

LAGERLÖF

SELMA

THE MIRACLES
OF ANTICHRIST

Selma Lagerlöf

The Miracles of Antichrist

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Содержание

INTRODUCTION	5
I	6
II	9
III	13
FIRST BOOK	15
I	16
II	21
III	25
IV	31
V	32
VI	35
VII	38
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	44

Selma Lagerlöf
The Miracles of Antichrist / A Novel

INTRODUCTION

“When Antichrist comes, he shall seem as Christ”

I THE EMPEROR'S VISION

It was at the time when Augustus was emperor in Rome and Herod was king in Jerusalem.

It happened once upon a time that a very great and holy night sank down over the earth. It was the darkest night ever seen by man; it seemed as if the whole earth had passed under a vault. It was impossible to distinguish water from land, or to find the way on the most familiar paths. And it could not be otherwise, for not a ray of light came from the sky. All the stars stayed in their houses, and the fair moon kept her face turned away.

And just as intense as the darkness was the silence and the calm. The rivers stood still in their course; the wind did not stir, and even the leaves of the aspen ceased to tremble. Any one walking by the sea would have found that the waves no longer broke on the shore, and the sand of the desert did not crunch under the wanderer's foot. Everything was as if turned to stone and without motion, in order not to disturb the holy night. The grass did not dare to grow, the dew could not fall, and the flowers feared to exhale their perfume.

During that night the beasts of prey did not hunt, the serpents did not sting, the dogs did not bay. And what was even more wonderful, none of the inanimate things would have disturbed the holiness of the night by lending themselves to an evil deed. No false key could open a lock, and no knife could shed blood.

In Rome, on that very night, a little group of people came down from the emperor's palace on the Palatine and made their way over the Forum to the Capitol. During the day just completed his councillors had asked the emperor if they might not raise a temple to him on Rome's holy mountain. But Augustus had not immediately given his consent. He did not know if it would be pleasing to the gods for him to possess a temple next to theirs, and he had answered that he wished first to discover by a nocturnal sacrifice to his genius what their wishes were. Followed by a few faithful retainers, he was now on his way to perform that sacrifice.

Augustus was carried in his litter, for he was old, and the long stairs to the Capitol fatigued him. He held the cage of doves which was his offering. Neither priests, nor soldiers, nor councillors accompanied him; only his nearest friends. Torch-bearers walked in front of him, as if to force a way through the darkness of the night, and behind him followed slaves, carrying the tripod, the charcoal, the knives, the holy fire, and everything needed for the sacrifice.

On the way the emperor chatted gayly with his retainers, and none of them noticed the infinite silence and calm of the night. It was only on reaching the open place on the top of the Capitol, which had been thought of for the new temple, that it was revealed to them that something unusual was occurring.

It could not be a night like any other, for on the edge of the cliff they saw the strangest being. They thought at first that it was an old twisted olive trunk; then they thought that an ancient statue from the temple of Jupiter had wandered out on the cliff. At last they saw that it could only be the old sibyl.

They had never seen anything so old, so weather-beaten, and so gigantic. If the emperor had not been there, they would have all fled home to their beds. "It is she," they whispered to each other, "who counts as many years as there are grains of sand on her native shores. Why has she come out of her cave to-night? What does she foretell to the emperor and to the country, she who writes her prophecies on the leaves of trees, and knows that the wind carries the words of the oracle to him who needs them?"

They were so terrified that all would have fallen on their knees with their foreheads to the ground had the sibyl made the slightest movement. But she sat as still as if she had been without life. Crouched on the very edge of the cliff, and shading her eyes with her hand, she stared out into the

night. She sat there as if she had gone up on the hill the better to see something happening far away. She alone could see something in the black night!

At the same moment the emperor and all his suite perceived how intense the darkness was. Not one of them could see a hand's-breadth in front of him. And what a calm, what silence! They could not even hear the rippling murmur of the Tiber. The air seemed to choke them; a cold sweat came out on their foreheads, and their hands were stiff and powerless. They thought that something dreadful must be impending.

But no one liked to show that he was afraid, and everybody told the emperor that it was a good omen; nature herself held her breath to greet a new god.

They urged Augustus to hurry, and said that the old sibyl had probably come up from her cave to greet his genius.

But the truth was that the old sibyl, engrossed in a vision, did not even know that Augustus had come to the Capitol. She was transported in spirit to a far distant land, where she thought she was wandering over a great plain. In the darkness she kept striking her foot against something, which she thought to be tufts of grass. She bent down and felt with her hand. No, they were not tufts of grass, but sheep. She was walking among great sleeping flocks of sheep.

Then she perceived the fire of the shepherds. It was burning in the middle of the plain, and she approached it. The shepherds were lying asleep by the fire, and at their sides they had long, pointed staves, with which they defended their flocks from wild beasts. But the little animals with shining eyes and bushy tails, which crept forward to the fire, were they not jackals? And yet the shepherds did not throw their staves at them; the dogs continued to sleep; the sheep did not flee; and the wild beasts lay down to rest beside the men.

All this the sibyl saw, but of what was going on behind her on the mountain she knew nothing. She did not know that people were raising an altar, lighting charcoal, strewing incense, and that the emperor was taking one of the doves out of the cage to make a sacrifice to her. But his hands were so benumbed that he could not hold the bird. With a single flap of her wings the dove freed herself, and disappeared into the darkness of the night.

When that happened, the courtiers looked suspiciously at the old sibyl. They thought that it was she who was the cause of the misfortune.

Could they know that the sibyl still thought she was standing by the shepherds' fire, and that she was now listening to a faint sound which came vibrating through the dead silence of the night? She had heard it for a long time before she noticed that it came from the sky, and not from the earth. At last she raised her head, and saw bright, glistening forms gliding about up in the darkness. They were small bands of angels, who, singing, and apparently searching, flew up and down the wide plain.

While the sibyl listened to the angels' song, the emperor was preparing for a new sacrifice. He washed his hands, purified the altar, and grasped the other dove. But although he now made a special effort to hold it fast, the bird slipped through his fingers, and swung itself up into the impenetrable night.

The emperor was appalled. He fell on his knees before the empty altar and prayed to his genius. He called on him for strength to avert the misfortunes which this night seemed to portend.

Nothing of all this had the sibyl heard. She was listening with her whole soul to the angels' song, which was growing stronger and stronger. At last it became so loud that it wakened the shepherds. They raised themselves on their elbows, and saw shining hosts of silvery angels moving in the darkness in long, fluttering lines, like birds of passage. Some had lutes and violins in their hands; others had zithers and harps, and their song sounded as gay as children's laughter, and as free from care as the trilling of a lark. When the shepherds heard it they rose up to go to the village which was their home, to tell of the miracle.

They went by a narrow, winding path, and the sibyl followed them. Suddenly it became light on the mountain. A great, bright star kindled over it, and the village on its top shone like silver in

the starlight. All the wandering bands of angels hastened thither with cries of jubilation, and the shepherds hurried on so fast that they almost ran. When they had reached the town they found that the angels had gathered over a low stable near the gate. It was a wretched building, with roof of straw, and the bare rock for one wall. Above it hung the star, and more and more angels kept coming. Some of them placed themselves on the straw roof, or settled down on the steep cliff behind the house; others hovered over it with fluttering wings. High, high up, the air was lighted by their shining wings.

At the moment when the star flamed out over the mountain-village all nature awoke, and the men who stood on the top of the Capitol were conscious of it. They felt fresh, but caressing breezes; sweet perfumes streamed up about them; the trees rustled; the Tiber murmured, the stars shone, and the moon stood high in the heaven and lighted the world. And out of the sky the two doves flew circling down, and lighted on the emperor's shoulders.

When this miracle took place Augustus rose up with proud joy, but his friends and his slaves fell on their knees. "Hail, Cæsar!" they cried. "Your genius has answered you! You are the god who shall be worshipped on the heights of the Capitol."

And the tribute which the men in their transport offered the emperor was so loud that the old sibyl heard it. It waked her from her visions. She rose from her place on the edge of the cliff, and came forward toward the people. It seemed as if a dark cloud had risen up from the abyss and sunk down over the mountain. She was terrifying in her old age. Coarse hair hung in thin tufts about her head, her joints were thickened, and her dark skin, hard as bark, covered her body with wrinkle upon wrinkle.

Mighty and awe-inspiring, she advanced towards the emperor. With one hand she seized his wrist, with the other she pointed towards the distant east.

"Look," she commanded, and the emperor raised his eyes and saw. The heavens opened before his eyes and he looked away to the far east. And he saw a miserable stable by a steep cliff, and in the open door some kneeling shepherds. Within the stable he saw a young mother on her knees before a little child, who lay on a bundle of straw on the floor.

And the sibyl's big, bony fingers pointed towards that poor child.

"Hail, Cæsar!" said the sibyl, with a scornful laugh. "There is the god who shall be worshipped on the heights of the Capitol."

Augustus shrank back from her as if from a maniac.

But upon the sibyl fell the mighty spirit of the prophetess. Her dim eyes began to burn, her hands were stretched towards heaven, her voice did not seem to be her own, but rang with such strength that it could have been heard over the whole world. And she spoke words which she seemed to have read in the stars: —

"On the heights of the Capitol the redeemer of the world shall be worshipped,
Christ or Antichrist, but no frail mortal."

When she had spoken she moved away between the terrified men, went slowly down the mountain, and disappeared.

Augustus, the next day, strictly forbade his people to raise him any temple on the Capitol. In its place he built a sanctuary to the new-born godchild and called it "Heaven's Altar," Aracoeli.

II ROME'S HOLY CHILD

On the summit of the Capitol stood a monastery occupied by Franciscan monks. It was, however, less a monastery than a fortress. It was like a watch-tower by the seashore, where watch was kept for an approaching foe.

Near the monastery stood the magnificent basilica "Santa Maria in Aracoeli." The basilica was built because the sibyl had caused Augustus to see Christ. But the monastery was built because they feared the fulfilment of the sibyl's prophecy; that Antichrist should come to be worshipped on the Capitol.

And the monks felt like warriors. When they went to church to sing and pray, they thought that they were walking on ramparts, and sending showers of arrows down on the assaulting Antichrist.

They lived always in terror of Antichrist, and all their service was a struggle to keep him away from the Capitolium.

They drew their hats down over their eyes and sat and gazed out into the world. Their eyes grew feverish with watching, and they continually thought they discovered Antichrist. "He is here, he is there!" they cried. And they fluttered up in their brown robes and braced themselves for the struggle, as crows gather on a crag when they catch a glimpse of an eagle.

But some said: "What is the use of prayers and penitence? The sibyl has said it. Antichrist must come."

Then others said, "God can work a miracle. If it was of no avail to struggle, He would not have let the sibyl warn us."

Year after year the Franciscans defended the Capitol by penitences, and works of charity, and the promulgation of God's word.

They protected it century after century, but as time went on, men became more and more feeble and lacking in force. The monks said among themselves: "Soon the kingdoms of the earth can stand no longer. A redeemer of the world is needed as in the time of Augustus."

They tore their hair and scourged themselves, for they knew that he who was to be born again must be the Antichrist, and that it would be a regeneration of force and violence.

As a sick man is tormented by his pain, so were they hunted by the thought of Antichrist. And they saw him before them. He was as rich as Christ had been poor, as wicked as Christ had been good, as honored as Christ had been humiliated.

He bore powerful weapons and marched at the head of bloody evil-doers. He overturned the churches, murdered the priests, and armed people for strife, so that brother fought against brother, and each feared his neighbor, and there was no peace.

And for every person of power and might who made his way over the sea of time, they cried out from the watch-tower on the Capitol: "Antichrist, Antichrist!"

And for every one who disappeared, and went under, the monks cried: "Hosanna!" and sang the "Te Deum." And they said: "It is because of our prayers that the wicked fall before they succeed in scaling the Capitol."

It was a hard punishment that in that beautiful monastery its monks could never feel at rest. Their nights were heavier than their days. Then they saw wild beasts come into their cells and stretch themselves out beside them on their beds. And each wild beast was Antichrist. But some of the monks saw him as a dragon, and others as a griffin, and others as a sphinx. When they got up from their dreams they were as weak as after a severe illness.

The only comfort of these poor monks was the miracle-working image of Christ, which was kept in the basilica of Aracoeli. When a monk was frightened to desperation, he went into the church to seek consolation from it. He would go through the whole basilica and into a well-guarded chapel at

the side of the great altar. There he lighted the consecrated wax candles, and spoke a prayer, before opening the altar shrine, which had double locks and doors of iron. And as long as he gazed at the image, he remained upon his knees.

The image represented a little babe, but he had a gold crown upon his head, gold shoes upon his feet, and his whole dress shone with jewels, which were given to him by those in distress, who had called on him for help. And the walls of the chapel were covered with pictures, which showed how he had saved from dangers of fire and shipwreck, how he had cured the sick and helped all those who were in trouble. When the monk saw it he rejoiced, and said to himself: "Praise be to God! As yet it is Christ who is worshipped on the Capitol."

The monk saw the face of the image smile at him with mysterious, conscious power, and his spirit soared up into the holy realms of confidence. "What can overthrow you in your might?" he said. "What can overthrow you? To you the Eternal City bends its knees. You are Rome's Holy Child. Yours is the crown which the people worship. You come in your might with help and strength and consolation. You alone shall be worshipped on the Capitol."

The monk saw the crown of the image turn into a halo, which sent out rays over the whole world. And in whatever direction he followed the rays he saw the world full of churches, where Christ was worshipped. It seemed as if a powerful conqueror had shown him all the castles and fortresses which defended his kingdom. "It is certain that you cannot fall," said the monk. "Your kingdom will be everlasting."

And every monk who saw the image had a few hours of consolation and peace, until fear seized him again. But had the monks not possessed the image, their souls would not have found a moment's rest.

Thus had the monks of Aracoeli, by prayers and struggles, worked their way through the centuries, and there had never lacked for watchers; as soon as one had been exhausted by terror and anxiety, others had hurried forward to take his place.

And although most of those who entered the monastery were struck down by madness or premature death, the succession of monks never diminished, for it was held a great honor before God to wage the war on Aracoeli.

So it happened that sixty years ago this struggle still went on, and in the degenerate times the monks fought with greater eagerness than ever before, and awaited the certain coming of Antichrist.

At that time a rich Englishwoman came to Rome. She went up to the Aracoeli and saw the image, and he charmed her so that she thought she could not live if she did not possess him. She went again and again up to Aracoeli to see the image, and at last she asked the monks if she might buy him.

But even if she had covered the whole mosaic floor in the great basilica with gold coins, the monks would not have been willing to sell her that image, which was their only consolation.

Still the Englishwoman was attracted beyond measure by the image, and found no joy nor peace without it. Unable to accomplish her object by any other means, she determined to steal the image. She did not think of the sin she was committing; she felt only a strong compulsion and a burning thirst, and preferred to risk her soul rather than to deny her heart the joy of possessing the object of her longing. And to accomplish her end, she first had an image made exactly like the one on Aracoeli.

The image on Aracoeli was carved from olive wood from the gardens of Gethsemane; but the Englishwoman dared to have an image carved from elm wood, which was exactly like him. The image on Aracoeli was not painted by mortal hand. When the monk who had carved him had taken up his brushes and colors, he fell asleep over his work. And when he awoke, the image was colored, – self-painted as a sign that God loved him. But the Englishwoman was bold enough to let an earthly painter paint her elm image so that he was like the holy image.

For the false image she procured a crown and shoes, but they were not of gold; they were only tin and gilding. She ordered ornaments; she bought rings, and necklaces, and chains, and bracelets, and diamond suns – but they were all brass and glass; and she dressed him as those seeking help had

dressed the true image. When the image was ready she took a needle and scratched in the crown: “My kingdom is only of this world.” It was as if she was afraid that she herself would not be able to distinguish one image from the other. And it was as if she had wished to appease her own conscience. “I have not wished to make a false Christ image. I have written in his crown: ‘My kingdom is only of this world.’”

Thereupon she wrapped herself in a big cloak, hid the image under it, and went up to Aracoeli. And she asked that she might be allowed to say her prayers before the Christchild.

When she stood in the sanctuary, and the candles were lighted, and the iron door opened, and the image showed itself to her, she began to tremble and shake and looked as if she were going to faint. The monk who was with her hurried into the sacristy after water and she was left alone in the chapel. And when he came back she had committed the sacrilege. She had exchanged the holy, miracle-working image, and put the false and impotent one in his place.

The monk saw nothing. He shut in the false image behind iron doors and double locks, and the Englishwoman went home with the treasure of Aracoeli. She placed him in her palace on a pedestal of marble and was more happy than she had ever been before.

Up on Aracoeli, where no one knew what injury they had suffered, they worshipped the false Christ image as they had worshipped the true one, and when Christmas came they built for him in the church, as was the custom, a most beautiful niche. There he lay, shining like a jewel, on Maria’s knees, and about him shepherds and angels and wise men were arranged. And as long as he lay there children came from Rome, and the Campagna, and were lifted up on a little pulpit in the basilica of Aracoeli, and they preached on the sweetness and tenderness and nobleness and power of the little Christchild.

But the Englishwoman lived in great terror that some one would discover that she had stolen the Christ image of Aracoeli. Therefore she confessed to no one that the image she had was the real one. “It is a copy,” she said; “it is as like the real one as it can be, but it is only copied.”

Now it happened that she had a little Italian servant girl. One day when the latter went through the room she stopped before the image and spoke to him. “You poor Christchild, who are no Christchild,” she said, “if you only knew how the real child lies in his glory in the niche in Aracoeli and how Maria and San Giuseppe and the shepherds are kneeling before him! And if you knew how the children place themselves on a little pulpit just in front of him, and how they courtesy, and kiss their fingers to him, and preach for him as beautifully as they can!”

A few days after the little maid came again and spoke to the image. “You poor Christchild, who are no Christchild,” she said, “do you know that to-day I have been up in Aracoeli and have seen how the true child was carried in the procession? They held a canopy over him, all the people fell on their knees, and they sang and played before him. Never will you see anything so wonderful!”

And mark that a few days later the little maid came again and spoke to the image: “Do you know, Christchild, who are not a real Christchild, that it is better for you to stand where you are standing? For the real child is called to the sick and is driven to them in his gold-laced carriage, but *he* cannot help them and they die in despair. And people begin to say that Aracoeli’s holy child has lost his power to do good, and that prayers and tears do not move him. It is better for you to stand where you are standing than to be called upon and not to be able to help.”

But the next night a miracle came to pass. About midnight a loud ringing was heard at the cloister gate at Aracoeli. And when the gate-keeper did not come quickly enough to open, some one began to knock. It sounded clear, like ringing metal, and it was heard through the whole monastery. All the monks leaped from their beds. All who had been tortured by terrible dreams rose at one time, and believed that Antichrist was come.

But when they opened the door – when they opened it! It was the little Christ image that stood on the threshold. It was his little hand that had pulled the bell-rope; it was his little, gold-shod foot that had been stretched out to kick the door.

The gate-keeper instantly took the holy child up in his arms. Then he saw that it had tears in its eyes. Alas, the poor, holy child had wandered through the town by night! What had it not seen? So much poverty and so much want; so much wickedness and so many crimes! It was terrible to think what it must have experienced.

The gate-keeper went immediately to the prior and showed him the image. And they wondered how it had come out into the night.

Then the prior had the church bells rung to call the monks to the service. And all the monks of Aracoeli marched into the great, dim basilica in order to place the image, with all solemnity, back in its shrine.

Worn and suffering, they walked and trembled in their heavy homespun robes. Several of them were weeping, as if they had escaped from some terrible danger. "What would have happened to us," they said, "if our only consolation had been taken from us? Is it not Antichrist who has tempted out Rome's holy child from the sheltering sanctuary?"

But when they came to set the Christ image in the shrine of the chapel, they found there the false child; him who wore the inscription on his crown: "My kingdom is only of this world."

And when they examined the image more closely they found the inscription.

Then the prior turned to the monks and spoke to them: —

"Brothers, we will sing the 'Te Deum,' and cover the pillars of the church with silk, and light all the wax candles, and all the hanging lamps, and we will celebrate a great festival.

"As long as the monastery has stood it has been a home of terror and a cursed dwelling; but for the suffering of all those who have lived here, God has been gracious. And now all danger is over.

"God has crowned the fight with victory, and this that you have seen is the sign that Antichrist shall not be worshipped on the Capitol.

"For in order that the sibyl's words should be carried out, God has sent this false image of Christ that bears the words of Antichrist in its crown, and he has allowed us to worship and adore him as if he had been the great miracle-worker.

"But now we can rest in joy and peace, for the sibyl's mystic speech is fulfilled, and Antichrist has been worshipped here.

"Great is God, the Almighty, who has let our cruel fear be dispelled, and who has carried out His will without the world needing to gaze upon the false image made by man.

"Happy is the monastery of Aracoeli that rests under the protection of God, and does His will, and is blessed by His abounding grace."

When the prior had said those words he took the false image in his hands, went through the church, and opened the great door. Thence he walked out on the terrace. Below him lay the high and broad stairway with its hundred and nineteen marble steps that leads down from the Capitol as if into an abyss. And he raised the image over his head and cried aloud: "Anathema Antikristo!" and hurled him from the summit of the Capitol down into the world.

III

ON THE BARRICADE

When the rich Englishwoman awoke in the morning she missed the image and wondered where she should look for him. She believed that no one but the monks of Aracoeli could have taken him, and she hurried towards the Capitol to spy and search.

She came to the great marble staircase that leads up to the basilica of Aracoeli. And her heart beat wildly with joy, for on the lowest step lay he whom she sought. She seized the image, threw her cloak about him, and hurried home. And she put him back on his place of honor.

But as she now sank into contemplation of his beauty, she found that the crown had been dented. She lifted it off the image to see how great the damage was, and at the same moment her eyes fell on the inscription that she herself had scratched: "My kingdom is only of this world."

Then she knew that this was the false Christ image, and that the right one had returned to Aracoeli.

She despaired of ever again getting it into her possession, and she decided to leave Rome the next day, for she would not remain there when she no longer had the image.

But when she left she took the forged image with her, because he reminded her of the one she loved, and he followed her afterwards on all her journeys.

She was never at rest and travelled continually, and in that way the image was carried about over the whole world.

And wherever the image came, the power of Christ seemed to be diminished without any one rightly understanding why. For nothing could look more impotent than that poor image of elm wood, dressed out in brass rings and glass beads.

When the rich Englishwoman who had first owned the image was dead, he came as an inheritance to another rich Englishwoman, who also travelled continually, and from her to a third.

Once, and it was still in the time of the first Englishwoman, the image came to Paris.

As he passed through the great city there was an insurrection. Crowds rushed wildly screaming through the streets and cried for bread. They plundered the shops and threw stones at the houses of the rich. Troops were called out against them, and then they tore up the stones of the street, dragged together carriages and furniture, and built barricades.

As the rich Englishwoman came driving in her great travelling-carriage, the mass of people rushed towards it, forced her to leave it, and dragged the carriage up to one of the barricades.

When they tried to roll the carriage up among all the thousand things of which the barricade consisted, one of the big trunks fell to the ground. The cover sprang open, and among other things out rolled the rejected Christ image.

The people threw themselves upon him to plunder, but they soon saw that all his grandeur was imitation and quite worthless, and they began to laugh at him and mock him.

He went from hand to hand among the agitators, until one of them bent forward to look at his crown. His eyes were attracted by the words which stood scratched there: "My kingdom is only of this world."

The man called this out quite loudly, and they all screamed that the little image should be their badge. They carried him up to the summit of the barricade and placed him there like a banner.

Among those who defended the barricade was one man who was not a poor working-man, but a man of education, who had passed his whole life in study. He knew all the want that tortured mankind, and his heart was full of sympathy, so that he continually sought means to better their lot. For thirty years he had written and thought without finding any remedy. Now on hearing the alarm bell he had obeyed it and rushed into the streets.

He had seized a weapon and gone with the insurgents with the thought that the riddle which he had been unable to solve should now be made clear by violence and force, and that the poor should be able to fight their way to a better lot.

There he stood the whole day and fought; and people fell about him, blood splashed up into his face, and the misery of life seemed to him greater and more deplorable than ever before.

But whenever the smoke cleared away, the little image shone before his eyes; through all the tumult of the fight it stood unmoved high up on the barricade.

Every time he saw the image the words “My kingdom is only of this world” flashed through his brain. At last he thought that the words wrote themselves in the air and began to wave before his eyes, now in fire, now in blood, now in smoke.

He stood still. He stood there with gun in hand, but he had stopped fighting. Suddenly he knew that this was the word that he had sought after all his life. He knew what he would say to the people, and it was the poor image that had given him the solution.

He would go out into the whole world and proclaim: “Your kingdom is only of this world.

“Therefore you must care for this life and live like brothers. And you shall divide your property so that no one is rich and no one poor. You shall all work, and the earth shall be owned by all, and you shall all be equal.

“No one shall hunger, no one shall be tempted to luxury, and no one shall suffer want in his old age.

“And you must think of increasing every one’s happiness, for there is no compensation awaiting you. Your kingdom is only of this world.”

All this passed through his brain while he stood on the barricade, and when the thought became clear to him, he laid down his weapon, and did not lift it again for strife and the shedding of blood.

A moment later the barricade was stormed and taken. The victorious troops dashed through and quelled the insurrection, and before night order and peace reigned in the great city.

The Englishwoman sent out her servants to look for her lost possessions, and they found many, if not all. What they found first of all on the captured barricade was the image ejected from Aracoeli.

But the man who had been taught during the fight by the image began to proclaim to the world a new doctrine, which is called Socialism, but which is an Antichristianity.

And it loves, and renounces, and teaches, and suffers like Christianity, so that it has every resemblance to the latter, just as the false image from Aracoeli has every resemblance to the real Christ image.

And like the false image it says: “My kingdom is only of this world.”

And although the image that has spread abroad the teachings is unnoticed and unknown, the teachings are not; they go through the world to save and remodel it.

They are spreading from day to day. They go out through all countries, and bear many names, and they mislead because they promise earthly happiness and enjoyment to all, and win followers more than any doctrine that has gone through the world since the time of Christ.

FIRST BOOK

“There shall be great want”

I MONGIBELLO

Towards the end of the seventies there was in Palermo a poor boy whose name was Gaetano Alagona. That was lucky for him! If he had not been one of the old Alagonas people would have let him starve to death. He was only a child, and had neither money nor parents. The Jesuits of Santa Maria i Jesu had taken him out of charity into the cloister school.

One day, when studying his lesson, a father came and called him from the school-room, because a cousin wished to see him. What, a cousin! He had always heard that all his relatives were dead. But Father Josef insisted that it was a real Signora, who was his relative and wished to take him out of the monastery. It became worse and worse. Did she want to take him out of the monastery? That she could never do! He was going to be a monk.

He did not at all wish to see the Signora. Could not Father Josef tell her that Gaetano would never leave the monastery, and that it was of no avail to ask him? No, Father Josef said that he could not let her depart without seeing him, and he half dragged Gaetano into the reception-room. There she stood by one of the windows. She had gray hair; her skin was brown; her eyes were black and as round as beads. She had a lace veil on her head, and her black dress was smooth with wear, and a little green, like Father Josef's very oldest cassock.

She made the sign of the cross when she saw Gaetano. "God be praised, he is a true Alagona!" she said, and kissed his hand.

She said that she was sorry that Gaetano had reached his twelfth year without any of his family asking after him; but she had not known that there were any of the other branch alive. How had she found it out now? Well, Luca had read the name in a newspaper. It had stood among those who had got a prize. It was a half-year ago now, but it was a long journey to Palermo. She had had to save and save to get the money for the journey. She had not been able to come before. But she had to come and see him. *Santissima madre*, she had been so glad! It was she, Donna Elisa, who was an Alagona. Her husband, who was dead, had been an Antonelli. There was one other Alagona, that was her brother. He, too, lived at Diamante. But Gaetano probably did not know where Diamante was. The boy drew his head back. No, she thought as much, and she laughed.

"Diamante is on Monte Chiaro. Do you know where Monte Chiaro is?"

"No."

She drew up her eyebrows and looked very roguish.

"Monte Chiaro is on Etna, if you know where Etna is."

It sounded so anxious, as if it were too much to ask that Gaetano should know anything about Etna. And they laughed, all three, she and Father Josef and Gaetano.

She seemed a different person after she had made them laugh. "Will you come and see Diamante and Etna and Monte Chiaro?" she asked briskly. "Etna you must see. It is the greatest mountain in the world. Etna is a king, and the mountains round about kneel before him, and do not dare to lift their eyes to his face."

Then she told many tales about Etna. She thought perhaps that it would tempt him.

And it was really true that Gaetano had not thought before what kind of a mountain Etna was. He had not remembered that it had snow on its head, oak forests in its beard, vineyards about its waist, and that it stood in orange groves up to its knees. And down it ran broad, black rivers. Those streams were wonderful; they flowed without a ripple; they heaved without a wind; the poorest swimmer could cross them without a bridge. He guessed that she meant lava. And she was glad that he had guessed it. He was a clever boy. A real Alagona!

And Etna was so big! Fancy that it took three days to drive round it and three days to ride up to the top and down again! And that there were fifty towns beside Diamante on it, and fourteen

great forests, and two hundred small peaks, which were not so small either, although Etna was so big that they seemed as insignificant as a swarm of flies on a church roof. And that there were caves which could hold a whole army, and hollow old trees, where a flock of sheep could find shelter from the storm!

Everything wonderful was to be found on Etna. There were rivers of which one must beware. The water in them was so cold that any one who drank of it would die. There were rivers which flowed only by day, and others that flowed only in winter, and some which ran deep under the earth. There were hot springs, and sulphur springs, and mud-volcanoes.

It would be a pity for Gaetano not to see the mountain, for it was so beautiful. It stood against the sky like a great tent. It was as gayly colored as a merry-go-round. He ought to see it in the morning and evening, when it was red; he ought to see it at night, when it was white. He ought also to know that it truly could take every color; that it could be blue, black, brown or violet; sometimes it wore a veil of beauty, like a signora; sometimes it was a table covered with velvet; sometimes it had a tunic of gold brocade and a mantle of peacock's-feathers.

He would also like to know how it could be that old King Arthur was sitting there in a cave. Donna Elisa said that it was quite certain that he still lived on Etna, for once, when the bishop of Catania was riding over the mountain, three of his mules ran away, and the men who followed them found them in the cave with King Arthur. Then the king asked the guides to tell the bishop that when his wounds were healed he would come with his knights of the Round Table and right everything that was in disorder in Sicily. And he who had eyes to see knew well enough that King Arthur had not yet come out of his cave.

Gaetano did not wish to let her tempt him, but he thought that he might be a little friendly. She was still standing, but now he fetched her a chair. That would not make her think that he wanted to go with her.

He really liked to hear her tell about her mountain. It was so funny that it should have so many tricks. It was not at all like Monte Pellegrino, near Palermo, that only stood where it stood. Etna could smoke like a chimney and blow out fire like a gas jet. It could rumble, shake, vomit forth lava, throw stones, scatter ashes, foretell the weather, and collect rain. If Mongibello merely stirred, town after town fell, as if the houses had been cards set on end.

Mongibello, that was also a name for Etna. It was called Mongibello because that meant the mountain of mountains. It deserved to be called so.

Gaetano saw that she really believed that he would not be able to resist. She had so many wrinkles in her face, and when she laughed, they ran together like a net. He stood and looked at it; it seemed so strange. But he was not caught yet in the net.

She wondered if Gaetano really would have the courage to come to Etna. For inside the mountain were many bound giants and a black castle, which was guarded by a dog with many heads. There was also a big forge and a lame smith with only one eye in the middle of his forehead. And worst of all, in the very heart of the mountain, there was a sulphur sea which cooked like an oil kettle, and in it lay Lucifer and all the damned. No, he never would have the courage to come there, she said.

Otherwise there was no danger in living there, for the mountain feared the saints. Donna Elisa said that it feared many saints, but most Santa Agata of Catania. If the Catanians always were as they should be to her, then neither earthquake nor lava could do them any harm.

Gaetano stood quite close to her and he laughed at everything she said. How had he come there and why could he not stop laughing? It was a wonderful signora.

Suddenly he said, in order not to deceive her, "Donna Elisa, I am going to be a monk." – "Oh, are you?" she said. Then without anything more she began again to tell about the mountain.

She said that now he must really listen; now she was coming to the most important of all. He was to follow her to the south side of the mountain so far down that they were near the castle of Catania, and there he would see a valley, a quite big and wide oval valley. But it was quite black;

the lava streams came from all directions flowing down into it. There were only stones there, not a blade of grass.

But what had Gaetano believed about the lava? Donna Elisa was sure that he believed that it lay as even and smooth on Etna as it lies in the streets. But on Etna there are so many surprises. Could he understand that all the serpents and dragons and witches that lay and boiled in the lava ran out with it when there was an eruption? There they lay and crawled and crept and twisted about each other, and tried to creep up to the cold earth, and held each other fast in misery until the lava hardened about them. And then they could never come free. No indeed!

The lava was not unproductive, as he thought. Although no grass grew, there was always something to see. But he could never guess what it was. It groped and fell; it tumbled and crept; it moved on its knees, on its head, and on its elbows. It came up the sides of the valley and down the sides of the valley; it was all thorns and knots; it had a cloak of spider's-web and a wig of dust, and as many joints as a worm. Could it be anything but the cactus? Did he know that the cactus goes out on the lava and breaks the ground like a peasant? Did he know that nothing but the cactus can do anything with the lava?

Now she looked at Father Josef and made a funny face. The cactus was the best goblin to be found on Etna; but goblins were goblins. The cactus was a Turk, for it kept female slaves. No sooner had the cactus taken root anywhere than it must have almond trees near it. Almond trees are fine and shining signoras. They hardly dare to go out on the black surface, but that does not help them. Out they must, and out they are. Oh, Gaetano should see if he came there. When the almond trees stand white with their blossoms in the spring on the black field among the gray cacti, they are so innocent and beautiful that one could weep over them as over captive princesses.

Now he must know where Monte Chiaro lay. It shot up from the bottom of that black valley. She tried to make her umbrella stand on the floor. It stood so. It stood right up. It had never thought of either sitting or lying. And Monte Chiaro was as green as the valley was black. It was palm next palm, vine upon vine. It was a gentleman in a flowery dressing-gown. It was a king with a crown on his head. It bore the whole of Diamante about its temples.

Some time before Gaetano had a desire to take her hand. If he only could do it. Yes, he could. He drew her hand to him like a captured treasure. But what should he do with it? Perhaps pat it. If he tried quite gently with one finger, perhaps she would not notice it. Perhaps she would not notice if he took two fingers. Perhaps she would not even notice if he should kiss her hand. She talked and talked. She noticed nothing at all.

There was still so much she wished to say. And nothing so droll as her story about Diamante!

She said that the town had once lain down on the bottom of the valley. Then the lava came, and fiery red looked over the edge of the valley. What, what! was the last day come? The town in great haste took its houses on its back, on its head, and under its arms, and ran up Monte Chiaro, that lay close at hand.

Zigzagging up the mountain the town ran. When it was far enough up it threw down a town gate and a piece of town wall. Then it ran round the mountain in a spiral and dropped down houses. The poor people's houses tumbled as they could and would. There was no time for anything else. No one could ask anything better than crowding and disorder and crooked streets. No, that you could not. The chief street went in a spiral round the mountain, just as the town had run, and along it had set down here a church and there a palace. But there had been that much order that the best came highest up. When the town came to the top of the mountain it had laid out a square, and there it had placed the city hall and the Cathedral and the old palazzo Geraci.

If he, Gaetano Alagona, would follow her to Diamante, she would take him with her up to the square on the top of the mountain, and show him what stretches of land the old Alagonas had owned on Etna, and on the plain of Catania, and where they had raised their strongholds on the inland peaks. For up there all that could be seen, and even more. One could see the whole sea.

Gaetano had not thought that she had talked long, but Father Josef seemed to be impatient. “Now we have come to your own home, Donna Elisa,” he said quite gently.

But she assured Father Josef that at her house there was nothing to see. What she first of all wished to show Gaetano was the big house on the corso, that was called the summer palace. It was not so beautiful as the palazzo Geraci, but it was big; and when the old Alagonas were prosperous they came there in summer to be nearer the snows of Etna. Yes, as she said, towards the street it was nothing to see, but it had a beautiful court-yard with open porticos in both the stories. And on the roof there was a terrace. It was paved with blue and white tiles, and on every tile the coat of arms of the Alagonas was burnt in. He would like to come and see that?

It occurred to Gaetano that Donna Elisa must be used to having children come and sit on her knees when she was at home. Perhaps she would not notice if he should also come. And he tried. And so it was. She was used to it. She never noticed it at all.

She only went on talking about the palace. There was a great state suite, where the old Alagonas had danced and played. There was a great hall with a gallery for the music; there was old furniture and clocks like small white alabaster temples that stood on black ebony pedestals. In the state apartment no one lived, but she would go there with him. Perhaps he had thought that she lived in the summer palace. Oh, no; her brother, Don Ferrante, lived there. He was a merchant, and had his shop on the lower floor; and as he had not yet brought home a signora, everything stood up there as it had stood.

Gaetano wondered if he could sit on her knees any longer. It was wonderful that she did not notice anything. And it was fortunate, for otherwise she might have believed that he had changed his mind about being a monk.

But she was just now more than ever occupied with her own affairs. A little flush flamed up in her cheeks under all the brown, and she made a few of the funniest faces with her eyebrows. Then she began to tell how she herself lived.

It seemed as if Donna Elisa must have the very smallest house in the town. It lay opposite the summer palace, but that was its only good point. She had a little shop, where she sold medallions and wax candles and everything that had to do with divine service. But, with all respect to Father Josef, there was not much profit in such a trade now-a-days, however it may have been formerly. Behind the shop there was a little workshop. There her husband had stood and carved images of the saints, and rosary beads; for he had been an artist, Signor Antonelli. And next to the workshop were a couple of small rat-holes; it was impossible to turn in them; one had to squat down, as in the cells of the old kings. And up one flight were a couple of small hen-coops. In one of them she had laid a little straw and put up a few hooks. That would be for Gaetano, if he would come to her.

Gaetano thought that he would like to pat her cheek. She would be sorry when he could not go with her. Perhaps he could permit himself to pat her. He looked under his hair at Father Josef. Father Josef sat and looked on the floor and sighed, as he was in the habit of doing. He did not think of Gaetano, and she, she noticed nothing at all.

She said that she had a maid, whose name was Pacifica, and a man, whose name was Luca. She did not get much help, however, for Pacifica was old; and, since she had grown deaf, she had become so irritable that she could not let her help in the shop. And Luca, who really was to have been a wood-carver, and carve saints that she could sell, never gave himself time to stand still in the workshop; he was always out in the garden, looking after the flowers. Yes, they had a little garden among the stones on Monte Chiaro. But he need not think it was worth anything. She had nothing like the one in the cloister, that Gaetano would understand. But she wanted so much to have him, because he was one of the old Alagonas. And there at home she and Luca and Pacifica had said to one another: “Do we ask whether we will have a little more care, if we can only get him here?” No, the Madonna knew that they had not done so. But now the question was, whether he was willing to endure anything to be with them.

And now she had finished, and Father Josef asked what Gaetano thought of answering. It was the prior's wish, Father Josef said, that Gaetano should decide for himself. And they had nothing against his going out into the world, because he was the last of his race.

Gaetano slid gently down from Donna Elisa's lap. But to answer! That was not such an easy thing to answer. It was very hard to say no to the signora.

Father Josef came to his assistance. "Ask the signora that you may be allowed to answer in a couple of hours, Gaetano. The boy has never thought of anything but being a monk," he explained to Donna Elisa.

She stood up, took her umbrella, and tried to look glad, but there were tears in her eyes.

Of course, of course he must consider it, she said. But if he had known Diamante he would not have needed to. Now only peasants lived there, but once there had been a bishop, and many priests, and a multitude of monks. They were gone now, but they were not forgotten. Ever since that time Diamante was a holy town. More festival days were celebrated there than anywhere else, and there were quantities of saints; and even to-day crowds of pilgrims came there. Whoever lived at Diamante could never forget God. He was almost half a priest. So for that reason he ought to come. But he should consider it, if he so wished. She would come again to-morrow.

Gaetano behaved himself very badly. He turned away from her and rushed to the door. He did not say a word of thanks to her for coming. He knew that Father Josef had expected it, but he could not. When he thought of the great Mongibello that he never would see, and of Donna Elisa, who would never come again, and of the school, and of the shut-in cloister garden, and of a whole restricted life! Father Josef never could expect so much of him; Gaetano had to run away.

It was high time too. When Gaetano was ten steps from the door, he began to cry. It was too bad about Donna Elisa. Oh, that she should be obliged to travel home alone! That Gaetano could not go with her!

He heard Father Josef coming, and he hid his face against the wall. If he could only stop sobbing!

Father Josef came sighing and murmuring to himself, as he always did. When he came up to Gaetano he stopped, and sighed more than ever.

"It is Mongibello, Mongibello," said Father Josef; "no one can resist Mongibello."

Gaetano answered him by weeping more violently.

"It is the mountain calling," murmured Father Josef. "Mongibello is like the whole earth; it has all the earth's beauty and charm and vegetation and expanses and wonders. The whole earth comes at once and calls him."

Gaetano felt that Father Josef spoke the truth. He felt as if the earth stretched out strong arms to catch him. He felt that he needed to bind himself fast to the wall in order not to be torn away.

"It is better for him to see the earth," said Father Josef. "He would only be longing for it if he stayed in the monastery. If he is allowed to see the earth perhaps he will begin again to long for heaven."

Gaetano did not understand what Father Josef meant when he felt himself lifted into his arms, carried back into the reception-room, and put down on Donna Elisa's knees.

"You shall take him, Donna Elisa, since you have won him," said Father Josef. "You shall show him Mongibello, and you shall see if you can keep him."

But when Gaetano once more sat on Donna Elisa's lap he felt such happiness that it was impossible for him to run away from her again. He was as much captured as if he had gone into Mongibello and the mountain walls had closed in on him.

II

FRA GAETANO

Gaetano had lived with Donna Elisa a month, and had been as happy as a child can be. Merely to travel with Donna Elisa had been like driving behind gazelles and birds of paradise; but to live with her was to be carried on a golden litter, screened from the sun.

Then the famous Franciscan, Father Gondo, came to Diamante, and Donna Elisa and Gaetano went up to the square to listen to him. For Father Gondo never preached in a church; he always gathered the people about him by fountains or at the town gates.

The square was swarming with people; but Gaetano, who sat on the railing of the court-house steps, plainly saw Father Gondo where he stood on the curb-stone. He wondered if it could be true that the monk wore a horse-hair shirt under his robes, and that the rope that he had about his waist was full of knots and iron points to serve him as a scourge.

Gaetano could not understand what Father Gondo said, but one shiver after another ran through him at the thought that he was looking at a saint.

When the Father had spoken for about an hour, he made a sign with his hand that he would like to rest a moment. He stepped down from the steps of the fountain, sat down, and rested his face in his hands. While the monk was sitting so, Gaetano heard a gentle roaring. He had never before heard any like it. He looked about him to discover what it was. And it was all the people talking. "Blessed, blessed, blessed!" they all said at once. Most of them only whispered and murmured; none called aloud, their devotion was too great. And every one had found the same word. "Blessed, blessed!" sounded over the whole market-place. "Blessings on thy lips; blessings on thy tongue; blessings on thy heart!"

The voices sounded soft, choked by weeping and emotion, but it was as if a storm had passed by through the air. It was like the murmuring of a thousand shells.

That took much greater hold of Gaetano than the monk's sermon. He did not know what he wished to do, for that gentle murmuring filled him with emotion; it seemed almost to suffocate him. He climbed up on the iron railing, raised himself above all the others, and began to cry the same as they, but much louder, so that his voice cut through all the others.

Donna Elisa heard it and seemed to be displeased. She drew Gaetano down and would not stay any longer, but went home with him.

In the middle of the night Gaetano started up from his bed. He put on his clothes, tied together what he possessed in a bundle, set his hat on his head and took his shoes under his arm. He was going to run away. He could not bear to live with Donna Elisa.

Since he had heard Father Gondo, Diamante and Mongibello were nothing to him. Nothing was anything compared to being like Father Gondo, and being blessed by the people. Gaetano could not live if he could not sit by the fountain in the square and tell legends.

But if Gaetano went on living in Donna Elisa's garden, and eating peaches and mandarins, he would never hear the great human sea roar about him. He must go out and be a hermit on Etna; he must dwell in one of the big caves, and live on roots and fruits. He would never see a human being; he would never cut his hair; and he would wear nothing but a few dirty rags. But in ten or twenty years he would come back to the world. Then he would look like a beast and speak like an angel.

That would be another matter than wearing velvet clothes and a glazed hat, as he did now. That would be different from sitting in the shop with Donna Elisa and taking saint after saint down from the shelf and hearing her tell about what they had done. Several times he had taken a knife and a piece of wood and had tried to carve images of the saints. It was very hard, but it would be worse to make himself into a saint; much worse. However, he was not afraid of difficulties and privations.

He crept out of his room, across the attic and down the stair. It only remained to go through the shop out to the street, but on the last step he stopped. A faint light filtered through a crack in the door to the left of the stairs.

It was the door to Donna Elisa's room, and Gaetano did not dare to go any further, since his foster mother had her candle lighted. If she was not asleep she would hear him when he drew the heavy bolts on the shop door. He sat softly down on the stairs to wait.

Suddenly he happened to think that Donna Elisa must sit up so long at night and work in order to get him food and clothes. He was much touched that she loved him so much as to want to do it. And he understood what a grief it would be to her if he should go.

When he thought of that he began to weep.

But at the same time he began to upbraid Donna Elisa in his thoughts. How could she be so stupid as to grieve because he went. It would be such a joy for her when he should become a holy man. That would be her reward for having gone to Palermo and fetched him.

He cried more and more violently while he was consoling Donna Elisa. It was hard that she did not understand what a reward she would receive.

There was no need for her to be sad. For ten years only would Gaetano live on the mountain, and then he would come back as the famous hermit Fra Gaetano. Then he would come walking through the streets of Diamante, followed by a great crowd of people, like Father Gondo. And there would be flags, and the houses would be decorated with cloths and wreaths. He would stop in front of Donna Elisa's shop, and Donna Elisa would not recognize him and would be ready to fall on her knees before him. But so should it not be; he would kneel to Donna Elisa, and ask her forgiveness, because he had run away from her ten years ago. "Gaetano," Donna Elisa would then answer, "you give me an ocean of joy against a little brook of sorrow. Should I not forgive you?"

Gaetano saw all this before him, and it was so beautiful that he began to weep more violently. He was only afraid that Donna Elisa would hear how he was sobbing and come out and find him. And then she would not let him go.

He must talk sensibly with her. Would he ever give her greater pleasure than if he went now?

It was not only Donna Elisa, there was also Luca and Pacifica, who would be so glad when he came back as a holy man.

They would all follow him up to the market-place. There, there would be even more flags than in the streets, and Gaetano would speak from the steps of the town hall. And from all the streets and courts people would come streaming.

Then Gaetano would speak, so that they should all fall on their knees and cry: "Bless us, Fra Gaetano, bless us!"

After that he would never leave Diamante again. He would live under the great steps outside Donna Elisa's shop.

And they would come to him with their sick, and those in trouble would make a pilgrimage to him.

When the syndic of Diamante went by he would kiss Gaetano's hand.

Donna Elisa would sell Fra Gaetano's image in her shop.

And Donna Elisa's god-daughter, Giannita, would bow before Fra Gaetano and never again call him a stupid monk-boy.

And Donna Elisa would be so happy.

Ah ... Gaetano started up, and awoke. It was bright daylight, and Donna Elisa and Pacifica stood and looked at him. And Gaetano sat on the stairs with his shoes under his arm, his hat on his head and his bundle at his feet. But Donna Elisa and Pacifica wept. "He has wished to run away from us," they said.

"Why are you sitting here, Gaetano?"

"Donna Elisa, I wanted to run away."

Gaetano was in a good mood, and answered as boldly as if it had been the most natural thing in the world.

“Do you want to run away?” repeated Donna Elisa.

“I wished to go off on Etna and be a hermit.”

“And why are you sitting here now?”

“I do not know, Donna Elisa; I must have fallen asleep.”

Donna Elisa now showed how distressed she was. She pressed her hands over her heart, as if she had terrible pains, and she wept passionately.

“But now I shall stay, Donna Elisa,” said Gaetano.

“You, stay!” cried Donna Elisa. “You might as well go. Look at him, Pacifica, look at the ingrate! He is no Alagona. He is an adventurer.”

The blood rose in Gaetano’s face and he sprang to his feet and struck out with his hands in a way which astonished Donna Elisa. So had all the men of her race done. It was her father and her grandfather; she recognized all the powerful lords of the family of Alagona.

“You speak so because you know nothing about it, Donna Elisa,” said the boy. “No, no, you do not know anything; you do not know why I had to serve God. But you shall know it now. Do you see, it was long ago. My father and mother were so poor, and we had nothing to eat; and so father went to look for work, and he never came back, and mother and we children were almost dead of starvation. So mother said: ‘We will go and look for your father.’ And we went. Night came and a heavy rain, and in one place a river flowed over the road. Mother asked in one house if we might pass the night there. No, they showed us out. Mother and children stood in the road and cried. Then mother tucked up her dress and went down into the stream that roared over the road. She had my little sister on her arm and my big sister by the hand and a big bundle on her head. I went after as near as I could. I saw mother lose her footing. The bundle she carried on her head fell into the stream, and mother caught at it and dropped little sister. She snatched at little sister and big sister was whirled away. Mother threw herself after them, and the river took her too. I was frightened and ran to the shore. Father Josef has told me that I escaped because I was to serve God for the dead, and pray for them. And that was why it was first decided that I was to be a monk, and why I now wish to go away on Etna and become a hermit. There is nothing else for me but to serve God, Donna Elisa.”

Donna Elisa was quite subdued. “Yes, yes, Gaetano,” she said, “but it hurts me so. I do not want you to go away from me.”

“No, I shall not go either,” said Gaetano. He was in such a good mood that he felt a desire to laugh. “I shall not go.”

“Shall I speak to the priest, so that you may be sent to a seminary?” asked Donna Elisa, humbly.

“No; but you do not understand, Donna Elisa; you do not understand. I tell you that I will not go away from you. I have thought of something else.”

“What have you thought of?” she asked sadly.

“What do you suppose I was doing while I sat there on the stairs? I was dreaming, Donna Elisa. I dreamed that I was going to run away. Yes, Donna Elisa, I stood in the shop, and I was going to open the shop door, but I could not because there were so many locks. I stood in the dark and unlocked lock after lock, and always there were new ones. I made a terrible noise, and I thought: ‘Now surely Donna Elisa will come.’ At last the door opened, and I was going to rush out; but just then I felt your hand on my neck, and you drew me in, and I kicked, and I struck you because I was not allowed to go. But, Donna Elisa, you had a candle with you, and then I saw that it was not you, but my mother. Then I did not dare to struggle any more, and I was very frightened, for mother is dead. But mother took the bundle I was carrying and began to take out what was in it. Mother laughed and looked so glad, and I grew glad that she was not angry with me. It was so strange. What she drew out of the bundle was all the little saints’ images that I had carved while I sat with you in the shop, and they were so pretty. ‘Can you carve such pretty images, Gaetano?’ said mother. ‘Yes,’ I answered. ‘Then

you can serve God by it,' said mother. 'Do I not need to leave Donna Elisa, then?' 'No,' said mother. And just as mother said that, you waked me."

Gaetano looked at Donna Elisa in triumph.

"What did mother mean by that?"

Donna Elisa only wondered.

Gaetano threw his head back and laughed.

"Mother meant that you should apprentice me, so that I could serve God by carving beautiful images of angels and saints, Donna Elisa."

III

THE GOD-SISTER

In the noble island of Sicily, where there are more old customs left than in any other place in the south, it is always the habit of every one while yet a child to choose a god-brother or god-sister, who shall carry his or her children to be christened, if there ever are any.

But this is not by any means the only use god-brothers and sisters have of one another. God-brothers and sisters must love one another, serve one another, and revenge one another. In a god-brother's ear a man can bury his secrets. He can trust him with both money and sweetheart, and not be deceived. God-brothers and sisters are as faithful to each other as if they were born of the same mother, because their covenant is made before San Giovanni Battista, who is the most feared of all the saints.

It is also the custom for the poor to take their half-grown children to rich people and ask that they may be god-brothers and sisters to their young sons and daughters. What a glad sight it is on the holy Baptist's day to see all those little children in festival array wandering through the great towns looking for a god-brother or sister! If the parents succeed in giving their son a rich god-brother, they are as glad as if they were able to leave him a farm as an inheritance.

When Gaetano first came to Diamante, there was a little girl who was always coming in and out of Donna Elisa's shop. She had a red cloak and pointed cap and eight heavy, black curls that stood out under the cap. Her name was Giannita, and she was daughter of Donna Olivia, who sold vegetables. But Donna Elisa was her god-mother, and therefore thought what she could do for her.

Well, when midsummer day came, Donna Elisa ordered a carriage and drove down to Catania, which lies full twenty miles from Diamante. She had Giannita with her, and they were both dressed in their best. Donna Elisa was dressed in black silk with jet, and Giannita had a white tulle dress with garlands of flowers. In her hand Giannita held a basket of flowers, and among the flowers lay a pomegranate.

The journey went well for Donna Elisa and Giannita. When at last they reached the white Catania, that lies and shines on the black lava background, they drove up to the finest palace in the town.

It was lofty and wide, so that the poor little Giannita felt quite terrified at the thought of going into it. But Donna Elisa walked bravely in, and she was taken to Cavaliere Palmeri and his wife who owned the house.

Donna Elisa reminded Signora Palmeri that they were friends from infancy, and asked that Giannita might be her young daughter's god-sister.

That was agreed upon, and the young signorina was called in. She was a little marvel of rose-colored silk, Venetian lace, big, black eyes, and thick, bushy hair. Her little body was so small and thin that one hardly noticed it.

Giannita offered her the basket of flowers, and she graciously accepted it. She looked long and thoughtfully at Giannita, walked round her, and was fascinated by her smooth, even curls. When she had seen them, she ran after a knife, cut the pomegranate and gave Giannita half.

While they ate the fruit, they held each other's hand and both said: —

“Sister, sister, sister mine!
Thou art mine, and I am thine,
Thine my house, my bread and wine,
Thine my joys, my sacrifice,
Thine my place in Paradise.”

Then they kissed each other and called each other god-sister.

“You must never fail me, god-sister,” said the little signorina, and both the children were very serious and moved.

They had become such good friends in the short time that they cried when they parted.

But then twelve years went by and the two god-sisters lived each in her own world and never met. During the whole time Giannita was quietly in her home and never came to Catania.

But then something really strange happened. Giannita sat one afternoon in the room back of the shop embroidering. She was very skilful and was often overwhelmed with work. But it is trying to the eyes to embroider, and it was dark in Giannita’s room. She had therefore half-opened the door into the shop to get a little more light.

Just after the clock had struck four, the old miller’s widow, Rosa Alfari, came walking by. Donna Olivia’s shop was very attractive from the street. The eyes fell through the half-open door on great baskets with fresh vegetables and bright-colored fruits, and far back in the background the outline of Giannita’s pretty head. Rosa Alfari stopped and began to talk to Donna Olivia, simply because her shop looked so friendly.

Laments and complaints always followed old Rosa Alfari. Now she was sad because she had to go to Catania alone that night. “It is a misfortune that the post-wagon does not reach Diamante before ten,” she said. “I shall fall asleep on the way, and perhaps they will then steal my money. And what shall I do when I come to Catania at two o’clock at night?”

Then Giannita suddenly called out into the shop. “Will you take me with you to Catania, Donna Alfari?” she asked, half in joke, without expecting an answer.

But Rosa Alfari said eagerly, “Lord, child, will you go with me? Will you really?”

Giannita came out into the shop, red with pleasure. “If I will!” she said. “I have not been in Catania for twelve years.”

Rosa Alfari looked delightedly at her; Giannita was tall and strong, her eyes gay, and she had a careless smile on her lips. She was a splendid travelling companion.

“Get ready,” said the old woman. “You will go with me at ten o’clock; it is settled.”

The next day Giannita wandered about the streets of Catania. She was thinking the whole time of her god-sister. She was strangely moved to be so near her again. She loved her god-sister, Giannita, and she did it not only because San Giovanni has commanded people to love their god-brothers and sisters. She had adored the little child in the silk dress; she was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. She had almost become her idol.

She knew this much about her sister, that she was still unmarried and lived in Catania. Her mother was dead, and she had not been willing to leave her father, and had stayed as hostess in his house. “I must manage to see her,” thought Giannita.

Whenever Giannita met a well-appointed carriage she thought: “Perhaps it is my god-sister driving there.” And she stared at everybody to see if any of them was like the little girl with the thick hair and the big eyes.

Her heart began to beat wildly. She had always longed for her god-sister. She herself was still unmarried, because she liked a young wood-carver, Gaetano Alagona, and he had never shown the slightest desire to marry her. Giannita had often been angry with him for that, and not least had it irritated her never to be able to invite her god-sister to her wedding.

She had been so proud of her, too. She had thought herself finer than the others, because she had such a god-sister. What if she should now go to see her, since she was in the town? It would give a lustre to the whole journey.

As she thought and thought of it, a newspaper-boy came running. “*Giornale da Sicilia*,” he called. “The Palmeri affair! Great embezzlements!”

Giannita seized the boy by the neck as he rushed by. “What are you saying?” she screamed. “You lie, you lie!” and she was ready to strike him.

“Buy my paper, signora, before you strike me,” said the boy. Giannita bought the paper and began to read. She found in it without difficulty the Palmeri affair.

“Since this case is to be tried to-day in the courts,” wrote the paper, “we will give an account of it.”

Giannita read and read. She read it over and over before she understood. There was not a muscle in her body which did not begin to tremble with horror when she at last comprehended it.

Her god-sister’s father, who had owned great vineyards, had been ruined, because the blight had laid them waste. And that was not the worst. He had also dissipated a charitable fund which had been intrusted to him. He was arrested, and to-day he was to be tried.

Giannita crushed the newspaper together, threw it into the street and trampled on it. It deserved no better for bringing such news.

Then she stood quite crushed that this should meet her when she came to Catania for the first time in twelve years. “Lord God,” she said, “is there any meaning in it?”

At home, in Diamante, no one would ever have taken the trouble to tell her what was going on. Was it not destiny that she should be here on the very day of the trial?

“Listen, Donna Alfari,” she said; “you may do as you like, but I must go to the court.”

There was a decision about Giannita. Nothing could disturb her. “Do you not understand that it is for this, and not for your sake, that God has induced you to take me with you to Catania?” she said to Rosa Alfari.

Giannita did not doubt for a moment that there was something supernatural in it all.

Rosa Alfari must needs let her go, and she found her way to the Palace of Justice. She stood among the street boys and riff-raff, and saw Cavaliere Palmeri on the bench of the accused. He was a fine gentleman, with a white, pointed beard and moustache. Giannita recognized him.

She heard that he was condemned to six months’ imprisonment, and Giannita thought she saw even more plainly that she had come there as an emissary from God. “Now my god-sister must need me,” she thought.

She went out into the street again and asked her way to the Palazzo Palmeri.

On the way a carriage drove by her. She looked up, and her eyes met those of the lady who sat in the carriage. At the same moment something told her that this was her god-sister. She who was driving was pale and bent and had beseeching eyes. Giannita loved her from the first sight. “It is you who have given me pleasure many times,” she said, “because I expected pleasure from you. Now perhaps I can pay you back.”

Giannita felt filled with devotion when she went up the high, white marble steps to the Palazzo Palmeri, but suddenly a doubt struck her. “What can God wish me to do for one who has grown up in such magnificence?” she thought. “Does our Lord forget that I am only poor Giannita from Diamante?”

She told a servant to greet Signorina Palmeri and say to her that her god-sister wished to speak to her. She was surprised when the servant came back and said that she could not be received that day. Should she be content with that? Oh, no; oh, no!

“Tell the signorina that I am going to wait here the whole day, for I must speak to her.”

“The signorina is going to move out of the palace in half an hour,” said the servant.

Giannita was beside herself. “But I am her god-sister, her god-sister, do you not understand?” she said to the man. “I must speak to her.” The servant smiled, but did not move.

But Giannita would not be turned away. Was she not sent by God? He must understand, understand, she said, and raised her voice. She was from Diamante and had not been in Catania for twelve years. Until yesterday afternoon at four o’clock she had not thought of coming here. He must understand, not until yesterday afternoon at four o’clock.

The servant stood motionless. Giannita was ready to tell him the whole story to move him, when the door was thrown open. Her god-sister stood on the threshold.

“Who is speaking of yesterday at four o’clock?” she said.

“It is a stranger, Signorina Micaela.”

Then Giannita rushed forward. It was not at all a stranger. It was her god-sister from Diamante, who came here twelve years ago with Donna Elisa. Did she not remember her? Did she not remember that they had divided a pomegranate?

The signorina did not listen to that. “What was it that happened yesterday at four o’clock?” she asked, with great anxiety.

“I then got God’s command to go to you, god-sister,” said Giannita.

The other looked at her in terror. “Come with me,” she said, as if afraid that the servant should hear what Giannita wished to say to her.

She went far into the apartment before she stopped. Then she turned so quickly towards Giannita that she was frightened. “Tell me instantly!” she said. “Do not torture me; let me hear it instantly!”

She was as tall as Giannita, but very unlike her. She was more delicately made, and she, the woman of the world, had a much more wild and untamed appearance than the country girl. Everything she felt showed in her face. She did not try to conceal it.

Giannita was so astonished at her violence that she could not answer at first.

Then her god-sister lifted her arms in despair over her head and the words streamed from her lips. She said that she knew that Giannita had been commanded by God to bring her word of new misfortunes. God hated her, she knew it.

Giannita clasped her hands. God hate her! on the contrary, on the contrary!

“Yes, yes,” said Signorina Palmeri. “It is so.” And as she was inwardly afraid of the message Giannita had for her, she began to talk. She did not let her speak; she interrupted her constantly. She seemed to be so terrified by everything that had happened to her during the last days that she could not at all control herself.

Giannita must understand that God hated her, she said. She had done something so terrible. She had forsaken her father, failed her father. Giannita must have read the last account. Then she burst out again in passionate questionings. Why did she not tell her what she wished to tell her? She did not expect anything but bad news. She was prepared.

But poor Giannita never got a chance to speak; as soon as she began, the signorina became frightened and interrupted her. She told her story as if to induce Giannita not to be too hard to her.

Giannita must not think that her unhappiness only came from the fact of her no longer having her carriage, or a box at the theatre, or beautiful dresses, or servants, or even a roof over her head. Neither was it enough that she had now lost all her friends, so that she did not at all know where she should ask for shelter. Neither was it misfortune enough that she felt such shame that she could not raise her eyes to any one’s face.

But there was something else much worse.

She sat down, and was silent a moment, while she rocked to and fro in agony. But when Giannita began to speak, she interrupted her.

Giannita could not think how her father had loved her. He had always had her live in splendor and magnificence, like a princess.

She had not done much for him; only let him think out delightful things to amuse her. It had been no sacrifice to remain unmarried, for she had never loved any one like her father, and her own home had been finer than any one else’s.

But one day her father had come and said to her, “They wish to arrest me. They are spreading the report that I have stolen, but it is not true.” Then she had believed him, and helped him to hide from the *Carabinieri*. And they had looked for him in vain in Catania, on Etna, over the whole of Sicily.

But when the police could not find Cavaliere Palmeri, the people began to say: “He is a fine gentleman, and they are fine gentlemen who help him; otherwise they would have found him long

ago.” And the prefect in Catania had come to her. She received him smiling, and the prefect came as if to talk of roses, and the beautiful weather. Then he said: “Will the signorina look at this little paper? Will the signorina read this little letter? Will the signorina observe this little signature?” She read and read. And what did she see? Her father was not innocent. Her father had taken the money of others.

When the prefect had left her, she had gone to her father. “You are guilty,” she said to him. “You may do what you will, but I cannot help you any more.” Oh, she had not known what she said! She had always been very proud. She had not been able to bear to have their name stamped with dishonor. She had wished for a moment that her father had been dead, rather than that this had happened to her. Perhaps she had also said it to him. She did not rightly know what she had said.

But after that God had forsaken her. The most terrible things had happened. Her father had taken her at her word. He had gone and given himself up. And ever since he had been in prison he had not been willing to see her. He did not answer her letters, and the food that she sent him he sent back untouched. That was the most dreadful thing of all. He seemed to think that she wished to kill him.

She looked at Giannita as anxiously as if she awaited her sentence of death.

“Why do you not say to me what you have to say?” she exclaimed. “You are killing me!”

But it was impossible for her to force herself to be silent.

“You must know,” she continued, “that this palace is sold, and the purchaser has let it to an English lady, who is to move in to-day. Some of her things were brought in already yesterday, and among them was a little image of Christ.

“I caught sight of it as I passed through the vestibule, Giannita. They had taken it out of a trunk, and it lay there on the floor. It had been so neglected that no one took any trouble about it. Its crown was dented, and its dress dirty, and all the small ornaments which adorned it were rusty and broken. But when I saw it lying on the floor, I took it up and carried it into the room and placed it on a table. And while I did so, it occurred to me that I would ask its help. I knelt down before it and prayed a long time. ‘Help me in my great need!’ I said to the Christchild.

“While I prayed, it seemed to me that the image wished to answer me. I lifted my head, and the child stood there as dull as before, but a clock began to strike just then. It struck four, and it was as if it had said four words. It was as if the Christchild had answered a fourfold *yes* to my prayer.

“That gave me courage, Giannita, so that to-day I drove to the Palace of Justice to see my father. But he never turned his eyes toward me during the whole time he stood before his judges.

“I waited until they were about to lead him away, and threw myself on my knees before him in one of the narrow passages. Giannita, he let the soldiers lead me away without giving me a word.

“So, you see, God hates me. When I heard you speak of yesterday afternoon at four o’clock, I was so frightened. The Christchild sends me a new misfortune, I thought. It hates me for having failed my father.”

When she had said that, she was at last silent and listened breathlessly for what Giannita should say.

And Giannita told her story to her.

“See, see, is it not wonderful?” she said at the end. “I have not been in Catania for twelve years, and then I come here quite unexpectedly. And I know nothing at all; but as soon as I set my foot on the street here, I hear your misfortune. God has sent a message to me, I said to myself. He has called me here to help my god-sister.”

Signorina Palmeri’s eyes were turned anxiously questioning towards her. Now the new blow was coming. She gathered all her courage to meet it.

“What do you wish me to do for you, god-sister?” said Giannita. “Do you know what I thought as I was walking through the streets? I will ask her if she will go with me to Diamante, I thought. I know an old house there, where we could live cheaply. And I would embroider and sew, so that we could support ourselves. When I was out in the street I thought that it might be, but now I understand

that it is impossible, impossible. You require something more of life; but tell me if I can do anything for you. You shall not thrust me away, for God has sent me.”

The signorina bent towards Giannita. “Well?” she said anxiously.

“You shall let me do what I can for you, for I love you,” said Giannita, and fell on her knees and put her arms about her.

“Have you nothing else to say?” asked the signorina.

“I wish I had,” said Giannita, “but I am only a poor girl.”

It was wonderful to see how the features of the young signorina’s face softened; how her color came back and how her eyes began to shine. Now it was plain that she had great beauty.

“Giannita,” she said, low and scarcely audibly, “do you think that it is a miracle? Do you think that God can let a miracle come to pass for my sake?”

“Yes, yes,” whispered Giannita back.

“I prayed the Christchild that he should help me, and he sends you to me. Do you think that it was the Christchild who sent you, Giannita?”

“Yes, it was; it was!”

“Then God has not forsaken me, Giannita?”

“No, God has not forsaken you.”

The god-sisters sat and wept for a while. It was quite quiet in the room. “When you came, Giannita, I thought that nothing was left me but to kill myself,” she said at last. “I did not know where to turn, and God hated me.”

“But tell me now what I can do for you, god-sister,” said Giannita.

As an answer the other drew her to her and kissed her.

“But it is enough that you are sent by the little Christchild,” she said. “It is enough that I know that God has not forsaken me.”

IV DIAMANTE

Micaela Palmeri was on her way to Diamante with Giannita.

They had taken their places in the post-carriage at three o'clock in the morning, and had driven up the beautiful road over the lower slopes of Etna, circling round the mountain. But it had been quite dark. They had not seen anything of the surrounding country.

The young signorina by no means lamented over that. She sat with closed eyes and buried herself in her sorrow. Even when it began to grow light, she would not lift her eyes to look out. It was not until they were quite near Diamante that Giannita could persuade her to look at the landscape.

“Look! Here is Diamante; this is to be your home,” she said.

Then Micaela Palmeri, to the right of the road, saw mighty Etna, that cut off a great piece of the sky. Behind the mountain the sun was rising, and when the upper edge of the sun's disc appeared above the line of the mountain, it looked as if the white summit began to burn and send out sparks and rays.

Giannita entreated her to look at the other side.

And on the other side she saw the whole jagged mountain chain, which surrounds Etna like a towered wall, glowing red in the sunrise.

But Giannita pointed in another direction. It was not that she was to look at, not that.

Then she lowered her eyes and looked down into the black valley. There the ground shone like velvet, and the white Simeto foamed along in the depths of the valley.

But still she did not turn her eyes in the right direction.

At last she saw the steep Monte Chiaro rising out of the black, velvet-lined valley, red in the morning light and encircled by a crown of shady palms. On its summit she saw a town flanked with towers, and encompassed by a wall, and with all its windows and weather-vanes glittering in the light.

At that sight she seized Giannita's arm and asked her if it was a real town, and if people lived there.

She believed that it was one of heaven's cities, and that it would disappear like a vision. She was certain that no mortal had ever passed up the path that from the edge of the valley went in great curves over to Monte Chiaro and then zigzagged up the mountain, disappearing through the dark gates of the town.

But when she came nearer to Diamante, and saw that it was of the earth, and real, tears rose to her eyes. It moved her that the earth still held all this beauty for her. She had believed that, since it had been the scene of all her misfortunes, she would always find it gray and withered and covered with thistles and poisonous growths.

She entered poor Diamante with clasped hands, as if it were a sanctuary. And it seemed to her as if this town could offer her as much happiness as beauty.

V DON FERRANTE

A few days later Gaetano was standing in his workshop, cutting grape-leaves on rosary beads. It was Sunday, but Gaetano did not feel it on his conscience that he was working, for it was a work in God's honor.

A great restlessness and anxiety had come over him. It had come into his mind that the time he had been living at peace with Donna Elisa was now drawing to a close, and he thought that he must soon start out into the world.

For great poverty had come to Sicily, and he saw want wandering from town to town and from house to house like the plague, and it had come to Diamante also.

No one ever came now to Donna Elisa's shop to buy anything. The little images of the saints that Gaetano made stood in close rows on the shelves, and the rosaries hung in great bunches under the counter. And Donna Elisa was in great want and sorrow, because she could not earn anything.

That was a sign to Gaetano that he must leave Diamante, go out into the world, emigrate if there was no other way. For it could not be working to the honor of God to carve images that never were worshipped, and to turn rosary beads that never glided through a petitioner's fingers.

It seemed to him that, somewhere in the world, there must be a beautiful, newly built cathedral, with finished walls, but whose interior yet stood shivering in nakedness. It awaited Gaetano's coming to carve the choir chairs, the altar-rail, the pulpit, the lectern, and the shrine. His heart ached with longing for that work which was waiting.

But there was no such cathedral in Sicily, for there no one ever thought of building a new church; it must be far away in such lands as Florida or Argentina, where the earth is not yet overcrowded with holy buildings.

He felt at the same time trembling and happy, and had begun to work with redoubled zeal in order that Donna Elisa should have something to sell while he was away earning great fortunes for her.

Now he was waiting for but one more sign from God before he decided on the journey. And this was that he should have the strength to speak to Donna Elisa of his longing to go. For he knew that it would cause her such sorrow that he did not know how he could bring himself to speak of it.

While he stood and thought Donna Elisa came into the workshop. Then he said to himself that this day he could not think of saying it to her, for to-day Donna Elisa was happy. Her tongue wagged and her face beamed.

Gaetano asked himself when he had seen her so. Ever since the famine had come, it had been as if they had lived without light in one of the caves of Etna.

Why had Gaetano not been with her in the square and heard the music? asked Donna Elisa. Why did he never come to hear and see her brother, Don Ferrante? Gaetano, who only saw him when he stood in the shop with his tufts of hair and his short jacket, did not know what kind of a man he was. He considered him an ugly old tradesman, who had a wrinkled face and a rough beard. No one knew Don Ferrante who had not seen him on Sunday, when he conducted the music.

That day he had donned a new uniform. He wore a three-cornered hat with green, red, and white feathers, silver on his collar, silver-fringed epaulets, silver braid on his breast, and a sword at his side. And when he stepped up to the conductor's platform the wrinkles had been smoothed out of his face and his figure had grown erect. He could almost have been called handsome.

When he had led *Cavalleria*, people had hardly been able to breathe. What had Gaetano to say to that, that the big houses round the market-place had sung too? From the black Palazzo Geraci, Donna Elisa had distinctly heard a love song, and from the convent, empty as it was, a beautiful hymn had streamed out over the market-place.

And when there was a pause in the music the handsome advocate Favara, who had been dressed in a black velvet coat and a big broad-brimmed hat and a bright red necktie, had gone up to Don Ferrante, and had pointed out over the open side of the square, where Etna and the sea lay. “Don Ferrante,” he had said, “you lift us toward the skies, just as Etna does, and you carry us away into the eternal, like the infinite sea.”

If Gaetano had seen Don Ferrante to-day he would have loved him. At least he would have been obliged to acknowledge his stateliness. When he laid down his baton for a while and took the advocate’s arm, and walked forward and back with him on the flat stones by the Roman gate and the Palazzo Geraci, every one could see that he could well measure himself against the handsome Favara.

Donna Elisa sat on the stone bench by the cathedral, in company with the wife of the syndic. And Signora Voltaro had said quite suddenly, after sitting for a while, watching Don Ferrante: “Donna Elisa, your brother is still a young man. He may still be married, in spite of his fifty years.”

And she, Donna Elisa, had answered that she prayed heaven for it every day.

But she had hardly said it, when a lady dressed in mourning came into the square. Never had anything so black been seen before. It was not enough that dress and hat and gloves were black; her veil was so thick that it was impossible to believe that there was a face behind it. Santissimo Dio! it looked as if she had hung a pall over herself. And she had walked slowly, and with a stoop. People had almost feared, believing that it was a ghost.

Alas, alas! the whole market-place had been so full of gayety! The peasants, who were at home over Sunday, had stood there in great crowds in holiday dress, with red shawls wound round their necks. The peasant women on their way to the cathedral had glided by, dressed in green skirts and yellow neckerchiefs. A couple of travellers had stood by the balustrade and looked at Etna; they had been dressed in white. And all the musicians in uniform, who had been almost as fine as Don Ferrante, and the shining instruments, and the carved cathedral *façade*! And the sunlight, and Mongibello’s snow top – so near to-day that one could almost touch it – had all been so gay.

Now, when the poor black lady came into the midst of it all, they had stared at her, and some had made the sign of the cross. And the children had rushed down from the steps of the town-hall, where they were riding on the railing, and had followed her at a few feet’s distance. And even the lazy Piero, who had been asleep in the corner of the balustrade, had raised himself on his elbow. It had been a resurrection, as if the black Madonna from the cathedral had come strolling by.

But had no one thought that it was unkind that all stared at the black lady? Had no one been moved when she came so slowly and painfully?

Yes, yes; one had been touched, and that had been Don Ferrante. He had the music in his heart; he was a good man and he thought: “Curses on all those funds that are gathered together for the poor, and that only bring people misfortune! Is not that poor Signorina Palmeri, whose father has stolen from a charitable fund, and who is now so ashamed that she dares not show her face?” And, as he thought of it, Don Ferrante went towards the black lady and met her just by the church door.

There he made her a bow, and mentioned his name. “If I am not mistaken,” Don Ferrante had said, “you are Signorina Palmeri. I have a favor to ask of you.”

Then she had started and taken a step backwards, as if to flee, but she had waited.

“It concerns my sister, Donna Elisa,” he had said. “She knew your mother, signorina, and she is consumed with a desire to make your acquaintance. She is sitting here by the Cathedral. Let me take you to her!”

And then Don Ferrante put her hand on his arm and led her over to Donna Elisa. And she made no resistance. Donna Elisa would like to see who could have resisted Don Ferrante to-day.

Donna Elisa rose and went to meet the black lady, and throwing back her veil, kissed her on both cheeks.

But what a face, what a face! Perhaps it was not pretty, but it had eyes that spoke, eyes that mourned and lamented, even when the whole face smiled. Yes, Gaetano perhaps would not wish to

carve or paint a Madonna from that face, for it was too thin and too pale; but it is to be supposed that our Lord knew what he was doing when he did not put those eyes in a face that was rosy and round.

When Donna Elisa kissed her, she laid her head down on her shoulder, and a few short sobs shook her. Then she looked up with a smile, and the smile seemed to say: "Ah, does the world look so? Is it so beautiful? Let me see it and smile at it! Can a poor unfortunate really dare to look at it? And to be seen? Can I bear to be seen?"

All that she had said without a word, only with a smile. What a face, what a face!

But here Gaetano interrupted Donna Elisa. "Where is she now?" he said. "I too must see her."

Then Donna Elisa looked Gaetano in the eyes. They were glowing and clear, as if they were filled with fire, and a dark flush rose to his temples.

"You will see her all in good time," she said, harshly. And she repented of every word she had said.

Gaetano saw that she was afraid, and he understood what she feared. It came into his mind to tell her now that he meant to go away, to go all the way to America.

Then he understood that the strange signorina must be very dangerous. Donna Elisa was so sure that Gaetano would fall in love with her that she was almost glad to hear that he meant to go away.

For anything seemed better to her than a penniless daughter-in-law, whose father was a thief.

VI DON MATTEO'S MISSION

One afternoon the old priest, Don Matteo, inserted his feet into newly polished shoes, put on a newly brushed soutane, and laid his cloak in the most effective folds. His face shone as he went up the street, and when he distributed blessings to the old women spinning by the doorposts, it was with gestures as graceful as if he had scattered roses.

The street along which Don Matteo was walking was spanned by at least seven arches, as if every house wished to bind itself to a neighbor. It ran small and narrow down the mountain; it was half street and half staircase; the gutters were always overflowing, and there were always plenty of orange-skins and cabbage-leaves to slip on. Clothes hung on the line, from the ground up to the sky. Wet shirt-sleeves and apron-strings were carried by the wind right into Don Matteo's face. And it felt horrid and wet, as if Don Matteo had been touched by a corpse.

At the end of the street lay a little dark square, and there Don Matteo saw an old house, before which he stopped. It was big, and square, and almost without windows. It had two enormous flights of steps, and two big doors with heavy locks. And it had walls of black lava, and a "loggia," where green slime grew over the tiled floor, and where the spider-webs were so thick that the nimble lizards were almost held fast in them.

Don Matteo lifted the knocker, and knocked till it thundered. All the women in the street began to talk, and to question. All the washerwomen by the fountain in the square dropped soap and wooden clapper, and began to whisper, and ask, "What is Don Matteo's errand? Why does Don Matteo knock on the door of an old, haunted house, where nobody dares to live except the strange signorina, whose father is in prison?"

But now Giannita opened the door for Don Matteo, and conducted him through long passages, smelling of mould and damp. In several places in the floor the stones were loose, and Don Matteo could see way down into the cellar, where great armies of rats raced over the black earth floor.

As Don Matteo walked through the old house, he lost his good-humor. He did not pass by a stairway without suspiciously spying up it, and he could not hear a rustle without starting. He was depressed as before some misfortune. Don Matteo thought of the little turbaned Moor who was said to show himself in that house, and even if he did not see him, he might be said to have felt him.

At last Giannita opened a door and showed the priest into a room. The walls there were bare, as in a stable; the bed was as narrow as a nun's, and over it hung a Madonna that was not worth three soldi. The priest stood and stared at the little Madonna till the tears rose to his eyes.

While he stood so Signorina Palmeri came into the room. She kept her head bent and moved slowly, as if wounded. When the priest saw her he wished to say to her: "You and I, Signorina Palmeri, have met in a strange old house. Are you here to study the old Moorish inscriptions or to look for mosaics in the cellar?" For the old priest was confounded when he saw Signorina Palmeri. He could not understand that the noble lady was poor. He could not comprehend that she was living in the house of the little Moor.

He said to himself that he must save her from this haunted house, and from poverty. He prayed to the tender Madonna for power to save her.

Thereupon he said to the signorina that he had come with a commission from Don Ferrante Alagona. Don Ferrante had confided to him that she had refused his proposal of marriage. Why was that? Did she not know that, although Don Ferrante seemed to be poor as he stood in his shop, he was really the richest man in Diamante? And Don Ferrante was of an old Spanish family of great consideration, both in their native country and in Sicily. And he still owned the big house on the Corso that had belonged to his ancestors. She should not have said no to him.

While Don Matteo was speaking, he saw how the signorina's face grew stiff and white. He was almost afraid to go on. He feared that she was going to faint.

It was only with the greatest effort that she was able to answer him. The words would not pass her lips. It seemed as if they were too loathsome to utter. She quite understood, she said, that Don Ferrante would like to know why she had refused his proposal. She was infinitely touched and grateful on account of it, but she could not be his wife. She could not marry, for she brought dishonor and disgrace with her as a marriage portion.

"If you marry an Alagona, dear signorina," said Don Matteo, "you need not fear that any one will ask of what family you are. It is an honorable old name. Don Ferrante and his sister, Donna Elisa, are considered the first people in Diamante, although they have lost all the family riches, and have to keep a shop. Don Ferrante knows well enough that the glory of the old name would not be tarnished by a marriage with you. Have no scruples for that, signorina, if otherwise you may be willing to marry Don Ferrante."

But Signorina Palmeri repeated what she had said. Don Ferrante should not marry the daughter of a convict. She sat pale and despairing, as if wishing to practise saying those terrible words. She said that she did not wish to enter a family which would despise her. She succeeded in saying it in a hard, cold voice, without emotion.

But the more she said, the greater became Don Matteo's desire to help her. He felt as if he had met a queen who had been torn from her throne. A burning desire came over him to set the crown again upon her head, and fasten the mantle about her shoulders.

Therefore Don Matteo asked her if her father were not soon coming out of prison, and he wondered what he would live on.

The signorina answered that he would live on her work.

Don Matteo asked her very seriously whether she had thought how her father, who had always been rich, could bear poverty.

Then she was silent. She tried to move her lips to answer, but could not utter a sound.

Don Matteo talked and talked. She looked more and more frightened, but she did not yield.

At last he knew not what to do. How could he save her from that haunted house, from poverty, and from the burden of dishonor that weighed her down? But then his eyes chanced to fall on the little image of the Madonna over the bed. So the young signorina was a believer.

The spirit of inspiration came to Don Matteo. He felt that God had sent him to save this poor woman. When he spoke again, there was a new ring in his voice. He understood that it was not he alone who spoke.

"My daughter," he said, and rose, "you will marry Don Ferrante for your father's sake! It is the Madonna's will, my daughter."

There was something impressive in Don Matteo's manner. No one had ever seen him so before. The signorina trembled, as if a spirit voice had spoken to her, and she clasped her hands.

"Be a good and faithful wife to Don Ferrante," said Don Matteo, "and the Madonna promises you through me that your father will have an old age free of care."

Then the signorina saw that it was an inspiration which guided Don Matteo. It was God speaking through him. And she sank down on her knees, and bent her head. "I shall do what you command," she said.

But when the priest, Don Matteo, came out of the house of the little Moor and went up the street, he suddenly took out his breviary and began to read. And although the wet clothes struck him on the cheek, and the little children and the orange-peels lay in wait for him, he only looked in his book. He needed to hear the great words of God.

For within that black house everything had seemed certain and sure, but when he came out into the sunshine he began to worry about the promise he had given in the name of the Madonna.

Don Matteo prayed and read, and read and prayed. Might the great God in heaven protect the woman, who had believed him and obeyed him as if he had been a prophet!

Don Matteo turned the corner into the Corso. He struck against donkeys on their way home, with travelling signorinas on their backs; he walked right into peasants coming home from their work, and he pushed against the old women spinning, and entangled their thread. At last he came to a little, dark shop.

It was a shop without a window which was at the corner of an old palace. The threshold was a foot high; the floor was of trampled earth; the door almost always stood open to let in the light. The counter was besieged by peasants and mule-drivers.

And behind the counter stood Don Ferrante. His beard grew in tufts; his face was in one wrinkle; his voice was hoarse with rage. The peasants demanded an immoderately high payment for the loads that they had driven up from Catania.

VII

THE BELLS OF SAN PASQUALE

The people of Diamante soon perceived that Don Ferrante's wife, Donna Micaela, was nothing but a great child. She could never succeed in looking like a woman of the world, and she really was nothing but a child. And nothing else was to be expected, after the life she had led.

Of the world she had seen nothing but its theatres, museums, ball-rooms, promenades, and race courses; and all such are only play places. She had never been allowed to go alone on the street. She had never worked. No one had ever spoken seriously to her. She had not even been in love with any one.

After she had moved into the summer palace she forgot her cares as gayly and easily as a child would have done. And it appeared that she had the playful disposition of a child, and that she could transform and change everything about her.

The old dirty Saracen town Diamante seemed like a paradise to Donna Micaela. She said that she had not been at all surprised when Don Ferrante had spoken to her in the square, nor when he had proposed to her. It seemed quite natural to her that such things should happen in Diamante. She had seen instantly that Diamante was a town where rich men went and sought out poor, unfortunate signorinas to make them mistresses of their black lava palaces.

She also liked the summer-palace. The faded chintz, a hundred years old, that covered the furniture told her stories. And she found a deep meaning in all the love scenes between the shepherds and shepherdesses on the walls.

She had soon found out the secret of Don Ferrante. He was no ordinary shop-keeper in a side street. He was a man of ambition, who was collecting money in order to buy back the family estate on Etna and the palace in Catania and the castle on the mainland. And if he went in short jacket and pointed cap, like a peasant, it was in order the sooner to be able to appear as a grandee of Spain and prince of Sicily.

After they were married Don Ferrante always used every evening to put on a velvet coat, take his guitar under his arm, and place himself on the stairway to the gallery in the music-room in the summer-palace and sing canzoni. While he sang, Donna Micaela dreamed that she had been married to the noblest man in beautiful Sicily.

When Donna Micaela had been married a few months her father was released from prison and came to live at the summer palace with his daughter. He liked the life in Diamante and became friends with every one. He liked to talk to the bee-raisers and vineyard workers whom he met at the Café Europa, and he amused himself every day by riding about on the slopes of Etna to look for antiquities.

But he had by no means forgiven his daughter. He lived under her roof, but he treated her like a stranger, and never showed her affection. Donna Micaela let him go on and pretended not to notice it. She could not take his anger seriously any longer. That old man, whom she loved, believed that he would be able to go on hating her year after year! He would live near her, hear her speak, see her eyes, be encompassed by her love, and he could continue to hate her! Ah, he knew neither her nor himself. She used to sit and imagine how it would be when he must acknowledge that he was conquered; when he must come and show her that he loved her.

One day Donna Micaela was standing on her balcony waving her hand to her father, who rode away on a small, dark-brown pony, when Don Ferrante came up from the shop to speak to her. And what Don Ferrante wished to say was that he had succeeded in getting her father admitted to "The Brotherhood of the Holy Heart" in Catania.

But although Don Ferrante spoke very distinctly, Donna Micaela seemed not to understand him at all.

He had to repeat to her that he had been in Catania the day before, and that he had succeeded in getting Cavaliere Palmeri into a brotherhood. He was to enter it in a month.

She only asked: “What does that mean? What does that mean?”

“Oh,” said Don Ferrante, “can I not have wearied of buying your father expensive wines from the mainland, and may I not sometimes wish to ride Domenico?”

When he had said that, he wished to go. There was nothing more to say.

“But tell me first what kind of a brotherhood it is,” she said. – “What it is! A lot of old men live there.” – “Poor old men?” – “Oh, well, not so rich.” – “They do not have a room to themselves, I suppose?” – “No, but very big dormitories.” – “And they eat from tin basins on a table without a cloth?” – “No, they must be china.” – “But without a table-cloth?” – “Lord, if the table is clean!”

He added, to silence her: “Very good people live there. If you like to know it, it was not without hesitation they would receive Cavaliere Palmeri.”

Thereupon Don Ferrante went. His wife was in despair, but also very angry. She thought that he had divested himself of rank and class and become only a plain shop-keeper.

She said aloud, although no one heard her, that the summer palace was only a big, ugly old house, and Diamante a poor and miserable town.

Naturally, she would not allow her father to leave her. Don Ferrante would see.

When they had eaten their dinner Don Ferrante wished to go to the Café Europa and play dominoes, and he looked about for his hat. Donna Micaela took his hat and followed him out to the gallery that ran round the court-yard. When they were far enough from the dining-room for her father not to be able to hear them, she said passionately: —

“Have you anything against my father?” – “He is too expensive.” – “But you are rich.” – “Who has given you such an idea? Do you not see how I am struggling?” – “Save in some other way.” – “I shall save in other ways. Giannita has had presents enough.” – “No, economize on something for me.” – “You! you are my wife; you shall have it as you have it.”

She stood silent a moment. She was thinking what she could say to frighten him.

“If I am now your wife, do you know why it is?” – “Oh yes.” – “Do you also know what the priest promised me?” – “That is his affair, but I do what I can.” – “You have heard, perhaps, that I broke with all my friends in Catania when I heard that my father had sought help from them and had not got it.” – “I know it.” – “And that I came here to Diamante that he might escape from seeing them and being ashamed?” – “They will not be coming to the brotherhood.” – “When you know all this, are you not afraid to do anything against my father?” – “Afraid? I am not afraid of my wife.”

“Have I not made you happy?” she asked. – “Yes, of course,” he answered indifferently. – “Have you not enjoyed singing to me? Have you not liked me to have considered you the most generous man in Sicily? Have you not been glad that I was happy in the old palace? Why should it all come to an end?”

He laid his hand on her shoulder and warned her. “Remember that you are not married to a fine gentleman from the Via Etnea!” – “Oh, no!” – “Up here on the mountain the ways are different. Here wives obey their husbands. And we do not care for fair words. But if we want them we know how to get them.”

She was frightened when he spoke so. In a moment she was on her knees before him. It was dark, but enough light came from the other rooms for him to see her eyes. In burning prayer, glorious as stars, they were fixed on him.

“Be merciful! You do not know how much I love him!” Don Ferrante laughed. “You ought to have begun with that. Now you have made me angry.” She still knelt and looked up at him. “It is well,” he said, “for you hereafter to know how you shall behave.” Still she knelt. Then he asked: “Shall I tell him, or will you?”

Donna Micaela was ashamed that she had humbled herself. She rose and answered imperiously: “I shall tell him, but not till the last day. And you *shall* not let him notice anything.”

“No, I *shall* not,” he said, and mimicked her. “The less talk about it, the better for me.”

But when he was gone Donna Micaela laughed at Don Ferrante for believing that he could do what he liked with her father. She knew some one who would help her.

In the Cathedral at Diamante there is a miracle-working image of the Madonna, and this is its story.

Long, long ago a holy hermit lived in a cave on Monte Chiaro. And this hermit dreamed one night that in the harbor of Catania lay a ship loaded with images of the saints, and among these there was one so holy that Englishmen, who are richer than anybody else, would have paid its weight in gold for it. As soon as the hermit awoke from this dream he started for Catania. In the harbor lay a ship loaded with images of the saints, and among the images was one of the holy Madonna that was more holy than all the others. The hermit begged the captain not to carry that image away from Sicily, but to give it to him. But the captain refused. “I shall take it to England,” he said, “and the Englishmen will pay its weight in gold.” The hermit renewed his petitions. At last the captain had his men drive him on shore, and hoisted his sail to depart.

It looked as if the holy image was to be lost to Sicily; but the hermit knelt down on one of the lava blocks on the shore and prayed to God that it might not be. And what happened? The ship could not go. The anchor was up, the sail hoisted, and the wind fresh; but for three long days the ship lay as motionless as if it had been a rock. On the third day the captain took the Madonna image and threw it to the hermit, who still lay on the shore. And immediately the ship glided out of the harbor. The hermit carried the image to Monte Chiaro, and it is still in Diamante, where it has a chapel and an altar in the Cathedral.

Donna Micaela was now going to this Madonna to pray for her father.

She sought out the Madonna’s chapel, which was built in a dark corner of the Cathedral. The walls were covered with votive offerings, with silver hearts and pictures that had been given by all those who had been helped by the Madonna of Diamante.

The image was hewn in black marble, and when Donna Micaela saw it standing in its niche, high and dark, and almost hidden by a golden railing, it seemed to her that its face was beautiful, and that it shone with mildness. And her heart was filled with hope.

Here was the powerful queen of heaven; here was the good Mother Mary; here was the afflicted mother who understood every sorrow; here was one who would not allow her father to be taken from her.

Here she would find help. She would need only to fall on her knees and tell her trouble, to have the black Madonna come to her assistance.

While she prayed she felt certain that Don Ferrante was even at that moment changing his mind. When she came home he would come to meet her and say to her that she might keep her father.

It was a morning three weeks later.

Donna Micaela came out of the summer palace to go to early mass; but before she set out to the church, she went into Donna Elisa’s shop to buy a wax candle. It was so early that she had been afraid that the shop would not be open; but it was, and she was glad to be able to take a gift with her to the black Madonna.

The shop was empty when Donna Micaela came in, and she pushed the door forward and back to make the bell ring and call Donna Elisa in. At last some one came, but it was not Donna Elisa; it was a young man.

That young man was Gaetano, whom Donna Micaela scarcely knew. For Gaetano had heard so much about her that he was afraid to meet her, and every time she had come over to Donna Elisa he had shut himself into his workshop. Donna Micaela knew no more about him than that he was to leave Diamante, and that he was always carving holy images for Donna Elisa to have something to sell while he was earning great fortunes away in Argentina.

When she now saw Gaetano, she found him so handsome that it made her glad to look at him. She was full of anxiety as a hunted animal, but no sorrow in the world could prevent her from feeling joy at the sight of anything so beautiful.

She asked herself where she had seen him before, and she remembered that she had seen his face in her father's wonderful collection of pictures in the palace at Catania. There he had not been in working blouse; he had had a black felt hat with long, flowing, white feathers, and a broad lace collar over a velvet coat. And he had been painted by the great master Van Dyck.

Donna Micaela asked Gaetano for a wax candle, and he began to look for one. And now, strangely enough, Gaetano, who saw the little shop every day, seemed to be quite strange there. He looked for the wax candle in the drawers of rosaries and in the little medallion boxes. He could not find anything, and he grew so impatient that he turned out the drawers and broke the boxes open. The destruction and disorder were terrible. And it would be a real grief to Donna Elisa when she came home.

But Donna Micaela liked to see how he shook the thick hair back from his face, and how his gold-colored eyes glowed like yellow wine when the sun shines through it. It was a consolation to see any one so beautiful.

Then Donna Micaela asked pardon of the noble gentlemen whom the great Van Dyck had painted. For she had often said to them: "Ah, signor, you have been beautiful, but you never could have been so dark and so pale and so melancholy. And you did not possess such eyes of fire. All that the master who painted you has put into your face." But when Donna Micaela saw Gaetano she found that it all could be in a face, and that the master had not needed to add anything. Therefore she asked the noble old gentlemen's pardon.

At last Gaetano had found the long candle-boxes that stood under the counter, where they had always stood. And he gave her the candle, but he did not know what it cost, and said that she could come in and pay it later. When she asked him for something to wrap it in he was in such trouble that she had to help him to look.

It grieved her that such a man should think of travelling to Argentina.

He let Donna Micaela wrap up the candle and watched her while she did it. She wished she could have asked him not to look at her now, when her face reflected only hopelessness and misery.

Gaetano had not scrutinized her features more than a moment before he sprang up on a little step-ladder, took down an image from the topmost shelf, and came back with it to her. It was a little gilded and painted wooden angel, a little San Michele fighting with the arch-fiend, which he had created from paper and wadding.

He handed it to Donna Micaela and begged her to accept it. He wished to give it to her, he said, because it was the best he had ever carved. He was so certain that it had greater power than his other images that he had put it away on the top shelf, so that no one might see and buy it. He had forbidden Donna Elisa to sell it except to one who had a great sorrow. And now Donna Micaela was to take it.

She hesitated. She found him almost too daring.

But Gaetano begged her to look how well the image was carved. She saw that the archangel's wings were ruffled with anger, and that Lucifer was pressing his claws into the steel plate on his leg? Did she see how San Michele was driving in his spear, and how he was frowning and pressing his lips together?

He wished to lay the little image in her hand, but she gently pushed it away. She saw that it was beautiful and spirited, she said, but she knew that it could not help her. She thanked him for his gift, but she would not accept it.

Then Gaetano seized the image and rolled it in paper and put it back in its place.

And not until it was wrapped up and put away did he speak to her.

But then he asked her why she came to buy wax candles if she was not a believer. Did she mean to say that she did not believe in San Michele? Did she not know that he was the most powerful of

the angels, and that it was he who had vanquished Lucifer and thrown him into Etna? Did she not believe that it was true? Did she not know that San Michele lost a wing-feather in the fight, and that it was found in Caltanissetta? Did she know it or not? Or what did she mean by San Michele not being able to help her? Did she think that none of the saints could help? And he, who was standing in his workshop all day long, carving saints! – would he do such a thing if there was no good in it? Did she believe that he was an impostor?

But as Donna Micaela was just as strong a believer as Gaetano, she thought that his speech was unjust, and it irritated her to contradiction.

“It sometimes happens that the saints do not help,” she said to him. And when Gaetano looked unbelieving, she was seized by an uncontrollable desire to convince him, and she said to him that some one had promised her in the name of the Madonna that, if she was a faithful wife to Don Ferrante, her father should enjoy an old age free of care. But now her husband wished to put her father in a brotherhood, which was as wretched as a poor-house and strict as a prison. And the Madonna had not averted it; in eight days it would happen.

Gaetano listened to her with the greatest earnestness. That was what induced her to confide the whole story to him.

“Donna Micaela,” he said, “you must turn to the black Madonna in the Cathedral.”

“So you think that I have not prayed to her?”

Gaetano flushed and said almost with anger: “You will not say that you have turned in vain to the black Madonna?”

“I have prayed to her in vain these last three weeks – prayed to her, prayed to her.”

When Donna Micaela spoke of it she could scarcely breathe. She wanted to weep over herself because she had awaited help each day, and each day been disappointed; and yet had known nothing better to do than begin again with her prayers. And it was visible on her face that her soul lived over and over again what she had suffered, when each day she had awaited an answer to her prayer, while the days slipped by.

But Gaetano was unmoved; he stood smiling, and drummed on one of the glass cases that stood on the counter.

“Have you only *prayed* to the Madonna?” he said.

Only prayed, only prayed! But she had also promised her to lay aside all sins. She had gone to the street where she had lived first, and nursed the sick woman with the ulcerated leg. She never passed a beggar without giving alms.

Only prayed! And she told him that if the Madonna had had the power to help her, she ought to have been satisfied with her prayers. She had spent her days in the Cathedral. And the anguish, the anguish that tortured her, should not that be counted?

He only shrugged his shoulders. Had she not tried anything else?

Anything else! But there was nothing in the world that she had not tried. She had given silver hearts and wax candles. Her rosary was never out of her hand.

Gaetano irritated her. He would not count anything that she had done; he only asked: “Nothing else? Nothing else?”

“But you ought to understand,” she said. “Don Ferrante does not give me so much money. I cannot do more. At last I have succeeded in getting some silk and cloth for an altar cloth. You ought to understand!”

But Gaetano, who had daily intercourse with the saints, and who knew the power and wildness of enthusiasm that had filled them when they had compelled God to obey their prayers, smiled scornfully at Donna Micaela, who thought she could subjugate the Madonna with wax candles and altar-cloths.

He understood very well, he answered. The whole was clear to him. It was always so with those miserable saints. Everybody called to them for help, but few understood what they ought to do to

get their prayers granted. And then people said that the saints had no power. All were helped who knew how they ought to pray.

Donna Micaela looked up in eager expectation. There was such strength and conviction in Gaetano's words that she began to believe that he would teach her the right words of salvation.

Gaetano took the candle lying in front of her on the counter and threw it down into the box again, and told her what she had to do. He forbade her to give the Madonna any gifts, or to pray to her, or to do anything for the poor. He told her that he would tear her altar-cloth to pieces if she sewed another stitch on it.

"Show her, Donna Micaela, that it means something to you," he said, and fixed his eyes on her with compelling force. "Good Lord, you must be able to find something to do, to show her that it is serious, and not play. You must be able to show her that you will not live if you are not helped. Do you mean to continue to be faithful to Don Ferrante, if he sends your father away? I know you do. If the Madonna has no need to fear what you are going to do, why should she help you?"

Donna Micaela drew back. He came swiftly out from behind the counter and seized her coat sleeve.

"Do you understand? You shall show her that you can throw yourself away if you do not get help. You shall throw yourself into sin and death if you do not get what you want. That is the way to force the saints."

She tore herself from him and went without a word. She hurried up the spiral street, came to the Cathedral, and threw herself down in terror before the altar of the black Madonna.

That happened one Saturday morning, and on Sunday evening Donna Micaela saw Gaetano again. For it was beautiful moonlight, and in Diamante it is the custom on moonlight nights for all to leave their homes and go out into the streets. As soon as the inhabitants of the summer palace had come outside their door they had met acquaintances. Donna Elisa had taken Cavaliere Palmeri's arm, and the syndic Voltaro had joined Don Ferrante to discuss the elections; but Gaetano came up to Donna Micaela because he wished to hear if she had followed his advice.

"Have you stopped sewing on that altar-cloth?" he said.

But Donna Micaela answered that all day yesterday she had sewn on it.

"Then it is you who understand what you are doing, Donna Micaela."

"Yes, now there is no help for it, Don Gaetano."

She managed to keep them away from the others, for there was something she wished to speak to him about. And when they came to Porta Etnea, she turned out through the gate, and they went along the paths that wind under Monte Chiaro's palm groves.

They could not have walked on the streets filled with people. Donna Micaela spoke so the people in Diamante would have stoned her if they had heard her.

She asked Gaetano if he had ever seen the black Madonna in the Cathedral. She had not seen her till yesterday. The Madonna perhaps had placed herself in such a dark corner of the Cathedral so that no one should be able to see her. She was so black, and had a railing in front of her. No one could see her.

But to-day Donna Micaela had seen her. To-day the Madonna had had a festival, and she had been moved from her niche. The floor and walls of her chapel had been covered with white almond-blossoms, and she herself had stood down on the altar, dark and high, surrounded by the white glory.

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