and promised to do all that his father had said. Many a time had he watched the great ships spread their sails and ride gallantly out to sea, and often had he followed them with longing eyes as they swept along the waterway. But now he, too, would go sailing off towards those distant lands of which he had so often dreamed.

All was new and strange and wonderful to him as Venice was left behind, and he began his first voyage on the green sea. How eagerly he looked forward to the time when they should reach the far-off countries where he was to see such wonders and trade with his

father's gold. But the ships had not sailed many days before an island came in sight, and when they reached it the captain sent a boatload of sailors ashore that they might bring off a fresh supply of water.

When the sailors returned to the ship they were very much excited and told a strange tale. There on the island they had found a company of men who looked like brigands, but who said that they were Christian slaves, just escaped from the Turks. These men had implored the sailors to help them as they had very little food and were in great distress.

As soon as Bartolo heard all this he jumped into the boat and bade the sailors row him to the island, that he might see for himself who these men were and what help they might need.

The escaped slaves very soon saw what manner of man Bartolo was. And because he had such a kind heart and was so anxious to help every one, they made their story as sad as possible, and ended up by begging him to give them money.

'But I have no money of my own to give you,' said Bartolo simply. 'I can but give you food and clothing.'

'No money?' said the men roughly. 'Then how comes it that thou art sailing as master of that great ship?'

'The ship belongs to my father, and the money that I have is his also, lent to me on trust,' answered Bartolo. 'I am bound by my promise not to give it

away, but to trade with it and bring back merchandise in its stead.'

A gleam came into the greedy eyes of the men as they listened.

'That is well,' they said, 'for thou canst then lay out thy money wisely in buying our great treasure.'

'What treasure is that?' asked Bartolo in surprise, for the men had said they possessed nothing.

'A treasure indeed,' said one of them with a hoarse laugh, 'the most beautiful maiden thine eyes have ever rested upon. She is a princess, daughter of the Grand Turk. When we escaped from the palace we contrived to carry her off with us, and now we mean to make her serve our ends in one way or another. Either we shall sell her for gold, or make her suffer in revenge for all the misery her people have caused us these many years.'

'I do not buy slaves,' said Bartolo haughtily, 'and what use would a beautiful maiden be to me?'

'Come now,' said the man, 'thou mayest at least look at our treasure, even if thou hast no mind to buy her.'

Then with cruel, rough hands they dragged forward a young, helpless girl and placed her in front of Bartolo. Never before had he seen anything half so lovely, and he almost held his breath as he gazed earnestly at her. Her gauzy dress of silken tissue was torn and soiled, and she looked like a delicate flower which had been carelessly plucked and left to fade. But in spite

of all she had suffered, her beauty shone out like a gleam of heaven's sunshine in a dark place. Her long golden hair had escaped from its fastening and half wrapped her round as with a mantle, and her wonderful star-like eyes seemed to shine as from an inward light.

It was plain that she had been but cruelly treated, for the look she cast at Bartolo was one of terror. She seemed so unhappy that his heart was wrung with pity, and he began to wonder if he could not buy her and save her from the cruelty of her captors.

'Well, and how much do you want for your treasure?' he said, as he turned to the men who watched him with eager looks.

'Six hundred golden pieces,' they said at once.

'Then I certainly cannot buy her,' said Bartolo, 'for I have only three hundred zecchini all told.'

But the men began to consult together, for they wanted to get rid of the princess, and needed the money immediately, so with a very bad grace they told Bartolo he might have her at that price.

'Though indeed thou mightest well give us more,' they grumbled, 'seeing how rich are her clothes and how precious is that jewelled star which she wears round her neck.'

But seeing there was indeed no more money to be had, they took all that they could get, and Bartolo carried off the beautiful maiden back to the ship with him.

Now, as all the money was gone and there was nothing left with which to buy merchandise, it seemed useless to go farther, and so the ship was turned homewards and they set sail once more for Venice.

At first the beautiful princess was more frightened than ever, but ere long, when she saw how gently she was treated, she began to take courage. The best state-room was given to her, and she was waited upon as if she were a queen, while every one was ready to do her bidding. So the frightened look began to die out of her star-like eyes, and she grew more beautiful than ever. No one could understand her at first, for she spoke a language that sounded strange in their ears, but very soon she learned to say 'Bartolo,' and whenever she wanted anything, or if she was lonely or unhappy, her soft voice would be heard calling 'Bartolo, Bartolo.' When he came he was sure to make everything right.

After that Bartolo began to teach her other words, and especially taught her to say 'Father' over and over again. He was very anxious that the old merchant should be pleased with the beautiful girl whom he was bringing home in exchange for the gold.

So the pleasant days flew swiftly by. But though the maiden seemed happy, there were times when the look of misery and fear would cloud her eyes again. She could not yet understand where she was going. She knew she was a slave, and feared she might be sold once more, and that perhaps a worse fate awaited her.

At last they came in sight of Venice, and Bartolo was rejoiced to see his beautiful city again. But for the first time he began to wonder what his father would think of this adventure. It would be wiser, he thought, to see him alone and tell him all about it, before bringing the maiden home. So he left the princess in the ship, promising ere long to return and fetch her.

The old merchant was overjoyed to see his son, and embraced him again and again.

'But how is it that thou hast returned so soon?' he asked.

Then Bartolo began to tell his tale, and as he went on the merchant's brow grew blacker and blacker, and when the story was finished with the account of how the three hundred golden zecchini had been paid for the maiden, the old man's rage knew no bounds.

'Alas! that I should have a fool for a son,' he shouted. 'Dost thou dream that thou canst ever get half the money for her that thou hast given?'

'Get money for her?' said Bartolo. 'What? Dost thou imagine I intend to sell her?'

'And what else is she good for?' asked his father. 'If thou wilt not sell her, I will, and that right quickly too.'

'Thou shalt not as much as touch her,' said Bartolo, getting angry too, 'and if thou darest to interfere with her in any way, I will appeal to the Sindaco for protection.'

The old merchant had never seen his son angry before, and as, in spite of his loud talk, he was rather a coward, he became somewhat frightened at Bartolo's wrath.

'Come, come,' he said in a gentler tone, 'I will not touch her. Let me but see this wonderful treasure.'

So Bartolo went back to the ship and brought the maiden to his father's house, and as they returned together he tried to make her understand where they were going to, by saying 'Father' over and over again.

The sun had been hiding behind a cloud, and the room looked grey and cheerless as the maiden came timidly forward. But just at that moment the cloud passed and a burst of sunshine flooded the room with light. It shone upon the silvery gauze of the princess's dress, it lightened into a cloud of glory the waves of her golden hair, and played with tiny points of light upon the sparkling jewels of the star upon her breast, until she seemed wrapped round in a halo of living flame. Her starry eyes shone with excitement, and as she came nearer and said 'Father' in her soft voice, the old man started as if he had seen a vision, and then bowed his head and kissed her hand as if doing homage to a queen.

There was no more talk of selling the treasure, for the old merchant began to love her almost as much as he loved his son. And when the maiden had learned to speak their language, she guided the household

affairs so skilfully, and attended to all their wants so carefully, that Bartolo and his father wondered what they had ever done without her.

'Bartolo,' said the old man one day, 'pray what dost thou mean to do with this beautiful maiden?'

Bartolo looked up with troubled eyes.

'I too have been thinking of that,' he said. 'Methinks we should send her to some convent where the good nuns would teach her our faith so that she may be baptized, and then perchance we may wed her to some great prince.'

'Now, by my faith,' said the old merchant crossly, 'thou art more foolish than ever I had supposed. Why not marry her thyself?'

But Bartolo opened his eyes wide in wonder and surprise.

'Marry her!' he repeated; 'but she is a princess, and would never marry a common merchant.'

'Oh, go thy own foolish way,' said his father; 'I wash my hands of thee.'

Bartolo shook his head gravely, and ere long he so arranged matters that the princess was received into a convent. There she was taught many things, and at last was baptized by the name of Stellante. They chose that name because her eyes were like the stars, and because she always wore upon her breast the beautiful star-like jewel, which was her only possession.

But it was not long before the good nuns sent for Bartolo and told him that their charge was very

unhappy and constantly prayed to be allowed to go home. Not till then did Bartolo come to know that his beautiful Stellante really loved him and could not be happy without him. So they were married, and it seemed as if life was all to be as gay as a summer's morning.

But at the end of a year the old merchant began to grow restless and called his son to him.

'Thou hast well learned how to spend money,' he said, 'but never how to make it. Once more I will give thee three hundred zecchini and a good ship, and to-morrow thou shalt sail away on a fresh venture.'

Sorrow fell on the heart of Stellante when she knew that she must be left alone. Day and night she sat and wove a fine chain of her own golden hair, and when it was finished she hung thereon her jewelled star and clasped it round the neck of her beloved Bartolo.

'Thou shalt never part with it,' she said. 'The chain of my hair will bind my heart to thine—the star will serve to remind thee of Stellante.'

So Bartolo set out once more, but this time he was not eager to go, but rather counted the days until he should return.

The first place at which the ship stopped was the little town of Amalfi, with its great convent perched on the side of the vine-clad hill. The people of Amalfi were then a greedy, grasping race, who cared for nothing but gain and bargaining, and as Bartolo

crossed the market-place he saw to his surprise that a dead man lay there among the merchandise.

'How is this?' he asked of one of the passers-by; 'do you allow a man to lie unburied in your streets?'

'That is a man who died in debt,' said the other carelessly, 'and his creditors will not allow him to be buried until all his debts are paid.'

That, of course, was more than Bartolo could suffer, and before long he had paid all the poor man's debts, and the body was laid to rest. Then Bartolo felt he must help the widow and children, and when all was done there was not a penny left of the three hundred golden zecchini.

'Well,' said Bartolo to himself, 'this time, at any rate, my father cannot disapprove, for surely he would himself have acted as I have done.' So he sailed back to Venice in good spirits, longing to see Stellante again.

No words can describe the rage and fury of the old merchant when he heard how his son had spent the gold pieces.

'Never darken my doors again!' he screamed. 'From this day forth I cast thee out, and thou art no longer a son of mine. The Turkish girl and the dead man may be thy protectors.'

Very sorrowfully then did Bartolo turn away, but scarcely had he gone ten steps when a little hand was slipped into his and he found Stellante by his side.

'Thou canst not come with me, little Star,' he said.

'I have no home now to which to take thee. Stay rather in peace and comfort with my father.'

'But I cannot live without thee,' said Stellante, 'and didst thou not hear what thy father said? The Turkish girl will indeed be thy protector.'

So together they went out to seek their fortune, and Stellante began to sew the most wonderful pieces of embroidery, such as no one had ever before seen in Venice. When these were sold they brought in such a great price that there was money enough on which to live in ease and comfort. Bartolo, too, found work to do, and while he was away Stellante sewed her embroidery and began to make three great pieces of tapestry, the stitches of which were so fine and varied that a whole year passed before the work was finished.

Now it happened at the end of a year that a great fair was held to which buyers and sellers came from all the country round. Stellante therefore took the tapestry and bade Bartolo carry it to the fair where he might chance to sell it.

'But above all things,' she warned him, 'do not breathe my name to any one or tell who has done the work, and do not take less than a hundred gold zecchini for each piece.'

The days of the fair went past and many people came to look and admire the wonderful pieces of tapestry, but they all shook their heads when they heard of the great price which was asked for them. No one was found who would offer even fifty zecchini.

Bartolo began to feel downcast and heavy-hearted, for it was near the end of the fair, and he feared he would be forced to carry back the tapestry unsold. But on the very last day some strange foreign-looking men came to look at the work and seemed to think the price not too great.

'We come with a commission from the King of France,' they told Bartolo. 'He wishes his palace to be hung with the rarest and most beautiful tapestry, and these pieces are the most exquisite we have seen. But before we buy them we would wish to learn who has done this wonderful work?'

'I must not tell the name of the worker,' answered Bartolo; 'that must go untold.'

Then the men consulted together and finally bade Bartolo bring the tapestry on board their ship which was lying at anchor close by. It must be delivered to the captain, they said, and he would pay for it himself.

But when Bartolo had carried the precious load on board and the captain had examined it closely, he still refused to pay the money.

'This is a woman's work,' he said, 'and how am I to know that thou hast not stolen it?'

Bartolo was very angry when he heard this, so angry indeed that he forgot the warning given him by Stellante.

'It is my wife's work,' he said proudly, 'and I am selling it for her.'

'Nevertheless you shall prove your words,' answered

the captain. 'Bring thy wife here that I may pay her the money herself.'

So Bartolo went home and told Stellante all that had happened, and how in his anger he had broken his promise.

'All that cannot now be mended,' said Stellante; 'but thou shouldst not have left the tapestry behind. Now we shall lose the work of a whole long year.'

'Nay, but thou wilt come with me and claim the money, Stellante?' said Bartolo anxiously, for he could not bear to think of losing that exquisite work.

Stellante shook her head.

'Wiser not, dear heart,' she said. 'Rather let us lose the work than risk an unknown danger.'

But Bartolo gave her no rest until she consented to do as he wished, and at last they went back together to the great foreign ship.

The captain's rough manner changed when he saw the beautiful maiden with the star-like eyes, and he courteously invited her to descend to his cabin that he might at once pay her the money. But no sooner had she disappeared below than the cry of 'Bartolo! Bartolo!' rang out, and when her husband rushed forward he was seized by two sailors and received a blow on the head which felled him to the deck and he became unconscious.

How long it was that he lay there, Bartolo never knew, but when he came to himself the ship was sailing far out to sea and there was no land in sight. Not a

sound came from the cabin, and the sailors told him roughly that Stellante was dead. So he sank back in black despair once more.

Now the sailors were speaking falsely when they said that Stellante was dead, for Stellante was alive and in safe keeping, but in another part of the ship.

These men were none other than the servants of the Grand Turk, her father, who had sent them out to seek all over the world for his lost daughter. Vainly had they searched all these years and not a clue had they found until one of them had caught sight of the beautiful tapestry, and knew that the secret of that exquisite work was known only to the Sultan's daughters. Thus they had laid their plans to carry off Stellante, and were now on their way back to Turkey to carry her home to her father. Of course the Grand Turk would have nothing to say to Bartolo, who was but a common man and a Christian to boot, and the captain was anxious to get rid of him as soon as possible. That very day, when the ship was sailing past a desert island, the captain commanded that the captive should be put ashore and left there to starve.

Bound hand and foot poor Bartolo was left helpless upon the desolate shore. His life would soon have been ended had not one of the sailors in pity turned back and cut the ropes which were tied so tightly round him.

'It may give thee a chance of life, poor wretch,' said the sailor, as he hurried after his companions.

Weak and ill from all the hardships and suffering he had undergone, Bartolo could scarcely stand upright, and as he tried to climb up the hill in search of water to cool his parched throat, he often stumbled and fell. It was drawing towards evening now, and only the last faint twittering of the birds was heard as they settled to rest in the branches of the thick trees. The flowers that go to rest had folded their petals and closed their cups, and not a sound was soon to be heard but the lap of the waves on the shore below.

Suddenly the clear call of a vesper bell broke the heavy silence and Bartolo paused in amazement. Could he be dreaming ? No, there was the sound of the bell again, and as he looked up he saw the dim outline of a little chapel upon the brow of the hill. Perhaps if he could climb that steep path there might be some one there who could help him. His feet dragged wearily on, and all the time he wondered if, after all, he wanted help, or if it would not be better to lie down and die.

Darker and darker it grew, and then one pale star shone out through the deep blue, and breathed its pure silver light upon the poor stumbling form, as if to light a beacon of hope in the black darkness of his despair.

With a start Bartolo turned and caught a glint of that silver point of light, and stretching out his hands, he called aloud in the bitterness and longing of his


LEFT·HELPLESS·ON·
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heart, ' Stellante, Stellante, where art thou, star of my heart ? ' Then the darkness seemed to close in around him and he knew no more.

But close at hand an old hermit was kneeling in the little chapel, and when the strange cry fell upon his ear, he rose quickly from his knees and hurried out to see who it was that needed his help. Very gently he carried Bartolo into his poor cell and laid him upon the bed of dried leaves, and held a cup of cool water to his lips.

For many weeks the good old hermit tenderly nursed the stranger back to life, but could not find out who he was or whence he came. There was but one cry always upon his lips, ' Stellante, Stellante,' and nothing more.

Then by-and-bye as health returned Bartolo told his story little by little, and the old man listened with pitying look.

' Grieve not so bitterly, my son,' he said at length. ' Something tells me that the star of thy life is not yet set. Be sure that Stellante lives and some day thou wilt again behold her.'

' Thou meanest, perchance, in Paradise ? ' said Bartolo drearily ; ' but, Father, that seems a long, long way off.'

But the old hermit shook his head and still bade Bartolo not despair.

' Meanwhile, my son, what wilt thou do here ? ' he asked. ' Shall we set up a signal upon the hilltop that

some passing ship may stay its course and carry thee hence ? '

' No, no,' said Bartolo quickly, ' let me rather live here quietly with thee. The world has been no friend to me, and I am done with it.'

The old hermit thought deeply for a few minutes and then laid his hand tenderly on Bartolo's bowed head.

' I am old now,' he said, ' and my span of life grows short. If thou wilt tarry here with me my days will indeed be brighter for thy presence. But either thou must leave at once before I grow to love thee and depend on thee too much, or else thou must promise me that whatever comes thou wilt never part from me.'

' That will I promise with all my heart,' said Bartolo, and he knelt to receive the hermit's blessing.

So the days went by and the hermit and Bartolo lived their simple life together. There was much to do in the garden, digging and planting and training the vines, and there was the little chapel to sweep out, and the bell to ring for matins and vespers. They scarcely noticed how quickly the days slipped by until one day they counted up that a whole year had passed since Bartolo had been left upon the island.

They were sitting that afternoon, talking happily together as they looked across the blue mirror of the sea, when they suddenly caught sight of a ship sailing towards the island with widespread sails like a white butterfly. As it came nearer, and its flag could be

seen, the hermit rose quickly to his feet and turned to Bartolo.

'My son,' he said, 'we must hide ourselves in some safe place. The men on board that ship are Turkish pirates, and should they land and find us here we would fare badly at their hands.'

Swiftly then Bartolo and the old hermit made their way to the little chapel, which was well built and had a strong oaken door. This door they made stronger still by piling against it inside their few wooden benches, and the store of winter firewood which they had already gathered.

So well and quickly did Bartolo work that when the pirates, with a shout of triumph, discovered their hiding-place and tried to force the door, they could not move it an inch. Again and again they tried and then they grew impatient, for they had but little time to spare.

'Come out,' they shouted to Bartolo; 'we will let thee go unharmed if thou wilt open the door.'

'But wilt thou also spare the holy man, my father?' said Bartolo from inside.

'No, no,' shouted the pirates, 'the price of thy freedom shall be the life of the old man.'

'Then will we die together,' said Bartolo calmly.

The pirates drew off for a little to consider what was to be done. They had no means of setting fire to the little chapel, and it was now time to return to their ship.

Come, then,' they shouted at last, 'open the door and both your lives shall be spared.'

Even the rough pirates were touched by the sight of the two figures that came slowly out of the chapel. The old hermit, frail and aged, and the young man to whom he clung with trembling hands and who guided his tottering steps with loving care while he gazed fearlessly into the faces of their captors.

'Thou art a brave man,' said the pirate chief, 'and we love bravery wherever we find it. It is true that henceforth ye are doomed to be slaves, but I will promise that when thou art sold thou shalt not be parted from thy aged father whose life thou hast saved.'

The chief was as good as his word, and when the ship arrived at Constantinople, Bartolo and the old hermit were sold to the Sultan's gardener, and were set to work together in the palace gardens.

But what had become of Stellante all this time? On that evil day when the captain of the Turkish vessel told her he had discovered who she was, and that he meant to carry her back to Turkey, she cried aloud as she always did in any trouble, 'Bartolo, Bartolo,' feeling sure he would come and rescue her. Never before had he failed her, never before had her cry fallen unheeded on his ears. And when he did not answer she was ready to believe what the captain so grimly told her, that Bartolo was dead.

They could do as they liked with her then, she cared

for nothing, and it was easy to keep her a close prisoner until Bartolo was safely put out of the way upon the desert island. Like a lily with a broken stem she sat bowed with grief and refused all comfort.

Then at last the ship sailed into the harbour and the captain delivered the long-lost princess to her father the Sultan. But there was no joy in Stellante's heart, and the light of the stars had faded from her eyes.

The Sultan scarcely knew his beautiful daughter again in this pale, sad maiden, and he listened kindly to her story, though she dared not tell him that she had become a Christian.

'I am weary and broken-hearted,' she said when she had finished her tale; 'let me live for a while alone in peace and quietness, my father.'

'Thou shalt do whatever pleaseth thee best,' said the Sultan, ready to promise anything in his delight at having her back once more.

So Stellante lived in a separate part of the palace all alone, with only one old black slave called Rachel to wait upon her.

Life seemed like a long grey road stretching out before her, flat and uninteresting, and she shivered as she sat day after day gazing into the future which looked so empty, cold, and grey.

'Your Highness,' said the old black slave one day, 'are all Christians as sad as thou?'

Stellante started and looked up.

'Nay,' she said, 'the Christians are happier than any other people.'

Old Rachel smiled and half shook her head, and for the first time Stellante began to feel ashamed of her selfish sorrowing and for the ceaseless moan she made over her unhappiness. Little by little she taught the old woman what it meant to be a Christian, and she grew almost happy as she watched the interest and light dawn in the kind old eyes. Then together they made plans to help the poor slaves whom they could see working in the palace grounds, and at night Rachel would steal out and carry food and medicine and many comforts which Stellante's skilful fingers had prepared during the day.

Gradually the heavy grey cloud lifted off Stellante's life, and the long dull road was marked by shining white pebbles of peaceful, happy days. But in spite of her work there were many dreary hours to pass through, and the light that once more shone in her starry eyes was often dimmed by the tears that rose from her sad heart.

One day, as she stood by the window gazing out at the bright sunshine and gay flowers, she wondered if light and happiness would ever really fill her broken heart again. There was a far-away look in her eyes, for she was thinking of Venice and those dream-like days of pure delight, when the fairy isles of the lagunes seemed to beckon her over the sea of glass, with the reflections of their tiny spires like a long finger mirrored in the silent waters. It was all so real to her then that

a strain of soft music seemed to mingle in the delight of that vision, and the words of a song she loved floated on the air.

'Bartolo, Bartolo,' she cried softly to herself with sobbing breath, and then she looked to find the picture gone, as it had so often vanished before. But though the vision had fled the song still floated on the air, and the words came clear and distinct to her ear from the garden beneath.

It was no dream voice, some one was singing down there in the garden, but although Stellante could not see the singer from her window, she felt sure it must be some poor Italian prisoner who had been carried off from his sunny land to toil as a slave in the Sultan's garden. The thought troubled her, and she called Rachel at once and bade her go out and make careful search among the slaves and find out if one among them was an Italian.

It seemed to Stellante that Rachel was absent a very long time, and she paced the room with impatient steps, scarcely knowing why she felt so restless, except that the song she had heard had wakened old memories that crowded like dim ghosts around her.

'Hast thou then found the singer?' she cried out eagerly, when she heard Rachel's steps slowly mounting the stairs that led to her mistress's room.

'Have patience, my princess,' panted the old woman, 'and I will tell thee all, if thou wilt but give me time to find my breath again.'

Stellante twisted her fingers together and tapped the floor with one impatient foot. It was hard to wait even a few seconds. But presently the old woman began her tale.

'Thou art right,' she said; 'the gardener has a new slave who talks a strange language which they call Italian, and they say, too, that he is a Christian. He is a young man, and my heart ached with pity as I watched him, for he looks so sad and worn. Nevertheless I doubt if we can help him much, for I do not think it is the hard work and rough usage that makes him miserable. For when he thought no one was near I saw him draw out from his breast a jewelled star, which was hung round his neck by a golden chain, and as he kissed it he sighed as if his heart would break, and the jewels shone wet with his tears. But, my princess, why dost thou look so pale, and why dost thou tremble greatly?'

For Stellante had grown as white as a lily, and she swayed forward as if she had not strength to stand.

'Didst thou say a jewelled star, and that it was hung by a golden chain?' she cried. 'O Bartolo, Bartolo, can it indeed be thou?'

The poor old slave-woman feared for a moment that her beloved princess had lost her reason. But her fears were turned to joy when, half laughing and half sobbing, Stellante told her of the braided chain of her own golden hair, and the jewelled star which she had herself hung around her husband's neck.

'It can be no other than he,' Stellante breathed, 'and oh, Rachel, thou must help me to see him to-night.'

But Rachel looked grave, and mournfully shook her head.

'That cannot be,' she said. 'Wert thou once seen outside the palace doors, the Sultan, thy father, would instantly send to have thee executed.'

'Some way must be found,' answered Stellante calmly. 'Even if I am discovered, I must see this stranger at once and know who he is.'

Long and earnestly they talked together until at last a plan was arranged. It was dangerous, but since Stellante had made up her mind to go, the only way was to dress herself in Rachel's flowing garments, hold the veil close over her face, and then go and stand at the well where the slaves came to draw water after sundown.

In the shadow of a great tree which overhung the well, Stellante waited that evening, with bowed head and closely veiled face. Scarce a look was cast upon her, for the old slave-woman used often to stand there, and the slaves who came with weary feet to draw water from the well did not often notice her. Eagerly Stellante watched their sad, worn faces as the dreary procession passed on. The light was slowly fading now, and as the last man passed by, hope seemed to die out in her heart. No, he was not there, it was all a mistake, and now she must go back to her loneliness once more.

But as, with a sob, she turned to go she heard another step draw near, and in the dim light she saw a tired figure with bowed shoulders come slowly towards the well. She needed not to look closer at his face, her heart knew even the echo of that footfall, and with a half-cry she sprang forward to meet her husband.

'Who art thou?' said Bartolo, startled out of his dreams by this strange, closely veiled woman, who had clasped her arms around his neck.

'Bartolo! Bartolo!' she cried, and needed to say no more, for Bartolo's arms were round her and he held her close to his heart.

'Stellante, star of my life,' he whispered, 'tell me thou art real and no dream which will but vanish and leave my arms empty when I awake.'

Meanwhile in the palace the slow hours dragged by, and the old slave-woman sat and watched with anxious, fearful heart. She started at every noise and wrung her hands in despair as time went on and her princess did not return.

'She is discovered,' she wailed aloud. 'Oh, why did I ever allow her to run into so certain a danger?'

But even as she lamented, a soft knock sounded on the door, and when with trembling hands old Rachel opened it, Stellante glided in. There was no need to ask if she had found what she sought, the light in her eyes and the wonder of her beauty seemed to cast a spell even over the old slave-woman, and she could

only kneel and kiss Stellante's hands and bathe them with her thankful tears.

There was much now to think about and difficult matters to plan, for Stellante had made up her mind that not only should she and Bartolo escape, but that they would take with them all the Christian slaves. The difficulty, however, was not so great since Stellante had gold enough and to spare, and could pay for all the help they needed.

In a wonderfully short time the arrangements were made. A good ship was hired to be ready to sail at nightfall from the harbour, and all the slaves were warned to meet on the shore at sundown, where boats would be waiting to carry them off to the ship.

One by one the slaves silently gathered at the appointed place, and Bartolo carefully placed Stellante and old Rachel in the first boat and then directed the men where to go.

But as he rapidly counted them over an anxious look came into his eyes, and he asked in a troubled voice, ' Where is the old man, my father ? '

No one had seen him, and in the hurry of departure all seemed to have forgotten him.

Just then lights began to shine in all the palace windows, and a distant roar of voices was heard.

' Our escape has been discovered,' cried the men. ' Quick, quick, let us cast off or all will be lost.'

' Bartolo, Bartolo,' cried Stellante, ' oh, come

quickly,' and she stretched out her arms to try to draw him into the boat.

'Nay, I cannot come without the old man,' said Bartolo. 'I have promised.'

'Then we must all perish together,' said the men in despair.

'Not so,' said Bartolo quickly. 'Cast away and row off to the ship with all speed. I will stay and search for the old hermit.'

'You shall not stay,' cried Stellante wildly, 'or I will stay with thee.'

But even as she spoke the boat was pushed off and Bartolo was left alone upon the seashore. In vain she prayed and entreated to be taken back; the men grimly held to their oars, and took no notice of her cries, for it was a matter of life and death to all of them, and they knew a Turkish vessel would soon be ready to sail in pursuit. Half fainting, Stellante was lifted on board, and all night long she lay with her head on old Rachel's lap, white and silent as death. It was a terrible night for all on board. The Turkish ship gained fast upon them, and would ere long have recaptured them had not a dense mist come suddenly rolling in from the sea and hidden them in its great white, friendly folds. But even then they anxiously watched and waited for the dawn, never knowing where their enemy might be.

Towards daybreak the mist began to melt into a gentle rain, and the pale face upon old Rachel's

lap began to show signs of returning life as the cool, refreshing drops fell upon the white cheeks. Gradually all the sad truth came back to Stellante and she stood upright, with the strength given her by her anger and despair. With flashing eyes she called the men traitors and cowards.

'He had helped you all, to him you owed your escape, and yet you sailed away in safety and left him alone and defenceless to face the rage and revenge of your masters,' she cried.

The men hung their heads and answered nothing. They could not reason with her, but so great was her grief and anger that they feared she would throw herself into the sea.

But like most fierce storms Stellante's anger soon spent itself, and ere long she sat sobbing, with her head leaning against old Rachel's shoulder.

'Princess,' said the old woman, 'anger and reproaches cannot help us; let us rather pray that all may yet be well.'

But Stellante only shook her head, she could not even pray, and alone the old woman quietly told her beads and prayed for the safety of Bartolo and the old man.

Stellante sat silent, but presently she lifted her head and seemed to listen to some far-off sound. Then she stood up and ran swiftly to the side of the ship. There was a quick movement among the men, for they did not know what she meant to do, but she only lifted

her finger and bade them be silent, and stood there with that listening look, and eyes which strove to pierce the mist. Then by-and-bye they, too, heard the sound of oars dipped in regular cadence, and through the mist the dim outline of a boat was seen to glide nearer and nearer, manned by two ghostly figures. Slowly they drew near and then a shout of joy went up from all on board, for they saw that the two grey figures were indeed their lost comrades, Bartolo and the old hermit.

Eager hands helped them on board and anxious voices asked how they had fared, but they were too tired to speak until they had been revived by food and wine. Then with Stellante's hand clasped close in his, Bartolo told how he had gone back and found the old man, and how in the uproar no one had noticed them and they had managed to escape unseen into the friendly mist which had hidden them, too, from their enemies. The old hermit had rowed with wonderful strength and seemed to have eyes that could pierce the mist, for he had directed the boat's course so well that they had come straight to their own vessel.

Merrily then the good ship sailed along, leaving the unfriendly shores and cruel pursuers far behind, and daily it drew nearer that dear land they called home. But as each brow grew lighter and each heart grew happier there was one person who became sadder and quieter as the days passed by. This was the old hermit, and when at last the long purple line on the horizon showed that land would soon be near, he called

all the men together and bade them listen to a tale he had to tell.

It was the story of Bartolo's life which the old man told to the listening company. It began with all the kind little deeds which their captain had done when he was but a child in Venice, and it then went on to his rescue of Stellante and all the adventures which came after. There were many things told which even Bartolo himself had forgotten, and he was amazed at the knowledge which the old hermit possessed. As he listened to the list of his good deeds he grew shame-faced, especially when all the men shouted with one accord, 'Long live our captain!'

But the old hermit held up his hand and asked for silence, that he might go on with his story.

'There is but little more to tell,' he said, 'but now I would explain to you my own share in this story. I am none other than that poor, disgraced debtor whom Bartolo found in the market-place of Amalfi, and laid to rest in a peaceful grave. In the world of shadows I was permitted to know what dangers threatened him, and allowed to return to earth for a space to watch over and protect him. There upon the desert island I waited for him, and ever since I have helped and guided him. Now, my children, my time is ended. Bartolo, you have no longer need of me, for thy other protector, the star of thy life, shines clear upon thy pathway once more, and peace and happiness await thee as the just reward of thy kind deeds.'

Then as they looked, the old man was gone, and they knew he had been indeed a guardian angel sent to protect and help him who had never failed to help and protect others that needed his care.

So, hand in hand, Stellante and Bartolo began life once more in beautiful Venice, and the blessing they had earned was like a golden ring around them, keeping out all evil, and closing them in with love and peace and true happiness.

A TALE OF THE EPIPHANY

THE Christmas bells had but lately ceased to ring out the message of peace and goodwill to all the world, and now the Feast of the Epiphany was drawing near. All around the city there hung an expectant air of holiday-making, and every one was preparing for the great festa. The street boys made enough noise on their long glass trumpets to drive peaceful people mad, but the good-natured folks only clapped their hands over their ears and thanked the saints that such noise came but once a year. Up and down the busy streets the country-people walked, swinging pairs of shrieking fowls by their long, lean legs, eager to sell them for a good price, and paying no heed to their miserable cries. There was scarcely a family in the city, however poor, who would not have a fowl to cook for the coming festa, and so trade was brisk and bargaining became a fine art.

Amidst all the noise of bargaining, the shrieks of fowls, and the blare of the glass trumpets, a poor woman made her way through the busy, crowded streets. Her thin old shawl was tightly wound round her shoulders, and in its folds was wrapped a little bundle which from its shape might be a baby. Another

child, three or four years old, clattered along over the stone pavement, at her side, clutching a fold of the mother's gown, Behind came the tap, tap of wooden crutches as a bigger child who was lame tried to keep up with the rest.

The woman looked wistfully at the array of fowls held up so temptingly before her, and the quick eye of one of the sellers rested on her at once.

'Ecco,' he cried, 'this is the very thing thou seekest! See how fat and tender he is.' Here he displayed a sad-looking, long-legged bird, little more than skin and bone and bedraggled feathers. 'And the price is so small, it is really nothing. I rob myself and my innocent children, but there! I give it thee for two lire.'

The woman shook her head and hurried on. She could not trust herself to look at the tempting dainty.

'Mother,' said Brigida, the little lame girl, making an effort to keep up at her mother's side, 'shall we have no festa to-morrow?'

'Who can tell?' said her mother cheerfully. 'Perhaps we may earn money to-day. If the master can but pay us, we may keep the festa with the best of them. A good boiled fowl and plenty of polenta, a gay new dress for the old doll thou lovest so well, a toy for little Maria here, and good milk for little Beppino. Ah yes, who knows, we too may keep the festa!'

The faces of the two children brightened as she

talked, and Maria's little legs, which had begun to drag wearily along, stepped out bravely once more.

'See, here we are,' said the mother, stopping before a big, gloomy-looking entrance and preparing to climb the steps which led up and up to the top story.

'Who comes there?' sounded a warning voice from above.

'A friend,' answered the woman, and then climbed steadily on, giving a helping hand to the tired child at her side.

At last they all reached the topmost flight, and there a door stood open, and a tall, stern-faced old man looked keenly out on the little family who came toiling up the last few steps.

'Ah!' he said, 'so thou hast brought my model. Come in, come in; the daylight fades all too soon these bitter days, and I would finish my work to-day if it be possible.'

He led them as he spoke into a great, bare attic, and bade the woman sit upon the old chair which he pulled forward.

The children pressed close to their mother and looked about with round, surprised eyes. What a strange place this was! No table, no bed, nothing but piles of pictures standing with their faces against the walls, and in the centre of the room on a curious wooden stand a great uncovered picture glowing with such wonderful colour that it seemed almost to shine in the dull, dim room. The light from the sloping window fell full

upon this picture, and as they looked the children forgot their shyness and fear of the stern-faced old man, and pressed forward to look at it.

Why, it was a picture of the very festa which they were preparing to keep next day, the feast of the Blessed Epiphany. There was the rough, rude stable, with the dim outline of the cattle just seen in the background; at one side an empty manger; and in the centre, where some straw had been heaped together, the Holy Mother with her Baby in her arms. Such a sweet young mother she looked, as she gazed down with tender happiness and almost reverent awe upon the Child on her knee. Before them, on the rough stones of the stable floor, knelt the three kings, their heads bent in lowly adoration, their costly robes of crimson, purple and gold standing out in contrast to the dark stable and the simply clad mother. It was a wonderful picture, but it was disappointing too, for the best part of all was still unfinished, and only a blank showed where the face of the Gesu Bambino was still to be painted.

The old painter himself stood with the children looking at the picture, and he sighed heavily as he gazed. Day after day, month after month, he had worked at this picture, which he felt sure would at last bring him fame and honour. Faithfully and well he had worked, and each part was as beautiful as he could make it: only one thing seemed beyond his power. It was the face of the Child, the centre of the whole,

and toil as he might he could not paint it as he wished it to be. Over and over again had he tried; he had sought for models far and near, but it always ended in failure, and he painted it out each time in fresh despair.

But here was a new chance, a little model his quick eye had noted in his search the day before. He roused himself and bade the children stand back as he caught up his brushes and prepared to work. Then he turned impatiently to the woman.

'Unwrap thy shawl and hold the child so that I can see its face,' he ordered. 'Dost thou think that I wish to paint a mummy or a chrysalis?'

The woman started and began hastily to undo her shawl.

'He is asleep,' she said, 'and has a cough, *poverino*.' But seeing an angry, impatient look come over the painter's face, she hastened to rouse the child and arrange its blue pinafore and gently stroke its little, dark, downy head.

But Beppino did not approve of this at all. He liked the soft shawl round him, and he wanted to go to sleep. So his nose began to wrinkle up, and his mouth to open wider as his eyes shut tighter, and a long-drawn wail came sobbing forth. Then followed a fit of coughing and more cries till the painter dashed down his brushes and clapped his hands over his ears.

'Away with thee!' he cried; 'as well bring me a screaming parroquet for a model.'

The angry voice stopped Beppino's cries for a moment, and he gazed across, his brown eyes full of tears, and his lip still quivering and ready to start afresh. The mother gently chafed the little blue hands and spoke soothing words, and Maria clapped her hands and played bo-peep to make him laugh. But it was all no use. Beppino found the world a cold, unkind place, and the sobs broke out again even louder than before.

'There, take him away,' said the painter, 'it is but waste of time,' and he stood gloomily looking on as the woman wrapped Beppino in her old shawl once more and took Maria's hand in hers. Very wearily she walked towards the door, followed by the tap, tap of Brigida's crutches behind. Then for one moment she paused and looked round. Could she ask for just a little help ? She had never begged of any one before, but to-morrow was the festa, and there was nothing for the children to eat. It was some weeks now since poor little Beppino's mother had died, leaving him alone and uncared for, and he had had his share of love and daily bread with her own two little ones. But an extra mouth, however small, was difficult to fill, and to-day she did not know where to turn to for help. She looked wistfully at the tall figure with the stern face standing there. She tried to speak, but the words would not come. If he would but give her one kindly glance she might find courage. But a dark frown had gathered on the painter's forehead, and he turned

impatiently from her beseeching look and stood before his picture.

With a choking sob the woman held the baby closer and went slowly through the door and down the long flight of stone steps. It was no use looking at the fowls now or dreaming of gay presents. Brigida saw the tears stealing one after another down her mother's cheeks as they silently trudged homewards.

'Thou art not angry with the little one, mammina?' she asked anxiously. 'It is not easy to sit and smile when one is cold and sleepy.'

The woman shook her head and tried to smile.

'Poor lamb,' she said; 'no, it is no fault of his, but there will be no festa for us to-morrow.'

Maria opened her mouth and gave out one long, loud wail. No good food, no sweet cake, no toy; it was more than she could bear.

'Hush thee, hush now,' cried Brigida, bending down to kiss the miserable little face. 'I promise thee thou shalt have a beautiful present all thy own,' and she gave a mysterious little nod and smile, which put a stop to Maria's tears like magic.

Meanwhile, in the cold, bare attic the painter stood motionless before his picture and then sank down in his chair in an attitude of deep despair. All his hopes had been set on this one picture, his greatest and his best. He knew that the work was good, but he began to fear now that it was beyond his power to finish it. He saw nothing but the blank where the Christ-child's

face should be, the centre and heart of the whole picture, till at last he covered his eyes with his hand that he might shut out the sight of his bitter failure and disappointment.

But a few minutes seemed to have passed when he looked up again with a start. What was that light which shone so clear in the dim twilight of the room ? It seemed to come from the unfinished picture, he thought, and then suddenly he felt rather than saw that the picture was unfinished no longer. The light which dazzled his eyes was the halo of glory which shone round the Christ-child's face—that face painted as even in his fairest dreams he had not pictured it. There was something so divine in the beauty of the little face that it seemed to make the very attic a holy place, and the painter fell upon his knees as he gazed, his eyes almost blinded by the glory. But was it only a picture, after all ? He looked around. Where was he, and who were these kneeling figures beside him ? This was not his great, bare garret but a stable, and instead of the kings in their costly robes, the space before the gentle Mother and her Divine Child was filled with many figures crowding round, some richly dressed, some in rags, old and young, but each one bearing in his hand some gift to offer to the Infant King. Strange gifts they were, some of them ; surely the Christ-child would refuse such mean offerings ? But no, His hand was stretched out to receive even the commonest, and, strange to say,

some gifts that seemed the poorest, at His touch were changed to such rare worth and beauty that they shone like pure gold, while others that looked fit offerings for a king, piles of gold and precious gems, turned in an instant to dull lead and worthless pebbles. 'It is love that makes an offering really precious,' whispered a voice in the painter's ear. 'Wherever self creeps in, it spoils the most costly gift.'

But now the painter felt he was being pressed forward, nearer and nearer, and only then it flashed upon him that he had no offering to make, that he alone of all the throng was kneeling there with empty hands. He thought of his past life and searched to find if he had any excuse to offer to the Child King. No, it was Self he saw at every turn; he had lived for nothing else, and now his hands were empty.

It was not fear that made him bow his head while the big sobs shook his shoulders. No fear could have broken up the ice which for years had been gathering round his frozen heart; it was the thought that soon the Blessed Child would smile on him, would stretch out His little hand towards him, and that he would have nothing to place there, no offering to make this glad Epiphany morning. Every one except himself had something. Even the little lame girl in old tattered clothes, who knelt beside him, held clasped in her arms an old wooden doll. He alone had nothing, and every moment he was drawing nearer.

Only three people were in front of him now—a man,

grasping a handful of gold, a poor woman carrying a tiny baby, and the little lame child with her battered doll.

The man walked confidently up, but lo! when the gold touched the outstretched hand, it lost its shining glitter and was changed to dull grey lead. Strangely enough, the man did not seem to notice that, for he never glanced upward, and did not see the grieved look upon the Christ-child's face.

Timidly now the poor woman came nearer, and kneeling down, she whispered how she had nothing to give, for the baby she held was a motherless waif, and her offering had been spent in giving it food and shelter. Nothing to give? Ah! but as the painter looked nearer he saw in the Christ-child's hand a golden scroll on which was written in shining characters, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me.'

The little lame child came next, and she gazed up with perfect trust and fearlessness as she held out the old wooden doll. It had been her one treasured possession, and it was very hard to part with it, but the little sister had nothing for the festa and had so longed for a real present. It was only an old doll, but it shone as brightly as the costliest gifts, and perhaps was counted by Him more precious than the gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Then the painter knew that it was his turn, and humbly kneeling there he covered his face with his

hands, while from his lips the words fell, 'I am but a poor man, too poor, Lord, to offer Thee anything, nor have I ever had the opportunity of doing anything for Thee.'

But the Child's voice bade him look up, and there before him was another scene. It was his old garret again, and a poor woman stood there holding a baby, and two children were clinging to her skirts. He saw the beseeching look in her eyes as she turned to go, and heard the sound of the half-choked sob as the door closed behind her. He started forward as if to stop her, but the vision faded, and again the voice sounded sorrowfully in his ear, 'Inasmuch as ye did it *not*.'

The painter wakened with a start. He had been dreaming, only dreaming, but the tears were wet on his cheeks, and a new pain gnawed at his heart. He could scarcely see the dim outline of his unfinished picture as he groped for his hat and felt his way to the door. Down the stone steps he hastened and out into the silent night, with but one thought in his mind. The streets were very quiet, but ere long the bells would ring out their glad welcome to the joyous festa day, and he must do his errand quickly. It was not long before he reached the poor street he sought, and climbed the steep stairs and stood before a closed door. Hastily he felt for his wallet and wrapped something round in a piece of paper, and then stooping down he slipped it under the door, carefully pushing it

in until the last scrap of paper had disappeared. Then with a sigh of relief he turned to go, with such a look of happiness upon his face as it had not worn for years.

. . . . . .

'Get thee up, Brigida, dost thou not hear the bells?' cried the mother. 'Hark! we must not be late in going to the church to-day, to greet the Gesu Bambino.'

'Truly, mother,' answered Brigida, rubbing her eyes, 'the night has seemed so short, and I dreamed that I had been to greet Him already.' And her face shone with such a happy smile that the mother stooped down to kiss the sunshiny little face.

A shriek of joy from the other little bed made them start, and then they both laughed with joy too. For there sat Maria staring with big round eyes at the old wooden doll which dangled from the end of the bed in front of her.

'For me?' she shouted, stretching out her arms towards it. Then as it seemed as if it must be too good to be true, she cried again, 'For me?'

'But yes, it is thy festa gift,' said Brigida, with a wise little womanly shake of her head. 'I am growing too old for playthings, and this is for thy very own.'

Even Beppino set up a feeble little crow of pleasure as he listened to the shouts of delight which came from Maria's bed as she clasped the old doll tight in her arms, and the poor mother too smiled at the sound,

though her heart was heavy when she thought of the long day before her, and the very small piece of bread which was all she had to fill those hungry little mouths.

'Come, children,' she cried, 'let us hurry, or the bells will stop before we can reach the church.'

She wrapped Beppino in her old shawl and helped to fasten Maria's little frock, and then began to unlock the door.

'See, mother,' said Brigida, stooping down and lifting a piece of paper that lay there, 'some one has pushed this under the door.'

'Only a little piece of dirty paper,' said the mother, but as she opened it her face changed.

'Children, children,' she cried, 'it is a piece of silver, it is money to buy all we need to-day.'

She stood and gazed at the scrap of paper and the silver piece as if she were bewitched.

'Mammina,' shouted little Maria, tugging at her dress. 'It is a gift from the Gesu Bambino for His festa, is it not so?'

'Now we shall have a fat fowl and sweet chestnuts, and Beppino will have the good white milk he loves,' cried Brigida, as she hopped about with joy, while Maria joined in the dance.

But the mother did not seem to heed them. There was an awed, thankful look upon her face as she held the piece of money tightly in her hand.

'Hush, hush, children,' she said, 'make not so much noise. There is something else to think of first.

We must away to thank the Blessed Child for this His birthday gift.'

The streets were already filled with hurrying people, and the air was gay with the sound of the glad bells, as the little family wended its way to the square and up the steps to the front of the great church. The door stood open, and the mother had only to push the heavy leathern curtains aside to let the little ones pass in. But first she pulled her handkerchief over her head, and laid two little white squares on the curly heads of the two children.

Hand in hand they walked slowly up the great dim church to where a glow of light shone from the candles of a distant altar, and there on the pavement they knelt in solemn reverence. Even the baby face of Maria wore an awed look as she folded her hands together and tried to say her Latin prayer, which ended with her own words, 'And I thank Thee, Little Lord Jesus, for this Thy birthday gift.'

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There was a stir in the world of Art, and men crowded to the convent chapel to see the new picture, about which every one was talking.

'Really a wonderful piece of work,' said the prior, rubbing his hands with pride over his new possession. 'And to think that we never knew until now how great a painter dwelt in our city!'

'Ah, we knew him well enough,' said a brother artist standing near, 'but never before has he painted

like this. His work was always good, but it lacked life and soul.'

'It would seem he has found his soul at last then,' said another, 'or how could he have painted a face such as that?' and he pointed with a reverent gesture to the face of the Christ-child, which looked out from the picture with such divine beauty that even as men beheld it they bowed their heads in reverence before it.

'It is painted from no earthly model,' said the prior thoughtfully, gazing at the great Epiphany picture. 'One feels that such a face could only have been seen in some vision sent by God to gladden our dim eyes.'

MARZIALE, THE ROBBER CHIEF

In the long-ago stormy days of the Middle Ages, when might was right, and the weak were the prey of the strong, in one of the mountainous districts of Italy there lived a robber chief called Marziale.

When but a boy he had broken away from all restraint and gone to live among the mountains, free as the wild animals he loved. He was tall and strong, active as a panther, and with a certain fierce beauty which belongs to wild things. As time went on he gathered companions around him, and together they lived by robbery and plunder.

At first these young brigands only took what they needed for their daily bread, a lamb or a kid from the flocks grazing on the hillside, or a fresh batch of bread from the frightened housewife's store. But as they grew stronger and bolder they began to rob travellers of their gold and merchandise, and even took the few pence they could seize from the poor.

So powerful did this band of robbers become that at last, with Marziale at their head, they attacked and captured a splendid old castle which was built on the mountain-side, and there took up their abode. This

was better than living among the caves and holes of the rocks, and it was a safe place too, where they might hide their plunder.

Night after night the great hall rang with the wild noise of their rioting and revelling, until it seemed as if the very demons which were said to haunt those hills had come down to keep the robbers company.

In the daytime Marziale would look out from the watch-tower, like a cat stealthily waiting for her prey. All along the winding of the high-road his keen eye would sweep, and woe betide any traveller who passed unprotected along that way. It might be a rich noble going to Rome, with a train of frightened servants; it might be a friar ambling along on the convent donkey, or a poor woman laden with her market basket; it was all one to the robbers. Like some great bird of prey, Marziale would swoop down suddenly with so sure an aim and so sudden an onslaught that no one had ever been known to escape his clutches. If the traveller had money or goods, he was stripped of all and suffered to depart; but if he had nothing wherewith to satisfy the greed of the robber band, he was driven up to the castle and thrust into the dungeons, there to await possible ransom.

But while Marziale reigned like a king and boasted that there was no one who could stand against him, a silent enemy entered the castle and at his touch all Marziale's great strength and power were brought low. In the grip of a terrible fever Marziale tossed and

groaned and grew weaker day by day. His rough companions gave him but scant pity.

'He will die,' they said carelessly. 'We need no longer trouble ourselves about him. Let us rather decide now who shall be our chief when he is dead.'

In a little dark, bare room, without even a blanket to cover him, and with no one to give him the water he prayed for, they left Marziale to die.

But among the band of cruel, rough men there was one kind heart that beat with pity for the suffering chief. In the midst of that wilderness of poisonous weeds one pure flower lifted its white cup as fresh and untainted as if it had been reared in some fair lady's bower. The daughter of one of the robber band, she had known no other home than the old grey castle, and no other companions than those men of evil growth. But there she lived her lonely life apart, and her gentle nature remained unharmed.

Beatrice, for that was the maiden's name, never troubled herself about the wild life that went on around her. But there was one thing she could not bear. The sight of any creature suffering pain roused all the anger and sorrow which dwelt in her pitiful heart. Many a wounded animal had she saved and tended back to life, many a trapped creature had she set free. But most bitter of all to her was the thought of those poor prisoners driven like sheep into the dark dungeons. She spent many nights sobbing over the thought of what they suffered, and she would clench

her hands and pray for the coming of the day when she should be strong and able to set them free.

It was some time before she knew that the chief was ill, and then she scarcely dared to think of entering the little dark room. Every one feared that strong, terrible man who had never been known to give a kind word or gentle look even to his dog. But she crept silently to his door and stood listening there. A moan of pain reached her ears, and then the sound of a feeble voice asking over and over again for 'Water, water.'

In a moment Beatrice forgot her fear, forgot that it was the terrible captain who lay there. It was only some one in pain, some one who needed her help, and she swiftly opened the door and went in.

'Water, water,' came the cry again from the poor, dry throat, and in a few minutes Marziale's weary head was resting on her strong arm, as Beatrice held a goblet of cool fresh water to the parched lips. Then she brought her own blanket and wrapped it round him and placed a pillow under his head.

From the first moment she ceased to feel any fear of this man. She tended and nursed him as she had nursed many a wild animal which she had found caught in some trap on the mountain-side.

And so, instead of dying, Marziale began daily to grow better, and ere long the fever left him and his strength began to return.

It was one day when the joy of life once more was

stirring in his veins that the robber chief called Beatrice to sit by him.

'Tell me, little maid,' he said, 'why hast thou done all this for me?'

'Because thou wast in pain, and needed my help,' replied Beatrice promptly.

'By heaven, thou shalt have thy reward,' said the chief. 'When those dogs left me to die, thou alone didst have it in thy heart to care what should become of me. Tell me what reward shall I give thee? Nothing thou shalt ask will I deny thee, even if it be all the treasure I have heaped together in my hidden hoards.'

Beatrice did not answer at once. She sat with her chin leaning on her hand as she thoughtfully gazed out of the little barred window where the swallows swooped and twittered as they built their nests beneath the eaves. Those free and happy birds, it was a pleasure even to watch them. Oh, if only all might share their freedom and joy, and all suffering and pain be banished!

'I do not want thy gold,' she said at last slowly, 'for I seek no reward. But if indeed thou dost seek to pleasure me, give me the lives of those poor prisoners who even now are sighing in the dungeons beneath.'

Marziale looked at her in amazement.

'What are they to thee?' he asked. 'What should it matter to thee whether they go free or die in their dungeons? But thou shalt have thy way, for no man has ever said that Marziale broke his word.'


BEATRICE
AND MARZIALE

Beatrice bent down and gently touched one of the great wasted hands with her lips. She found no words to speak, but her thanks shone out of her eyes.

Marziale drew back his hand quickly, and muttered almost roughly that a strong man's hand was more fitted for work than foolish child's play. But his eyes watched her as she went to and fro about her work, and her happiness made him feel strangely content.

'Beatrice,' he began next day, 'before long I shall be myself again and take my place as chief. Then my hounds will once more come to heel. Thou hast chosen thy reward and hast had thy way. But I would choose a way as well, and it is this. Thou, too, shalt be at the head of this band, as thou alone art worthy. Say, then, little maid, wilt thou accept my choice and be my wife?'

He spoke eagerly, and a flush was upon his thin face, so that Beatrice feared the fever had returned.

'Yes, yes,' she said soothingly, 'I will do all that thou dost wish.'

Then she stood at the window and began to tell him how beautiful the outside world was looking. How spring had begun to touch the trees with her dainty green finger-tips, how many swallows had returned, how the corn was sprouting and the anemones were beginning to show purple and scarlet under the olive-trees. He scarcely seemed to listen, but her voice soothed him, and presently she knew he had fallen asleep.

'He will soon grow strong now,' she said to herself

softly, 'and when he is well he will quickly forget this idle fancy.'

But it was no idle fancy on the part of Marziale, and although his strength came back and he once more took command of the robber band, he did not forget his promise as Beatrice had expected.

'We must wait until we can lay hands upon some priest,' he said. 'The first that we can capture shall be brought up to the castle that he may wed us duly and in order.'

Time went on, and Beatrice almost felt as if it had all been a dream, for the old evil days of riot and plunder returned to the castle. Marziale was fiercer and more daring than ever, and Beatrice seldom saw him. Only the best room in the castle was now set aside for her use, and by Marziale's orders she was treated with every respect, and no one dared to molest her.

So she lived her old, lonely life apart, and each day she watched from the turret window the band of robbers ride out to rob and plunder, with Marziale at their head.

'How strong and brave he is!' she would cry proudly; 'no one can match him in strength and courage. And yet, methinks I loved him better when he lay so weak and helpless and needed all my care. All wild things grow gentle when they suffer, though one would not have them suffer always.'

At nights the noise of feasting and brawling was

louder than ever, but Beatrice had learned to pay but little heed to it. There came a night, however, when the noise was so great that she thought something unusual must be happening, and she stole downstairs and slipped into the banqueting-hall.

The reason of the noise was not far to seek. A poor, frightened old priest stood there, cowering and defenceless, while the savage crew of robbers made sport of him and roughly ill-treated him.

Beatrice's eyes blazed with indignation. She sprang forward and placed her hand on the arm of Marziale's chair.

'Cowards!' her voice rang fearlessly out. 'Twenty strong men to one poor weak old man. Shame on you! shame! Brave and fearless warriors, to make war on unarmed old men! Next time, perchance, it will be women and little children.'

A hoarse growl of rage like distant thunder broke out at her words. Marziale, with flaming eyes, sprang to his feet. Scarce knowing what he did in his anger, he raised his arm and struck Beatrice to the ground.

In the noise and confusion that followed Beatrice was carried up to her room, and the old priest was dragged off and thrust into the deepest dungeon of the castle.

All was quiet when Beatrice came to herself. The cool night wind blew through the open window, and the moonlight made bright patches of silver on the stone floor. She sat up and tried to think. Ah,

that poor old man! She had not helped him, but had rather done harm by her sudden burst of anger. She must think of some other way, if yet there was time.

At the door she stood and listened awhile, but not a sound broke the silence. The whole castle was in darkness save where the moonlight streamed through the barred windows. Turning back, she gathered up her blanket and pillow in her arms and then crept quietly down the winding stair and along the gloomy passages until she came to the banqueting-hall. Here again she listened, but only the sound of deep breathing was to be heard. She knew the ways of the robbers and their chief. When once they slumbered they were not lightly wakened.

Carefully then she threaded her way between the sleeping forms until she came to the head of the room where Marziale lay stretched out in his great chair. Yes, here was what she sought. The great bunch of keys hung at his girdle fastened by a thong of leather. With deft fingers Beatrice noiselessly unfastened the keys, only stopping once when the robber chief moved uneasily in his sleep. Then she took some food from the table and a pitcher of water, and like a little grey ghost she glided out as noiselessly as she had entered.

Down in the dungeon, meanwhile, the old priest knelt. He was sore and aching in every limb, and he could not sleep. The damp air seemed to choke him, and his throat was parched with thirst.

'O Lord, how long?' he cried, and as he knelt and prayed, suddenly it seemed as if a vision had been sent to comfort him. He thought the door of the dungeon swung slowly open and there stood an angel looking down on him with pitying eyes. A halo of soft, flame-like light shone round her head, and in one hand she held a goblet of cool, crystal water.

'Santa Maria, art thou come thyself to answer my poor prayers,' cried the old man in a trembling voice, 'or is this but a vision?'

The angel smiled, and a strong human hand was laid on the old man's shoulder.

'I am no vision,' she said, 'I am only a poor maiden who would gladly help thee. I have brought thee food and drink and covering to keep thee warm.'

Then she carried in the load of blankets and her own soft pillow, and prepared a bed for him to lie on. Gently raising him from the cold stones, she held the cool water to his lips, and gave him food, until his strength began to return. Not until then did she begin to question him.

'Hast thou friends without?' she asked anxiously. 'And will they offer a ransom for thee? It is thy only hope. Marziale, the man into whose power thou hast fallen, is the strongest man in all the world, and no one can stand against his will.'

'My child,' replied the old priest in a calm, untroubled voice, 'my Master is stronger than Marziale, and can deliver me if He will.'

'Who is thy master, and what is his name?' asked Beatrice eagerly.

'My Master is the King of Heaven, and men call Him the Christ,' answered the old man reverently.

Then in a weak, low voice he began to tell Beatrice all his Master's story. The wonderful birth heralded by the angels; the brave, unselfish life; the cruel death and triumphant resurrection. And as he spoke his voice grew strong and clear, and a light as if from heaven shone on his suffering, weary face.

Beatrice listened as if spell-bound. She had never heard anything like this before.

'Where is thy Master to be found?' she asked. 'Tell me quickly, for I must tell all this to Marziale. He will surely take service under such a King.'

The old priest shook his head sadly.

'His service is not what thou thinkest, my daughter,' he said. 'And why dost thou take such an interest in this robber chief? I myself saw him strike thee to the ground.'

'I had angered him, and it was but a small matter,' said Beatrice carelessly. 'To thee, perhaps, he seemeth cruel and rough, but I love him, and ere long I shall marry him. But see, the dawn is breaking, and I dare stay no longer to talk with thee. To-morrow I will come again.'

The sun had risen, and the busy stir of morning sounded in the castle before Marziale moved uneasily in his seat and stretched himself. He was still half

asleep as his hands felt for the keys which always hung at his girdle, but failing to find them he grew alert and wide-awake in a moment. Who had dared to meddle with those keys ? He jumped to his feet and looked about him, fiercely seeking for the thief.

But the room was empty, and as he looked around the only thing his eye lighted on was a little white figure lying fast asleep in the broad window-seat, with the huge bunch of keys hanging loosely in her hands.

The anger died out of Marziale's eyes as he stood looking down on the sleeping face, but even as he looked she awoke and gazed up smiling into his face.

'So, thou hast been at thy tricks again,' he said, as he grimly pointed at the keys upon her lap.

But Beatrice was not in the least ashamed or afraid. She jumped up and laughed with glee as she jingled the great bunch of keys before him in tune with her laughter.

'Come, come,' she said, 'never heed the keys and look not so grim. I have a wonderful tale to tell thee,' and she dragged him down on to the seat next to her, and began eagerly to tell him all that she had done, and all that the old priest had told her.

At first Marziale was impatient and inclined to be angry, but by-and-bye he grew interested and listened intently.

'I will go to the old man myself and hear this wonderful story,' he said at last.

Long and silently the robber chief sat and listened

as the old man told his tale. It was indeed a wonderful story, but, above all, something in Marziale's heart seemed to tell him that it was not only wonderful but true. And if it was indeed true, how black and hideous must his life seem in the eyes of that calm, brave warrior King.

'Old man,' he cried at last, 'show me a way by which I may seek pardon and take service under this King of kings.'

'There is but one way,' answered the old man solemnly. 'Confess thy sins one by one, and perchance He may pardon thee.'

But as Marziale knelt on the cold, damp dungeon floor and began to confess all the evil he had done, a cold horror crept over the old priest. It was so terrible even to listen to the wild tale of sin that the very hair rose from his head and he could only gaze in terror and dismay at the man who knelt there telling of such dreadful deeds. Surely a demon could not have a worse tale to tell.

There was a deep silence when Marziale had finished, and the old priest buried his face in his hands as if he dared not look upon such a monster.

'Oh, horrible, horrible!' he cried. 'Thou hast indeed sold thy soul to the Evil One. There is no hope of pardon for such crimes as these.'

Then a terrible dark cloud seemed to fall on Marziale and to shut out all light from his soul. He could neither eat nor drink nor sleep, and all day long he

groaned in deep despair. Day followed day and brought no light to the black darkness of his soul, and all the time Beatrice never left him. By his side she knelt and tried to pray for pardon, but she could find no words, and the sobs choked her as she watched his dumb misery.

At last, when the robber chief was wasted away to a gaunt shadow, and he had scarcely strength even to moan, she heard a faint whisper come from his lips, and bending down she caught the word ' forgive.'

' Oh, come quickly ! ' she cried to the old priest who waited in a room near by, ' he is praying, and surely the King will pardon.'

' There can be no forgiveness for such as he,' said the old priest sternly. But Beatrice took no heed.

' He must, he must be forgiven,' she cried, ' and thou must bid him hope.'

But when together they reached the little chamber it was too late for any word of comfort to reach that poor, despairing soul. Marziale lay stretched out dead upon the floor.

Very bitter were the tears which Beatrice shed, for they came from a broken heart. But in the midst of her great sorrow there was one ray of light which pierced through the gloom. Marziale had prayed for pardon, and surely God had forgiven. The King was more merciful than His servants.

But the old priest could not share that comfort, and he gave his orders mournfully that the chief

should not be buried in any holy ground, but that a grave should be digged in the courtyard of the castle.

All the robber band gathered round the grave, and Beatrice, white and calm, knelt beside the body of the dead chief. The old priest talked long and earnestly to that grim company, and pointed out the terrible example of their leader, and bade them one and all take heed and repent while yet there was time.

But as he spoke Beatrice did not seem to listen, but lifted her head and looked up into the sky with an eager, wondering expression in her eyes. Her earnest gaze drew other eyes to look upward, too, and a great silence fell upon them all.

A spot of light shone in the blue above, which gradually grew whiter and whiter until it took the form of a dove. Nearer and nearer it flew till it hovered above their heads and then gently descended. The wondering company saw that it held in its beak a little golden leaf or tablet, and this it gently laid upon the dead man's lips. Then, with scarce a flutter of its wings, up again it flew, up and away until it was lost in the blue haze of the summer sky.

Awe-struck and with trembling hands Beatrice lifted the little gold leaf and saw in shining letters the blessed words 'Pardon and peace.' The white dove had brought the message to comfort and assure her, for the King had indeed forgiven, and Marziale was pardoned.

Then the old priest knelt down and humbly prayed for forgiveness for himself. Never again did he doubt God's mercy, and never again was he heard to say that any man's sins were too great to shut him out from the hope of pardon and peace.

THE ANGELS' ROBE

'WHY art thou crying, bambina mia?' asked the grandmother kindly as Angelina crept close to the old woman's chair and hid her little wet face in the rough woollen skirt. 'Ah! but I can guess without any words. It is hard, is it not, to be left at home to look after little Giovanino and the old grandmother, while all the rest have gone to the great city to see the festa. And it is hard, too, never to have a pair of shoes or a bright new handkerchief nor any pretty necklace such as other little maidens wear.'

'O Nonna,' said Angelina, lifting her tear-stained face, 'how canst thou know it all? I think the blessed saints must tell thee all my secrets.'

The old woman smiled and stroked the little brown head.

'It needs no telling to guess such things,' she said. 'It needs but the old memory of what another little girl used to feel to make me understand what goes on in thy little head. See here, bring thy stool and sit down close to me, and while the bambinetto sleeps so soundly in his cradle I will tell thee a story with a wonderful secret which will help thee to bear all thy troubles.

'It was in this very village and in this very house that there lived, long years ago, a little maid, whose name, like thine, was Angelina. She was but eight years old when she learned the wonderful secret of which I shall tell thee, so thou seest she was not very old and could not yet have been very wise.

'She was not much like her name, this little Angelina. When we think of angels we picture them tall and beautiful, with golden hair and wearing wonderful robes of white, while Angelina was short and square, with dark, straight hair and a little round face, which, though it looked honest and pleasant, could never be called beautiful. And then her clothes! How unlike they were to the white robes of the angels which one sees in the holy pictures. She had, like thee, an old blue petticoat faded into so pale a colour, that only the patches showed how gay the blue had once been. Her camicetta had all its red washed out, so that it only kept the faint colour of the apricot, and the old orange handkerchief which she tied over her dark hair was little more than a rag.

'And if there was one thing more than another that Angelina loved and longed for, it was to have fine clothes. Once or twice since she had grown old enough for the walk, she had gone with her father to the distant town, built high up on the hill. She had trotted along the winding white road and climbed up to the city gates and entered what seemed to her a paradise.

'For there, in the churches, she saw wonderful pictures of blue-robed Madonnas, and angels with gold-embroidered robes. And almost better still, she would catch glimpses of noble ladies as they came out of their palaces and stepped into their carriages. How her eyes would shine at the sight of the flowing silks, rich velvets, and dainty lace. She felt as if she had had a glimpse of heaven. Of course all these soft, fine garments of wondrous colour were only fit for noble ladies—for the Madonna and holy angels. But oh! how she longed sometimes, when she sat at home sewing a new patch on the old blue petticoat, for something new and bright. If she could have even a new handkerchief, or a little necklace such as Margherita who lived next door so proudly wore on Sundays! The envious tears filled Angelina's eyes when she thought of Margherita, who wore shoes on festa days and carried a white handkerchief with her prayer-book when she went to Mass.

'It always made the child cross and impatient when such thoughts filled her head, and one day she had even slapped Tommaso's little chubby hands when in his play he had torn the yellow handkerchief off her head and made another rent in the faded border. But when he sobbed with hurt feelings and smarting knuckles she took him in her arms and comforted him again, for she was really a kind-hearted little maid. Then she told him stories of all the grand times that were coming when she would have as many gay silk

handkerchiefs as she wanted, and he should have a little green hat with a long red feather and a golden clasp.

'The children always loved to listen to Angelina's stories. She seemed to open a little door and take them into a beautiful new world where every one wore gay clothes and splendid jewels, where the children played with golden toys, and the Madonna and saints looked on with the shining halos round their heads.

'"Where dost thou fill thy head with all that nonsense?" her mother would ask. "Come, there is no time for idle tales, when so much work is waiting to be done."

'There was, indeed, little time for idling now that Angelina was old enough to help in the house. There was Tommaso to be washed and dressed and kept out of mischief, the baby to be carried about until he slept, and the sheep to be tended on the hillside and led safely home at night.

'Then came a day when there was quite a stir in the village, and Angelina came home at dusk breathless with the news she had to tell.

'The great lord who owned the castle close by was coming home, they said, and would bring with him a beautiful young bride. Many gay nobles and ladies would also come in his train, and the procession would pass close to the village next day. It was to be a great festa for every one, and already they were

beginning to weave garlands of flowers and green leaves.

'"Well," said Angelina's mother, when she heard the great news, "thou hast been a good child of late, and to-morrow thou shalt have a whole holiday to see the show."

'The little maid could scarcely sleep that night, her head was so full of pleasure and excitement. There was only one little cloud to shadow her happiness. If only she had something gay to wear, something that would show it was a festa day! But all the wishing in the world wouldn't buy her a new handkerchief or take away the patches on her petticoat, so she tried not to think of it, and by-and-bye she fell asleep.

'The next day she woke very early and crept quietly out of doors before any one was awake. What if it should be raining! But no, the sun was beginning to rise clear and bright and the mists were rolling back. All was fair for the great holiday.

'Angelina's little bare feet danced along with joy as she went down the path and scrambled up the banks in search of wild flowers. Before long she had filled her hands with sweet violets and sat down contentedly to tie them into bunches. There was no need to hurry home, for this was a holiday, and there was no work to do.

'But presently she heard her mother call to her, and she went quickly towards the house, for the voice sounded sharp and troubled.

'"Where hast thou been, child?" said her mother, who sat rocking the baby in her arms and looking down at it with an anxious face. "I have been calling and calling for thee. The little one is ill, I fear. See how hot and flushed he is, and I cannot stop his wailing. Thou must go off to the town as fast as thy feet can carry thee. I have no one else to send. The good doctor there will give thee the medicine he needs."

'"O mother," burst from Angelina's lips, "but this is the festa day, and I was to have a holiday to see the grand procession of lords and ladies."

'"I wish thou hadst a wiser head, and cared less for gay sights and grand clothes," said her mother sharply. "But to-day there can be no holiday for thee. Thou must be gone at once, and even so thou wilt scarcely be back before nightfall, the way is so long. But see that thou dost not linger and that the medicine is carried carefully home."

'Angelina did not answer, but listened silently while her mother gave her the directions how to find the doctor when once she should reach the town. Then she turned obediently and began to go down the steep mountain path that led to the high-road below.

'But though she seemed so quiet and obedient, her heart was full of bitter disappointment and angry thoughts.

'As long as she was in sight of the little house she walked swiftly on, but by-and-bye, when she reached

the white, dusty high-road, her feet began to drag slowly along until at last she stopped and sat down on the grass at the wayside.

'It really was very hard that the baby should fall ill that one day of all others. It was very hard that she must fetch the medicine. It was very hard that she should never have a holiday, but always work from morning until night, and have such poor clothes to wear.

'The sun was shining brightly now, but there was no sunshine in Angelina's face. A sullen, dark cloud had gathered there. She pushed the white dust to and fro with her little brown toes, and then began to make now a round O, now a cross with her great toe, as if that was the most important work in the world.

'"I wish," she went on, muttering gloomily to herself, "I wish I had a pair of shoes. When I am always sent so far to fetch whatever is needed, it wears out all the soles of my feet."

'She stopped drawing crosses and turned up one foot to see if there were any holes or worn-out places. It was quite a disappointment to find the sole as hard and firm as a piece of tanned leather.

'Then a gentler look began to steal over the sullen little face, and she looked soberly down at the crosses in the dust. They reminded her of the words of the kind old priest when he had explained to her the meaning of a cross and had bidden her always try to do her duty as cheerfully as possible. In a moment

the clouds broke and the sunshine once more shone in Angelina's eyes.

'"To think," she said, "that I should care more for fine sights than the poor bambinetto! But he shall have his medicine now as quickly as I can fetch it."

'She started at a steady trot along the road, eager to make up for lost time, and thinking only now of the sick baby and poor, anxious mother at home. She had many a mile to go before she came to the hill on which the town was built, and then there was a weary climb before she reached the city gates. The little maid was indeed very hot and very tired by the time she had done her mother's bidding and could turn her face homewards carrying the precious medicine bottle rolled up safely in her apron. She never stopped to look at the shops or the gay crowds to-day, but as she passed a little quiet church she slipped in and knelt for a moment in a dim corner before her favourite picture of the Madonna and white-robed angels.

'Very carefully then she unwrapped the precious little bottle from her apron and held it out in both hands.

'"Mary Mother," she prayed, "for the sake of the Gesu Bambino, bless our bambinetto and grant that this medicine may make him better."

'The Madonna looked down with such kind eyes that Angelina was sure that all would be well, and

it was with a happy heart that she left the church and started on her homeward way.

'The sun was beginning to set when at last Angelina came in sight of the little village and turned from the high-road to climb the mountain pathway. She was very tired, and just then she knocked her foot against a great stone that lay in the way. The pain was sharp, and she stopped for a moment to rest by the roadside to rub the place that hurt so badly.

'She was bending down to touch the foot just to see how much it was hurt when something bright caught her eye shining there in the dust. It was something that shone as brightly as a star. She stretched out her hand and lifted it up and then gave a cry of surprise and delight. It was a beautiful gold brooch set with shining jewels. The light that looked like a star came from the white stone in the middle, and round it was a circle of stones blue as the summer sky.

'For a moment Angelina gazed at the beautiful thing lying in her hand, as if she could not believe it was real. She rubbed her eyes to be sure she was awake and not dreaming. Then she looked upwards as if she thought it must have fallen from the sky. Surely such a beautiful thing could not belong to earth ?

'Then in a moment she guessed where it had come from. There were marks of carriage wheels and many feet in the white dust of the high-road.

The lords and ladies had surely passed by that way, and one of the beautiful ladies must have dropped this treasure.

'But even as these thoughts came rushing through her mind, her hand closed tightly over the brooch. She knew that it did not belong to her, and that she must at once show it to her mother, and then take it to the old priest, who would return it to the beautiful lady.

'But oh! if only she might keep it, just for a few hours. It could do no harm if she hid it for one night and looked at it once more in the morning. The longer she looked at it the more she felt that she could not part with it at once, and so at last she pinned it inside a fold of her camicetta, and when it was quite hidden she got up and limped slowly home.

'The mother was standing watching for the child as Angelina came up the path.

'"Thou art a good little messenger," she said, "and hast done thine errand quickly. After all, though, there was no need for such great haste, for the little one is better."

'"Ah!" said Angelina, "I knew the Madonna would not forget him."

'Then she stopped, and a troubled look came into her eyes. Somehow she felt ashamed to think of the kind, gentle look upon the Madonna's face. Would the Madonna smile upon her so kindly now?

'"Thou art tired, child," said her mother; "come in and rest. I have saved thy dinner for thee."

'But Angelina was not very hungry and did not seem inclined to rest.

'"The walk has overtired thee," said her mother kindly. "Go now to bed and sleep soundly until the morning."

'Angelina crept into bed and shut her eyes as if she were asleep. But her head was full of busy thoughts. She had slipped the wonderful brooch under her pillow and lay holding it with one little hot hand. Would the Madonna and the Gesu Bambino be angry with her for hiding this treasure? But whatever happened she could not part with it. She thought if she might only keep it she would never be unhappy again. What did it matter if her clothes were old and patched and she had no shoes, if only she might always keep the beautiful brooch. So at last she fell asleep dreaming of stars that shone in a blue sky.

'Next morning she woke with the remembrance that something wonderful had happened. Then she quickly thrust her hand under her pillow to feel if the brooch were really there. She dared scarcely look at it, but once more pinned it carefully in the folds of her dress and went softly out of doors.

'When she reached the shelter of the olive-trees and had seated herself behind one of the old, gnarled grey trunks, she felt at last that it was safe to take

out her treasure. Oh, how beautiful it was! Almost more beautiful in the clear morning light than she had dreamed it could be. She held it up to catch the sunbeams that came sliding through the silver screen of the olive leaves, then she pinned it in the front of her old red camicetta, and sat silent with clasped hands and burning cheeks.

'What visions of splendour filled her head. She was no longer a little, ragged, bare-footed child sitting in an olive wood, but a grand lady in a flowing silken gown and scarlet pointed shoes. All around her were other gay ladies, but they all looked with envy upon her, and pointed at the wonderful star with its circle of blue, which shone upon her breast.

'But there was not much time for day-dreams, and soon the brooch was hidden away again and Angelina went back to her work. Strange to say, she did not feel as happy as usual that day. Nothing seemed to go well. She was impatient with the children and careless about her work, which made her mother scold. But worst of all was the strange, frightened feeling that seemed to choke her when she saw the old priest come slowly up the path towards the house. How glad she had always been to see him before. Why was it that now she only wished she might run away, and hide her burning cheeks?

'Even before the old man began to speak she guessed why he had come. But she listened eagerly while he told her mother how one of the ladies at the

castle had lost a valuable brooch and how it was thought it might be lying along the road. Of course, if any one found it, they would bring it at once to him, but he wanted all the children to look carefully for it.

'"The little ones have such sharp eyes," he said. And then patting Angelina's head he added, "And this little maid has, I know, a special eye for beautiful things."

'Then he asked how little Giovannino fared, and smiled down very kindly on Angelina when he heard the tale of her lost holiday and the long walk to fetch the medicine.

'"There is a special blessing on feet that cheerfully run errands for others," he said. "I think the angels make golden shoes for such little feet."

'But Angelina's heart was heavy, and the kindly words of the old priest only seemed to make her more unhappy. If his eyes could but see what was hidden in the folds of her dress, would he still look so kindly on her?

'There was much talk among the village folk about the missing brooch. They searched for it high and low, but not a trace of it could be found. Often when she listened to the talk Angelina's little guilty heart would thump so loudly that she wondered every one around her did not hear the beating noise.

'She scarcely dared take the beautiful thing out now to look at it, and she almost began to wish she had never seen it. Night after night she sobbed her-

self to sleep, and those tears seemed gradually to wash away all the longing to keep the forbidden treasure.

'Then at last she could bear it no longer, and very early one morning, before the village was astir, she found her way to the old priest's house. She waited patiently outside the door until the church bell began to ring, and then she saw him come out and cross the path towards the church.

'At first the old man did not notice the child, but presently a gentle pull at his cassock made him look down.

'"Why, what is the matter, little one?" he said. "Is the bambinetto ill again?"

'But Angelina only shook her head. She was sobbing so bitterly that she could not speak.

'"Come and tell me all about it," said the kind old voice, and he took her hand and led her back into the house.

'It was a long story and Angelina could not tell it very clearly, but the old priest understood. He took the brooch from the little trembling hand and locked it carefully away. Then he sat looking at the child with grave, kind eyes.

'"Ah," he said, "thou hast learned the lesson that fine things cannot make thee happy, and an honest and clear conscience is worth all the jewels in the world. It matters but little if we wear old and patched earthly garments, if only our heavenly

robe is kept pure and stainless. But now as thou hast done thy best to right the wrong, I will not punish thee. Only remember the lesson thou hast learnt."

'What a different world it seemed to Angelina as she knelt in the quiet little church that sunny morning listening to the old priest's voice as he chanted the service. She was no longer ashamed to think of the Madonna and the holy angels. It seemed as if a dark cloud had been rolled away.

'And then as she knelt a strange thing happened.

'She thought one of those same white-robed angels stood at her side, and bending down gently took her hand and led her up a flight of golden steps until they came to a shining room. There other angels sat at work, and before them lay a beautiful shining white robe, sewed with pearls and precious jewels, more exquisite than anything Angelina had ever dreamed of. And as she gazed spell-bound one of the angels put beside it a pair of little golden shoes.

'"These are for the little feet that are never too tired to run errands for others," said the angel with a gentle smile.

'"We have sewn her robe with every kind act and unselfish thought that we could gather," said another, "for we must make it fit to be worn in the presence of the King. But alas! there is here one stain we cannot cover."


THESE ARE FOR THE LITTLE FEET THAT ARE
NEVER TOO TIRED TO RUN ERRANDS FOR OTHERS
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'Angelina hung her head and a great sob choked her, but the angel who held her hand looked down with a comforting smile.

'"See," the angel said, "I have brought something that will quite cover the stain."

'The angel held out an open hand, and there on the palm lay some wondrous gleaming pearls, large enough to cover the ugly mark upon the robe.

'"Tears of repentance and sorrow," said the angel; "the robe is not spoilt after all."

'Then the vision faded and Angelina found she was kneeling in the church and the service was ended.

'But she never forgot the secret of that heavenly robe. What did it matter now if she had only old worn clothes and a faded handkerchief? Her robe was in the angels' keeping, and her only care would be to see that nothing should ever again stain its pure beauty.'

The old grandmother's voice ceased, and little Angelina looked up with an awed light in her eyes.

'Of course, after she saw the angels' robe she would never care if her petticoat was old and her feet were bare,' she said thoughtfully.

'No,' said her grandmother, 'for she knew that some day she would wear those golden shoes.'

'And was she very, very careful never to stain the robe again?' asked Angelina.

A sad look came into the old grandmother's eyes.

'She tried her very best,' she said, 'but I fear there were many stains that spoilt the angels' work.'

'But there would always be the sorry tears to cover them,' said Angelina, 'and the kind angel would gather them safely as they fell.'

'Ah, yes,' said the grandmother softly, 'thou art right, little one. There is no white robe that is not sewn with pearls.'

A TALE OF OLD FLORENCE

THERE were many enemies outside the gates of the fair City of Flowers, and many a war did she wage with envious neighbours, but even now, when quietness reigned without, there was little peace to be found within. The two great families of the Buondalmonti and the Bardi kept the city in constant turmoil. They were both strong and powerful, proud and overbearing, and though the quarrel between the families was so old that scarcely one of them remembered what it was about, still they hated each other with hearty, unquestioning hatred, just as their fathers had done before them.

Of course the servants and followers of the different houses kept up the quarrel even more fiercely than their masters. Whenever, by evil chance, they happened to meet in some narrow street, neither would give way to let the other pass, and there would begin at once a fierce fight and a call for help until the whole quarter rang with the uproar. 'A Bardi, a Buondalmonti' was shouted from every side, while all friends and enemies hastened to join in the fray.

But, after all, the Florentines were used to quarrels and bloodshed, and they never allowed such things

to interfere with their holidays and merry-makings. So it was that on the Feast of San Giovanni, when this story begins, all Florence was blithe and gay and bent on pleasure, though the prudent did not forget to carry a weapon handy in case of need.

From early morning the bells had rung out. Coloured cloths and gay carpets hung out from every window. In the great square the city banners were floating in the breeze, and throngs of country-people came hurrying through the gates, all dressed in holiday attire. The churches were hung with crimson silk and velvet hangings, and a blaze of candles lit up each altar in honour of the festa of the patron saint of Florence.

It was in the church of San Giovanni that the principal service of the day was held, and in the crowd of nobles who thronged the place, many a fair young face was to be seen, beautiful as the flowers that give the city its name. But there was one face more lovely than all the rest, or at least so it seemed to a young man who stood leaning against a pillar, with eyes intent upon a maiden who knelt close by. She was tall and slender, with a wealth of golden hair in which shone the soft gleam of pearls cunningly twisted among the braids. Her white silk robe edged with shining embroideries hung in long, straight folds around her, and gave her the look of some fair, slender lily. But it was the beauty of her face and her innocent, star-like eyes that kept the young Ippolito Buondalmonti spell-bound,


DIANORA.
K.C.

and made him forget to kneel and join in the prayers with the other worshippers.

Who could she be? Ippolito knew most of the noble Florentine ladies by sight, but he had never seen this fair maid before. As he stood gazing, there was a stir among the crowd, and with a start the young man realised that the service was over and people were preparing to leave the church. Quickly he elbowed his way till he reached the great door and then waited until his fair vision should come out.

He had not long to wait, and then it was an easy matter to keep her in sight, for there were so many people hurrying along the streets that no one could notice if she was followed. Darting in and out, sometimes close and sometimes further off, he never lost sight of her until she and her companion turned into the narrow, gloomy street of the Via dei Bardi, and he saw her about to mount the steps of a grim old palace there.

Ippolito hurried forward and stood at the side of the door, and as she turned her head their eyes met. With deep reverence the young man lifted his plumed cap and bared his head. The maiden started and for a moment looked almost afraid. Her companion had gone on in front and had noticed nothing, so the maiden looked timidly again at the handsome young man who made such a brave show standing there in his sky-blue embroidered doublet and mantle and silken hose. Then a half-mischievous smile lit up

her face, and although she knew full well that no well-brought-up maiden should take notice of a stranger, be he never so handsome, she waved her hand and ran lightly up the steps after her companion.

There were several loiterers in the street, and Ippolito turned to a man who stood idly leaning against the wall, munching his midday meal of black bread and onions.

'Canst thou tell me what palace that is?' asked Ippolito, pointing to the grim old doorway where his vision had disappeared.

'Art thou a Florentine and yet dost not know the palace of the Bardi?' answered the man. 'Why, thou wilt be asking next where dwell the Buondalmonti?'

Ippolito started and bit his lips. If this was indeed true, all his new-born hopes were dashed to the ground. If the maiden belonged to the hated family of the Bardi, there was but little chance they would ever meet, for never was the feud between the families fiercer than now.

It did not take long to find out all that he wished to know, and, alas, his worst fears turned out to be well founded.

The maiden's name was Dianora, the only child of the stern old Bardi. She was but sixteen years old and motherless. Brought up by an aged aunt, she led a lonely, dull life in the grim old palace, with no companions of her own age.

It was little wonder then that the face of the handsome young stranger whom she had seen on the festa day should haunt her thoughts. The very next time she went out for one of her solemn, stately walks on the Piazza with her father, she could not help smiling to herself when she saw the same face watching her from a distance, and caught a glimpse of a plumed cap swept low, as she turned to enter the palace gateway.

That night, when the moonbeams slanted their way into the narrow street, she heard the sound of soft music below, and when she noiselessly opened her window and looked down, there was the same handsome face upturned and the wistful eyes lifted towards her window, as the notes of a love-song and the gentle music of a guitar floated on the night air.

But though Ippolito caught these glimpses of his fair lady, he could do no more. It seemed hopeless to dream that they would ever learn to know each other. Yet the more and more hopeless it became the more Ippolito's heart was set upon it.

He began to grow thin and worn and could neither eat nor sleep, until at last he thought of a plan. He had an old friend, Madonna Contessa, who had always been good to him, and had taken no part in the family quarrels. She was a kind, sensible person, and knew Dianora, so one day poor Ippolito went to her and told her all his story.

'Now, are there not enough fair maidens in Florence

to choose from, that thou must needs fix on a daughter of the Bardi ? ' asked Madonna Contessa, shaking her wise old head.

' There is but one Dianora,' said Ippolito sadly.

' Ah, well,' said she, folding her hands and looking across to the blue hills that were growing misty in the dim magic of the twilight hour, ' I have not forgotten the dreams and disappointments of my youth, and I would fain make two young hearts happy. But it is a difficult and a dangerous task.'

' If I may but touch her hand and speak to her,' sighed Ippolito.

' Well, at least I can promise thee so much,' answered Madonna Contessa briskly. ' This very week I celebrate here the feast of the vintage, and Dianora Bardi shall be among my guests. Behave thyself wisely and leave it to me. All will go well, as thou shalt see.'

The summer was passing over and it was time for the grapes to be gathered in when Madonna Contessa invited her friends to the great feast held every year in honour of the vintage. The young people came early, and soon the vineyard was thronged with gaily dressed youths and maidens, and there was much laughing and merry chatter as they gathered the purple clusters of grapes that hung from the leafy festoons of the vines.

Ippolito had arrived first of all, but he was not among the gatherers in the vineyard. In a quiet,

cool parlour of the villa he waited with beating heart, striving to be patient until Dianora should appear. He had not long to wait, for very soon the curtain was drawn aside and the kind old Contessa entered with Dianora at her side. It seemed to Ippolito as if suddenly the whole world was flooded with sunshine, and he knew at last what happiness meant.

How much they had to say to each other, and how quickly the time sped past! It seemed as if they had scarcely met when it was time to part.

'Thou wilt be true to me?' said Ippolito as he bade her adieu.

'I will be true till death,' said Dianora; 'but I fear there is naught but trouble in store for us. Dost thou think my father will ever consent to my marriage with a Buondalmonti?'

'Then we shall find a way to wed without his consent,' said Ippolito gaily.

But though they both tried to speak so bravely they knew they would be parted for ever if the secret of their friendship became known to either of those fierce families.

So time went on, bringing no hope of happier days, until at last Ippolito determined to take matters into his own hands. He thought if Dianora was once his wife no power on earth could part them, and together they would brave any fate in store.

So once more the kind old Contessa stood their friend and she arranged for a priest to come to the

villa, and one happy day Dianora and Ippolito were married there in the little private chapel, with only the quiet sculptured angels to look on, and the birds to sing the wedding hymn of praise from the green boughs of the trees that shaded the open windows.

Still no one guessed their secret, and Dianora lived on as usual her quiet, dull life in the old palace of the Via dei Bardi. But her heart was light, and she dreamed of happy days that must surely come if only she waited patiently.

But to wait patiently was exactly the one thing that Ippolito could not do, and very soon he contrived to tell her of a plan he had arranged which would bring them many happy meetings. With a long silken ladder coiled under his cap, he made his way one dark night to the Via dei Bardi, when the old palace looked more grim and forbidding by night than even by day. There was a faint light in one window, however, and Ippolito's heart beat with happiness as he stood below and softly gave the signal they had agreed to use. The window was opened very quietly, and soon a cord came dangling down. Swiftly and silently Ippolito fastened his ladder to the cord and waited breathlessly while it was pulled up and he could feel it securely fastened above.

But, alas! for the careful plan. Scarcely had Ippolito began to climb than there was a sudden clanking sound of weapons, and a crowd of armed

servants came hurrying out of the Bardi palace waving torches and swords.

There hung Ippolito defenceless, at their mercy, and in a moment he was seized, dragged down, and securely bound.

'A robber! a robber!' they cried; 'away with him to the Bargello.'

But when they arrived at the city guard-house and they asked him his name, great was their surprise to learn he was a young noble, and one belonging to the house of their enemy the Buondalmonti.

'What was thy errand at the palace when thou wert found?' they asked, perplexed.

'To rob,' said Ippolito boldly, for nothing would tempt him to betray Dianora.

'And what then?' they said.

'To set fire to my enemy's palace,' said Ippolito recklessly.

Here was wickedness indeed, and it was high time such a bold young robber should be caught and securely locked up.

In the morning, when the old Bardi learned of the capture, he rubbed his hands with glee.

'Aha!' said he, 'we have made a famous capture this time. With this weapon we will strike a final blow at the pride of the house of Buondalmonti.'

It was the time for the morning meal, and Dianora and her aunt were seated at the table when the old Bardi came in with the news.

'Dost know young Ippolito Buondalmonti?' he asked. 'A gay young cock that will soon cease to crow. We have caught him red-handed trying to break into the palace last night with intent to rob and plunder.'

'To rob and plunder?' echoed Dianora. 'Surely that could not be.'

'Ay, and he was seized under thy very window,' said her father grimly, 'and soon he will swing in a different manner.'

Dianora turned deadly white and gazed with terrified eyes at her father's angry face.

'Do not frighten the maid with thy tales of midnight robbers,' said her old aunt crossly; 'see how pale she grows. It is enough to terrify any one to hear of such deeds.'

'Tush, tush, keep up a stout heart, little daughter,' said the old man. 'We have this gay young robber safely under guard at the Bargello, and soon there will be no more climbing of palace walls for him.'

Poor Dianora clasped her hands together in agony. Oh, if only she were brave enough to confess the truth. She tried to speak, but the words died away, for she dared not face her father's terrible anger. She could only creep away to her own room and sob her heart out with fear and grief.

Meanwhile Ippolito was taken before the podestà, or chief magistrate of Florence, and again examined. It seemed difficult to believe that a young noble could

be a common thief, and he was asked again and again why he had tried to enter the palace. But nothing could move him to confess. He held Dianora's honour dearer than his life, and his only answer was that he had gone there to plunder and to burn down his enemy's house. In vain his powerful family offered to pay a fine or undergo any sacrifice if he might be set free. The laws of Florence were strict, and the podestà refused to be bribed. There was but one sentence for such a crime, and Ippolito must die.

Now it was the custom in Florence that any one condemned to death should be granted one last request, and when in the early morning Ippolito was led out to his execution he prayed that he might pass by way of the Via dei Bardi instead of by the usual road. The wish was granted, although it was a long way round, for they fancied the young man might desire to beg forgiveness ere he died.

It was a mild spring day, and the sun was just glinting over the roofs of the houses and scarcely yet lighting up the gloom of the narrow street, when the procession turned into the Via dei Bardi. There, in front, walked the frati chanting their solemn prayers, then came the soldiers, then the guard with Ippolito bound between them. The young noble walked with firm steps and head proudly erect, and he never paused until they were beneath the palace windows. Then his steps faltered a moment and he cast one swift glance upwards to the window of Dianora's

room. Ah, yes! he knew she would be there. For a moment they looked into each other's eyes, and he gave a silent gesture of farewell which she alone saw, and then passed on.

That look was more than Dianora could bear. It was early morning, and she still wore only her white night-robe, while her hair hung unbound in a golden cloud about her shoulders. But she did not pause to think of that. In an instant she had opened the door and flown down the stairs, and before the procession could pass she was among the crowd, parting the soldiers from right to left. She never paused until she reached the prisoner and clasped her arms around his neck.

'He is innocent, innocent,' she sobbed out. 'He is my husband.'

In a moment all was noise and confusion, while the old Bardi appeared in a furious rage.

'She is mad,' he shouted; 'the fright has turned her brain, poor maid. Carry her in and pay no heed to her raving.'

But Dianora clung all the more tightly round her husband's neck, and repeated in a clear, steady voice, 'Indeed it is naught but the truth; he is my husband, and he is innocent.'

In vain the Bardi tried to carry her off, until one of the frati, who perhaps had heard Ippolito's confession and knew the truth, interfered.

'Mad or not, the maiden must come with us before

the podestà that we may make inquiry into this,' he said.

They wrapped a cloak around Dianora's trembling form, and gently carried her with them, soothing her fears and telling her all would be well.

The whole story was soon told, and Ippolito was set free from his bonds. Then the chiefs of the city ordered that the Bardi and the Buondalmonti should appear before them.

'Is it not time that your senseless quarrelling and unmeaning hatred should cease?' they sternly asked. 'Your son and daughter are married, and nothing can undo the deed. It were better to join hands now and henceforth forget your feud.'

So it was agreed that there should be peace between the families, and Florence at last had rest from their fierce quarrellings. Ippolito and Dianora, of course, lived happily together, and as the old chronicle tells us, 'they had twelve children, sons and daughters, each as brave and beautiful as their father and mother.'

THE STORY OF THE EMPRESS FLAVIA

FLAVIA was very young when she married the Emperor of Rome. Life seemed full of joy, and she had everything that her heart could desire. The Emperor loved her dearly, and she was as happy as the day was long. It is true that her husband sometimes flew into terrible passions and was often harsh in his judgments when he was angry, but to Flavia he was always gentle and kind, and she loved him with all her heart. He was not very clever, perhaps, but he was straightforward and honourable, very different to the prince, his brother, who always lived with them at the palace.

This prince was a handsome, clever young man and had great influence over the Emperor, but his ways were crooked and crafty and his heart was bad.

It happened soon after his marriage that war broke out with the Turks, and the Emperor was obliged to leave his young wife and put himself at the head of his army.

It troubled him to think of leaving Flavia with all the cares of the state on her hands. She was so young and would be so lonely in the great palace without him. It was a comfort, however, to think his brother would

be there to help and cheer her, and in parting he earnestly prayed the prince to do all in his power to help and protect the Empress.

But scarcely had the Emperor gone when the prince began to plan and plot how he might get rid of his brother. If only by some happy chance the Emperor should be killed and never return, what good fortune that would be!

The prince had long been envious of his brother. He longed to seize both the crown and the beautiful Empress, but he was obliged to work cautiously.

First he began with Flavia. With a word here and a word there he tried to make her feel ill-used.

'It is a pity,' he said, 'that the dear Emperor has such a terrible temper. I fear you must often have suffered from it.'

'That I never have,' said Flavia indignantly; 'he is always gentle with me.'

'Yet he has left you all alone and unprotected,' said the prince. 'He really need not have gone away so soon.'

'He always does his duty,' said Flavia proudly.

It was no use hinting to Flavia, and time was going on, so one day the prince spoke out boldly.

'The Emperor will return no more,' he said. 'I am about to arrange that he shall be accidentally killed, and then I shall seize the crown. Help me with my plans and you shall still be Empress.'

For a moment Flavia was paralysed with astonish-

ment and horror, and could not answer. The prince thought she was about to consent, and left her well pleased.

But he little knew Flavia. Scarcely had he gone out than she sent for the officer of the guard and bade him arrest the Emperor's brother immediately and see that he was locked up in a lonely tower outside the city where no one should go near him except the gaoler. The officer looked astonished, but Flavia did not tell him what crime the prince had committed; she could not bear to think that the Emperor's subjects should know that his brother was a base traitor. Then she wrote him a note in which she said that she hoped she would never look on his treacherous face again.

But though the prince found himself locked up and his plans upset, he did not despair, for he was very clever. First he pretended to be very ill indeed, and begged that a priest might be sent to him. Flavia was tender-hearted and could not bear to think he should die alone, so she sent him her own father confessor, a gentle old man who was very easily deceived. He very soon began to beg Flavia to release the prince.

'I do not know what crime you accuse him of,' said the old man, 'but he seems truly penitent. He cannot remember anything that happened before his illness, and, indeed, I think he has been quite out of his mind and did not know what he was doing.'

Then the prince, too, wrote long letters, pretending to be terribly afraid of his brother's anger.

'When he knows, he will kill me,' he wrote over and over again as if in an agony of fear. And he implored Flavia to set him at liberty before the Emperor returned.

Meanwhile the news came that the war was over, and the Emperor sent word that he would soon be on his way home. Flavia's heart was filled with happiness, and in her joy she could not bear to think that the Emperor should learn at once the story of his brother's treachery, so she sent word that the prince was to be released.

At last the happy day came when the Emperor entered the city at the head of his victorious army. There were great rejoicings throughout Rome, but happiest of all was the Empress Flavia.

There was one face, however, that was sad and downcast. The Emperor's brother went about with his melancholy eyes fixed on the ground as if he were too miserable to look up. The Emperor looked at him keenly several times and at last took him aside.

'Why dost thou look so sorrowful?' he asked; 'tell me what has come to thee?'

The prince shook his head and sighed. 'Ah, there is sorrow enough,' he said, 'but I cannot tell thee what it is.'

'I command thee to tell me at once,' said the Emperor.

'I dare not,' said the prince. 'Alas, it is a tale of treachery aimed against thy own life.'

'That is but what an emperor must expect,' said his brother calmly. 'Come, tell me the plot and the names of the plotters.'

The prince made great pretence of being most unwilling, but at last, when the Emperor began to lose patience, he spoke out.

'How can I tell thee,' he said, 'when the one who plotted against thy life was thine own wife, Flavia?'

The Emperor sprang to his feet and seized his brother's arm.

'Take care what thou sayest,' he said; 'such a thing cannot be.'

Then the prince began his tale saying that he had discovered the plot and begged Flavia to stop before it was too late. But as soon as the Empress knew that her crime was discovered by him, she sent immediately for the guard and ordered him to be arrested and shut up in a lonely prison, refusing to tell any one of what crime she accused him.

'There, in that solitary prison, I have lain sick and sorrowful until yesterday when the Empress ordered me to be released, doubtless fearing your anger,' ended the wily prince.

Even then the Emperor could not believe it, until the prince showed him some letters, really written by himself, but copied from Flavia's handwriting, in which all the treachery was told.

Then the Emperor called the officer of the guard and demanded why it was that the prince had been imprisoned.

'Your Highness,' said the officer, 'it was by order of the Empress, but for what crime he was punished we do not know.'

When the Emperor heard that, he flew into one of his dreadful rages and declared that Flavia should be put to death.

The prince pretended to plead for her, but that only made the Emperor more furious. He sent immediately for two of his most trusted officers and bade them go at once to the Empress's apartments and conduct her to a villa some distance from Rome. The way led through a lonely wood, and when they reached the wood the officers were instructed to put the Empress to death, but to pretend that she had died of an illness, so that no one might know of her dreadful crime.

'And as a token that ye have done your duty,' added the Emperor, 'bring me the ring and gold chain which the Empress wears, that I may know that the deed has been accomplished.'

Flavia could not understand why she should undertake this hurried journey, but the officers told her it was the Emperor's will, and that he would join her later. So she set out with them, feeling somewhat perplexed and unhappy.

They journeyed on for some time until they came

to the edge of a dark wood, and there the officers requested the Empress to alight from her horse, as there was only a narrow footpath through the woods. The servants would take the horses round by a longer road, they said.

This also seemed strange to Flavia, for she was not accustomed to walking on rough roads, but she dismounted and went on with the two officers.

As the wood grew darker and darker, and the path so narrow that it was difficult to push a way through the briars, the men began to look at one another.

'Wilt thou tell her?' said one.

'No, I cannot,' said the other; 'indeed I have no liking for this business. The Emperor is often hasty in his judgment, when those terrible rages seize him.'

'Still, it must be done,' said the first, and turning to Flavia he told her that she had been brought here to be executed, since the Emperor had discovered her treachery and how she had plotted against his life.

Flavia turned pale, but she held her head high and fearlessly.

'I am innocent,' was all she said.

'I verily believe she is,' said one of the officers. 'I would that we might spare her.'

'If we spare her, the Emperor will not spare us,' said the other. 'It is her life or ours. Remember how we are to take back her ring and her golden chain as a token that we have obeyed his commands.'

As soon as Flavia heard these words she quickly

slipped off her ring and unwound the chain from her neck and thrust them into the guard's hand. Then, quick as thought, she turned and ran through the trees.

It was drawing towards evening and the light in the wood was very dim as the trees grew thickly together. The men started to overtake Flavia, but the foremost officer, catching his foot in the root of a tree, fell heavily to the ground, while his companion, just behind him, fell headlong over him. When they picked themselves up Flavia had disappeared, and though they searched the wood all night they could discover no trace of her.

When morning dawned the men consulted together and made up their minds to return to Rome and carry the ring and the chain to the Emperor, and allow him to think that Flavia was dead.

By this time the Emperor's rage had spent itself, and although he was still sure that Flavia was guilty, he began to wish he had not been so hasty.

'She is little more than a child,' he said to his brother sorrowfully. 'It would have been better if I had shut her up in some convent where she might have had time to repent.'

So when the officers returned and silently offered him the well-known ring and golden chain, he asked no questions, but made a gesture for them to take the things away, for he would not touch them.

After that the Emperor lived but a sad, lonely life,

and the name of Flavia never passed his lips. Only once, when a crowd of poor people came to the palace door and he heard them lamenting that their 'little mother,' as they called Flavia, was gone, he gave orders that whatever charity the Empress had given should be continued in her name.

Now when poor Flavia had escaped from the two officers, she wandered about the wood all night and in the early morning found her way out on to the high-road once more.

Weary and footsore, her clothes torn by the brambles and her hands scratched and bleeding, she looked no longer like an empress but rather like a poor wayfarer. There she sat by the roadside and wondered what she should do next. She knew that the road in one direction must lead to Rome, and she did not know which way to take. Just then, in the dim morning light, she saw a company of people and horses coming along. Some of the horses were laden with merchandise, and at the head of the company rode an old man who appeared to be the chief merchant.

He had a kind, gentle-looking face, and Flavia, feeling desperate, went out into the road as he was passing and held out her hands to him as if to implore a favour.

The old man stopped his horse at once, but bade his servants go on. He saw that this was no common beggar, but some one of gentle birth.

'What can I do for thee?' he asked kindly.

'Wilt thou tell me whither this road leads?' she asked

'That way to Rome,' he said, pointing behind him, 'and this way in front to Ostia where I am going.'

'Oh, wilt thou help me?' said Flavia, clasping her hands. 'I am alone and unprotected, and I, too, would go to Ostia. Wilt thou take me under thy protection?'

The old man thought for a moment.

'What is thy name, and how camest thou here alone?' he asked.

Flavia looked into his kind eyes and felt she could trust him.

'I cannot tell thee who I am,' she said, 'but the reason I am here alone is that I was condemned to death and have just escaped.'

'Lift up thy veil and let me see thy face,' said the old man.

Flavia lifted her veil as he bade her, and the merchant looked at her with a long, searching gaze.

'Thou mayest come,' he said at last; 'I see nothing but good in that face.'

So he called to one of the men to bring a horse and lift the maiden upon it, and they journeyed on together to Ostia.

'I will take thee home to my wife for one night,' said the merchant thoughtfully as they neared the town, 'and to-morrow I will see thee safe in a convent where the Emperor himself could not touch thee.'

Flavia thanked him gratefully, and also thanked God in her heart that she had fallen into such kind hands.

But if the merchant was kind-hearted his wife was even kinder. She looked keenly at Flavia and listened to the tale which her husband had to tell, and when he talked of the convent she shook her head.

'Why not let her stay here with us?' she said. 'I have never seen a sweeter or a purer face, and it is useless to tell me she has committed a crime worthy of death. Why, she is but a child, just the age our little daughter would have been now had she lived to grow up.'

The thought of the little daughter who had died made the merchant feel very pitiful towards Flavia, but still he hesitated.

'Art thou sure it is wise to take a stranger into our house of whom we know nothing but that she is accused of a great crime?' he asked.

'You know our Emperor,' answered his wife; 'when he is seized with one of his sudden rages he is seldom just, and I feel sure this maiden is innocent. Let her stay with us, and she shall help me to look after the child.'

For the merchant and his wife had one little child, a son of their old age, whom they loved very dearly.

So it was settled that the maiden should stay, and for a while all went well. Poor Flavia began to hold up her head again and to feel as if there was still

some peace for her in the world, sheltered as she was in that kind home. But the peace did not last long.

The merchant had a younger brother who lived in the house, and this young man, seeing Flavia's beauty, began to wish to make her his wife. Flavia told him at once that he must not think of such a thing, that she was but a servant in the house, and not fit to marry her master's brother. But when he continued to trouble her she saw that she must tell the truth.

'Why wilt thou not marry me?' he asked.

'For the best reason of all,' she answered at last gravely. 'I am already married.'

At first the young man would not believe this, but afterwards he said even that did not matter, for her husband was as good as dead.

Then Flavia turned from him in great anger, and he in his turn waxed furious and warned her that she would soon repent of the way she had scorned him.

'Do as I wish or a terrible misfortune will overtake thee,' he said.

'The good God holds the future in His hands,' answered Flavia, 'and He will protect me.'

After this it seemed as if the young man's thoughts grew blacker and more evil every day. Very soon he began to arrange a dreadful plan to punish Flavia, and ended one day by killing the poor little boy and

then pretending that it was Flavia who had done the cruel deed.

Poor Flavia! at first she could not understand why they thought it possible for her to commit such a crime, for she loved the child dearly. But when the guards arrived to carry her off to prison and she asked them who had accused her and they told her it was her master's brother, then she understood it all.

The judges before whom she was taken asked at once who she was and what was her history. The poor old merchant could only tell what he knew, how he had found her alone and friendless and accused of some terrible crime. Flavia herself would tell nothing more, and everything looked so black that they were sure she was guilty. So the poor innocent maiden was condemned to death, with no one to help or pity her.

The judges shook their heads sorrowfully to think that one so young and beautiful should be so wicked, and they declared it was fitting that a terrible punishment should follow such a life of crime. So they ordered that both her hands should be cut off and then that she should be carried out to sea and left to die alone on a desolate rock.

But when Flavia came to herself on the little desert island alone and dying, a strange feeling of peace began to steal over her. It was so cool and quiet lying on that rock. The soft lap of the waves soothed

her after the turmoil of the angry voices, and the gentle breeze seemed like a friend laying a cool, caressing hand upon her aching forehead.

'I have found peace at last,' she said to herself with a tired smile as she turned and fell quietly asleep, thinking that all was over.

But that sleep was not the sleep of death. In the middle of the night she awoke and looked up to see the kindly stars shining down on her and to feel the cool wind gently stirring her hair. The soothing sound of the lapping water was still the only thing she heard, and again a great peace seemed to wrap her round and comfort her sad heart.

Then, as she lay there watching the stars, a light began to dawn in the sky. At first she thought it must be morning, but it was not at all like the light of dawn. Brighter and brighter it grew until it took the form of a shining cloud, so white and full of dazzling light that it seemed as if the midday sun must be shining from within.

Flavia gazed with wondering eyes as the cloud came ever nearer and nearer until it hung over the rock on which she lay. Then the wonder of it seemed to grow too great for mortal eyes. Like the petals of a white flower the soft masses of cloud unfolded from within, and there in the centre of the light stood the Madonna. Flavia knew that face at once, although it was far more beautiful than any picture she had ever seen.

The pitying look in the Madonna's face grew deeper as she bent down over Flavia and gently spoke to her.

'Poor child,' she said, 'I have come to put an end to all thy sufferings. There is nothing now but happiness in store for thee. Ere long thou wilt be taken from off this rock and thy troubles will be over. But first I have a gift to bestow upon thee.'

And as she spoke the Madonna fastened two of the fairest, whitest hands upon Flavia's poor wrists, and round the join she placed two bands of shining gold. They looked the most perfect, the most beautiful hands that mortal eyes had ever seen, and no wonder, since they were a gift from the Madonna herself.

'O Madonna mia,' said Flavia with a sobbing breath, 'take me away with thee. I am so weary of this world and all its troubles. I only want to be at rest.'

'Nay,' said the Madonna, 'I cannot take thee with me now, for there is still work for thee to do on earth.'

'How can that be?' asked Flavia sadly.

'Only wait and thou shalt see,' answered the Madonna. 'I have still another gift for thee. When I am gone lift up that stone close to the water's edge, and under it thou shalt find a bunch of sweet herbs. Take them with thee, for they will cure all ills and bring much comfort to those in sorrow.


·I·HAVE·FOUND·
·PEACE·AT·LAST·

Now, my child, wait patiently for thy release, and farewell.'

Then the cloud began to fold itself once more like a closing flower round its shining heart. And Flavia watched it float away, growing dimmer and dimmer in the distance, until it vanished from her sight.

Could it have been only a dream and was she still asleep ? Flavia wondered if she was dreaming, but she looked down at those fair white hands and the golden bands and knew that the Madonna had indeed come to comfort and heal her. Then she remembered the second gift, and, lifting the stone, she found there the bunch of sweet herbs which the Madonna had promised. She pressed them against her cheek to smell their fragrance and then carefully hid them in her robe. And, strange to say, she felt almost as happy and light-hearted as she used to feel when she was a young bride and Empress of Rome.

It was morning now, and as she looked across the blue water she saw a fishing-boat coming towards the island rowed by two men, one old and bent and the other with a bandage round his eyes. She called to them as they were rowing past, but at first they did not hear. Presently, however, they caught sight of her and came towards the rock.

The amazement of the fishermen was great to see a lady on that desolate island. It was all the more strange because she was so beautiful, with such

wonderful golden bracelets and fair, white hands. They thought it must be some vision, until Flavia spoke to them and asked them from whence they came.

They told her their home was in a little fishing-village some distance from Ostia, and this pleased Flavia well.

'Wilt thou take me there?' she asked the old man. 'I will find means to repay thee.'

The old man spoke some words to his companion, who nodded his head. He was a young man and seemed to be suffering great pain when he lifted the bandage from his eyes and tried to look at Flavia.

'Is aught amiss with thine eyes?' asked Flavia gently.

'We fear he will soon be blind,' said the old man mournfully. 'One eye was cut by a stone thrown by a careless boy, and now the sight of the other eye is almost gone.'

'Stay,' said Flavia, 'perhaps I can help thee.'

She took the bunch of herbs from her bosom, and after she had very tenderly undone the bandage she laid the sweet-smelling leaves upon the poor injured eyes.

The work of healing was done in a moment. The pain vanished and sight returned. Then feeling and seeing the miracle the two men fell on their knees, and lifting the hem of Flavia's robe, pressed it to their lips.

'My lady,' they said, 'tell us if thou art the Madonna herself?'

'Nay,' said Flavia, smiling, 'but these herbs are indeed a gift from heaven. So give thanks to God for thy healing.'

The grateful fishermen gladly now took her into their boat and rowed her back to the little village, where they gave her the best of everything their poverty could afford.

Every one who was sick or suffering came there to be cured by Flavia, and the blessed herbs never failed in their virtue. From the poor she took no payment, but from the rich she asked money, for she needed to live, and her clothes, too, were almost worn out.

Ere long the work in the village seemed ended, and Flavia made up her mind to depart. She had now bought a few garments, a plain black robe, and a long veil which covered her from head to foot. No one, she felt sure, would recognise her now, and so she set out to return to Ostia.

The fame of her cures had already reached that town, and people soon began to crowd around the Saint, as they called her. Very patiently she listened to all their woes and cured any one who came to her, just as she had done in the little fishing-village.

One day when they had brought a sick child to her, and the crowd was pressing round as usual to watch the miracle, she noticed a man trying to force

his way through the crush as if anxious to reach her. As he came nearer and she saw his face she recognised him as one of the servants who lived in her old master's house. She bade the people allow the man to pass, and when he reached her side asked him what he sought.

'Wilt thou come with me at once?' he panted; 'my master's brother is dying. My master prays thee to come and try if thou canst save him.'

'When I am finished my work here I will come,' said Flavia quietly

The servant waited impatiently, but Flavia would not come until she had done all she could for the sick child, and then she set out for the merchant's house.

'What ails thy master's brother?' she asked as they hurried along.

'No one knows,' answered the man, 'but he seems to have something on his mind and grows daily worse and worse.'

When Flavia reached the house she knew so well, she almost forgot to pretend she was a stranger, but she allowed the man to lead her upstairs as if she did not know the way.

There was a priest in the room into which they led her, and the old merchant and his wife were also there. They were all standing round the bed on which the young man lay.

The old merchant turned quickly to meet the

stranger, and in a low tone implored her to do all she could to cure his brother.

'I will do my best,' said Flavia gravely. 'But first I must ask if he has confessed his sins, because my herbs can only cure those who are truly penitent.'

'Oh yes, he has confessed only this morning,' said the priest.

But Flavia knew by the calm way he spoke that the young man had not confessed all.

She went up to the bed and quietly bent over him.

'There is one sin you have not confessed,' she said.

The sick man began to tremble from head to foot, and the people around thought he was dying

'Oh, help him!' cried the old merchant in an imploring voice to Flavia.

'I cannot help him unless he will help himself first and confess his sin,' answered Flavia. 'My herbs are powerless to heal until he does that.'

'Then let us leave him alone with the priest,' said the merchant.

'Nay,' said Flavia, 'he must confess before thee and thy wife and me.'

The young man groaned, but feeling sure that he was about to die he made up his mind to confess his great sin.

'I killed the child myself,' he moaned, 'and laid the blame on Flavia.'

A great cry broke from the lips of the merchant's

wife, and the master himself gave a deep groan, but Flavia bent gently over the sick man and laid the bunch of herbs upon his breast. Health and strength came back immediately, but he turned his head to the wall.

'To think how that poor child Flavia suffered while all the time she was innocent,' sobbed the merchant's wife.

'Well, at least he shall suffer the same,' said the merchant sternly. 'Call the guards that they may carry him off to prison.'

'No,' said Flavia firmly. 'See, his life has just been given back by a miracle. How would you dare to take it away again?'

'He has committed a crime and shall be put to death, although he is my brother,' said the merchant sternly.

'It is right that he should suffer seeing that he allowed Flavia to bear the punishment of his sin,' said the merchant's wife. 'I shall never have a moment's peace thinking of that poor young innocent maid.'

'Let me entreat you to spare at least his life,' pleaded Flavia.

'No, for Flavia's sake I cannot,' replied her old mistress.

'But if I tell you that the maid you mourn for is alive and well,' said Flavia, 'will you then be merciful?'

'If you promise that I shall indeed see Flavia some day you shall have your way,' said the merchant's wife.

'That I promise,' said Flavia, 'and as to this man he shall go into a convent where he will have time to pray and repent all the rest of his life.'

So at last this was settled and Flavia went home well content.

Soon after this the news reached Ostia that a terrible pestilence was raging in Rome and hundreds were dying daily. As soon as Flavia heard this she made up her mind to go there and see if she might help with her wonderful herbs.

Night and day she worked amongst the stricken people, healing all those who came to her, until the news of the wonderful cure reached the Emperor's ears. Then came a call for Flavia to go to the Imperial palace. The Emperor's brother was seized with the pestilence and the doctors said he could not live.

'Send for the wonderful saint who would seem to work miracles,' said the Emperor.

It was with strange feelings that Flavia mounted the great staircase of the Imperial palace. She thought of the day when she had entered so gaily as a young bride, and that sad day when she had come down for the last time.

No one could see that her eyes were full of tears, for she never lifted her long black veil, and only the

servants noticed with wonder that she seemed to know her way without a guide.

'In which room is the prince laid?' she asked, when at last they reached the Emperor's apartments.

They led her to the room, and she entered very quietly and looked around. The Emperor stood by the bedside and he turned as she entered, but Flavia scarcely knew him, so old and sad had he grown. And when he lifted his eyes there was such a world of sorrow in them that Flavia's heart ached with pity. The prince, indeed, looked terribly ill and seemed in fearful pain, but Flavia scarcely glanced at him, for she could think of no one but the Emperor.

'I think thou needest my healing powers as much as he who lies stricken there,' she said in a low voice.

'Mine is no illness that thou canst cure,' said the Emperor quietly. 'It is sickness of the heart, not of the body.'

'But my herbs have wonderful power,' said Flavia eagerly; 'let me but try.'

The Emperor motioned her towards the bed.

'I ask for nothing for myself,' he said, 'only cure my brother, for he is all I have left.'

'I cannot cure him until he has confessed a sin that lies heavy on his soul,' said Flavia.

'Then call a priest,' said the Emperor, 'and let it be done quickly.'

'Nay,' said Flavia, 'he must confess it to thee and to me.'

When the prince heard these words he turned his face to the wall and groaned aloud.

'I would rather die than confess,' he whispered.

But his sufferings began to increase so sorely that at last he could endure it no longer.

'I will confess,' he moaned. 'It was I who plotted against the Emperor's life. I accused Flavia to shelter myself. I am guilty. She was innocent.'

The Emperor stood there as if turned to stone when these words fell on his ear, but Flavia bent over the dying man and gently laid her herbs upon his mouth, and the pain and fever fled away.

Then the low, stern voice of the Emperor sounded through the room when he saw his brother was saved.

'Summon the guards,' he said.

'Stop!' cried Flavia; 'think well before thou takest a life which God has but just given back.'

'Alas!' said the Emperor, 'I cannot undo my rash mistake, but I can at least punish my brother as he caused Flavia to be punished.'

Then Flavia began to plead with all her heart that he would spare the prince's life, while the young man clung to a fold of her robe, feeling that his only chance of safety lay with her.

But for a long time she pleaded in vain.

'If I ordered Flavia to be put to death when she was innocent, how much more should I condemn this traitor when he himself owns that he is guilty?' said the Emperor.

'But supposing my wonderful herbs could bring the Empress back to life?' said Flavia at last.

'Ah,' said the Emperor sadly, 'let me but once more see Flavia alive, and there would be no room in my heart for anything but forgiveness.'

Then Flavia slowly lifted her veil and threw it back.

'I am Flavia,' she said simply.

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