

OIDA

THE WATERS
OF EDERA

Ouida
The Waters of Edera

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=36364318

The Waters of Edera:

Содержание

I	4
II	22
III	36
IV	52
V	66
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	68

Ouida

The Waters of Edera

I

It was a country of wide pastures, of moors covered with heath, of rock-born streams and rivulets, of forest and hill and dale, sparsely inhabited, with the sea to the eastward of it, unseen, and the mountains everywhere visible always, and endlessly changing in aspect.

Herdsmen and shepherds wandered over it, and along its almost disused roads pedlars and pack mules passed at times but rarely. Minerals and marbles were under its turf, but none sought for them; pools and lakes slept in it, undisturbed save by millions of water fowl and their pursuers. The ruins of temples and palaces were overgrown by its wild berries and wild flowers. The buffalo browsed where emperors had feasted, and the bittern winged its slow flight over the fields of forgotten battles.

It was the season when the flocks are brought through this lonely land, coming from the plains to the hills. Many of them passed on their way thus along the course of the Edera water. The shepherds, clothed in goatskin, with the hair worn outward, bearded, brown, hirsute men, looking like savage satyrs, the flocks they drove before them travel-worn, lame, heart-broken,

the lambs and kids bleating painfully. They cannot keep up with the pace of the flock, and, when they fall behind, the shepherds slit their throats, roast their bodies over an evening fire, or bake them under its ashes, and eat them; if a town or village be near, the little corpses are sold in it. Often a sheep dog or a puppy drops down in the same way, footsore and worn out; then the shepherds do not tarry, but leave the creatures to their fate, to die slowly of thirst and hunger.

The good shepherd is a false phrase. No one is more brutal than a shepherd. If he were not so he could not bear his life for a day.

All that he does is brutal. He stones the flock where it would tarry against his will. He mutilates the males, and drags the females away from their sucking babes. He shears their fleeces every spring, unheeding how the raw skin drops blood. He drives the halting, footsore, crippled animals on by force over flint and slate and parching dust. Sometimes he makes them travel twenty miles a day.

For his pastime he sets the finest of his beasts to fight. This is the feast day and holiday sport of all the shepherds; and they bet on it, until all they have, which is but little, goes on the heads of the rams; and one will wager his breeches, and another his skin jacket, and another his comely wife, and the ram which is beaten, if he have any life left in him, will be stabbed in the throat by his owner: for he is considered to have disgraced the *branca*.

This Sunday and Saints' day sport was going on a piece of

grass land in the district known as the Vale of Edera.

On the turf, cleared of its heaths and ferns, there was a ring of men, three of them shepherds, the rest peasants. In the midst of them were the rams, two chosen beasts pitted against each other like two pugilists. They advanced slowly at first, then more quickly, and yet more quickly, till they met with a crash, their two foreheads, hard as though carved in stone, coming in collision with a terrible force; then each, staggered by the encounter, drew back, dizzy and bruised, to recoil, and take breath, and gather fresh force, and so charge one on the other in successive rounds until the weaker should succumb, and, mangled and senseless, should arise no more.

One of the rams was old, and one was young; some of the shepherds said that the old one was more wary and more experienced, and would have the advantage; in strength and height they were nearly equal, but the old one had been in such duels before and the young one never. The young one thought he had but to rush in, head downward, to conquer; the old one knew that this was not enough to secure victory. The young one was blind with ardour and impatience for the fray; the old one was cool and shrewd and could parry and wait.

After three rounds, the two combatants met in a final shock; the elder ram butted furiously, the younger staggered and failed to return the blow, his frontal bone was split, and he fell to the ground; the elder struck him once, twice, thrice, amidst the uproarious applause of his backers; a stream of blood

poured from his skull, which was pounded to splinters; a terrible convulsion shook his body and his limbs; he stretched his tongue out as if he tried to lap water; the men who had their money on him cursed him with every curse they knew; they did not cut his throat, for they knew he was as good as dead.

"This is a vile thing you have done," said a little beggar girl who had been passing, and had been arrested by the horrible fascination of the combat, and forced against her will to stand and watch its issue. The shepherds jeered; those who had backed the victor were sponging his wounds beside a runlet of water which was close at hand; those who had lost were flinging stones on the vanquished. The girl knelt down by the dying ram to save him from the shower of stones; she lifted his head gently upward, and tried to pour water through his jaws from a little wooden cup which she had on her, and which she had filled at the river. But he could not swallow; his beautiful opaline eyes were covered with film, he gasped painfully, a foam of blood on his lips and a stream of blood coursing down his face; a quiver passed over him again; then his head rested lifeless on his knees. She touched his shattered horns, his clotted wool, tenderly.

"Why did you set him to fight?" she said with an indignation which choked her voice. "It was vile. He was younger than the other, and knew less."

Those who had won laughed. Those who had lost cursed him again; he had disgraced his *branca*. They would flay him, and put him in the cauldron over the wood fire, and would curse him

even whilst they picked his bones for a white-livered spawn of cowards; a son of a thrice-damned ewe.

The girl knew that was what they do. She laid his battered head gently down upon the turf, and poured the water out of her cup; her eyes were blind with tears; she could not give him back his young life, his zest in his pastoral pleasures, his joy in cropping the herbage, his rude loves, his merry gambols, his sound sleep, his odorous breath.

He had died to amuse and excite the ugly passions of men, as, if he had lived longer, he would, in the end, have died to satisfy their ugly appetites.

She looked at his corpse with compassion, the tears standing in her eyes; then she turned away, and as she went saw that her poor ragged clothes were splashed here and there with blood, and that her arms and hands were red with blood: she had not thought of that before; she had thought only of him. The shepherds did not notice her; they were quarrelling violently in dispute over what had been lost and won, thrusting their fingers in each other's faces, and defiling the fair calm of the day with filthy oaths.

The girl shrank away into the heather with the silent swiftness of a hare; now that she had lost the stimulus of indignant pity she was afraid of these brutes; if the whim entered into them they would be as brutal to her as to their flock.

Out of fear of them she did not descend at once to the river, but pushed her way through the sweet-smelling, bee-haunted, cross-leaved heaths; she could hear the sound of the water on her

right all the time as she went. She knew little of this country, but she had seen the Edera, and had crossed it farther up its course on one of its rough tree-bridges.

When, as well as she could judge, she had got half a mile away from the scene of the rams' combat, she changed her course and went to the right, directed by the murmur of the river. It was slow walking through the heath and gorse which grew above her head, and were closely woven together, but in time she reached shelving ground, and heard the song of the river louder on her ear. The heath ceased to grow within a few yards of the stream and was replaced by various water plants and acacia thickets; she slid down the banks between the stems and alighted on her bare feet where the sand was soft and the water-dock grew thick. She looked up and down the water; there was no one in sight, nothing but the banks rosehued with the bloom of the heather, and, beyond the opposite shore, in the distance, the tender amethystine hues of the mountains. The water was generally low, leaving the stretches of sand and of shingle visible, but it was still deep in many parts.

She stripped herself and went down into it, and washed the blood which had by this time caked upon her flesh. It seemed a pity, she thought, to sully with that dusky stain this pure, bright, shining stream; but she had no other way to rid herself of it, and she had in all the world no other clothes than these poor woollen rags.

Her heart was still sore for the fate of the conquered ram; and

her eyes filled again with tears as she washed his blood off her in the gay running current. But the water was soothing and fresh, the sun shone on its bright surface; the comfrey and fig-wart blew in the breeze, the heather smell filled the atmosphere.

She was only a child, and her spirits rose, and she capered about in the shallows, and flung the water over her head, and danced to her own reflection in it, and forgot her sorrow. Then she washed her petticoats as well as she could, having nothing but water alone, and all the while she was as naked as a Naiad, and the sun smiled on her brown, thin, childish body as it smiled on a stem of plaintain or on the plumage of a coot.

Then when she had washed her skirt she spread it out on the sand to dry, and sat down beside it, for the heat to bake her limbs after her long bath. There was no one, and there was nothing, in sight; if any came near she could hide under the great dock leaves until such should have passed. It was high noon, and the skirt of wool and the skirt of hemp grew hot and steamed under the vertical rays; she was soon as dry as the shingles from which the water had receded for months. She sat with her hands clasped round her updrawn knees, and her head grew heavy with the want of slumber, but she would not sleep, though it was the hour of sleep. Some one might pass by and steal her clothes, she thought, and how or when would she ever get others?

When the skirt was quite dried, the blood stains still showed on it; they were no longer red, but looked like the marks from the sand. She tied it on round her waist and her shirt over it, and

wound an old crimson sash round both. Then she took up her little bundle in which were the wooden cup and a broken comb, and some pieces of hempen cloth and a small loaf of maize bread, and went on along the water, wading and hopping in it, as the water-wagtails did, jumping from stone to stone, and sometimes sinking up to her knees in a hole.

She had no idea where she would rest at night, or where she would get anything to eat; but that reflection scarcely weighed on her; she slept well enough under stacks or in outhouses, and she was used to hunger. So long as no one meddled with her she was content. The weather was fine and the country was quiet. Only she was sorry for the dead ram. By this time they would have hung him up by his heels to a tree, and have pulled the skin off his body.

She was sorry; but she jumped along merrily in the water, as a kingfisher does, and scarcely even wondered where its course would lead her.

At a bend in it she came to a spot where a young man was seated amongst the bulrushes, watching his fishing net.

"Aie!" she cried with a shrill cry of alarm, like a bird who sees a fowler. She stopped short in her progress; the water at that moment was up to her knees. With both hands she held up her petticoat to save it from another wetting; her little bundle was balanced on her head, the light shone in her great brown eyes. The youth turned and saw her.

She was a very young girl, thirteen at most; her small flat

breasts were those of a child, her narrow shoulders and her narrow loin spoke of scanty food and privation of all kinds, and her arms and legs were brown from the play of the sun on their nakedness; they were little else than skin and bone, nerves and sinew, and looked like stakes of wood. All the veins and muscles stood revealed as in anatomy, and her face, which would have been a child's face, a nymph's face, with level brows, a pure straight profile, and small close ears like shells, was so fleshless and sunburnt that she looked almost like a mummy. Her eyes had in them the surprise and sadness of those of a weaning calf; and her hair, too abundant for such a small head, would, had it not been so dusty and entangled, have been of a red golden bronze, the hue of a chestnut which has just burst open its green husk.

"Who are you?" said the young man, looking at her in surprise.

"I am Nerina," answered the child.

"Where do you come from? What is your country?"

She pointed vaguely to the south-west mountains, where the snow on the upper ranges was still lying with bands of cloud resting on it.

"From the Abruzzo?"

She was silent. She did not know the mountains of her birthplace by their names.

"Who was your father?" he asked, with some impatience.

"He was Black Fausto."

"What did he do for a living?"

"He went down with the fair season to the Roman plain."

He understood: the man had no doubt been a labourer, one of those who descend in bands from the villages of the Abruzzo heights to plough, and mow, and sow, and reap, on the lands of the Castelli Romani; men who work in droves, and are fed and stalled in droves, as cattle are, who work all through the longest and hottest days in summer, and in the worst storms of winter; men who are black by the sun, are half naked, are lean and hairy and drip with continual sweat, but who take faithfully back the small wage they receive to where their women and children dwell in their mountain-villages.

"He went, you say? Is he ill? Does he work no longer?"

"He died last year."

"Of what?"

She gave a hopeless gesture. "Who knows? He came back with a wolf in his belly, he said, always gnawing and griping, and he drank water all day and all night, and his face burned, and his legs were cold, and all of a sudden his jaw fell, and he spoke no more to us. There are many of them who die like that after a hot season down in the plains."

He understood; hunger and heat, foul air in their sleeping places, infusoria in the ditch and rain water, and excessive toil in the extremes of heat and cold, make gaps in the ranks of these hired bands every year as if a cannon had been fired into them.

"Who takes care of you now?" he asked with pity, as for a homeless bitch.

"Nobody. There is nobody. They are all gone down into the

earth."

"But how do you live?"

"I work when I can. I beg when I cannot. People let me sleep in the stalls, or the barns, and give me bread."

"That is a bad life for a girl."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I did not make it."

"And where are you going?"

She opened her arms wide and swept the air with them.

"Anywhere. Along the water, until I find something to do."

"I cannot do much," she added, after a pause. "I am little, and no one has taught me. But I can cut grass and card wool."

"The grass season is short, and the wool season is far off. Why did you not stay in your village?"

She was mute. She did not know why she had left it, she had come away down the mountainside on a wandering instinct, with a vague idea of finding something better the farther she went: her father had always come back with silver pieces in his pocket after his stay down there in those lands which she had never seen, lying as they did down far below under the golden haze of what seemed an immeasurable distance.

"Are you not hungry?" said the fisher.

"I am always hungry," she said, with some astonishment at so simple a question. "I have been hungry ever since I can remember. We all were up there. Sometimes even the grass was too dried up to eat. Father used to bring home with him a sack

of maize; it was better so long as that lasted."

"Are you hungry now?"

"Of course."

"Come to my house with me. We will feed you. Come. Have no fear. I am Adone Alba, of the Terra Vergine, and my mother is a kind woman. She will not grudge you a meal."

The child laughed all over her thin, brown face.

"That will be good," she said, and leapt up out of the water.

"Poor soul! Poor soul!" thought the young man, with a profound sense of pity.

As the child sprang up out of the river, shaking the water off her as a little terrier does, he saw that she must have been in great want of food for a long time; her bones were almost through her skin. He set his fishing pole more firmly in the ground, and left the net sunk some half a yard below the surface; then he said to the little girl:

"Come, come and break your fast. It has lasted long, I fear."

Nerina only understood that she was to be fed; that was enough for her. She trotted like a stray cur, beckoned by a benevolent hand, behind him as he went, first through some heather and broom, then over some grass, where huge olive trees grew, and then through corn and vine lands, to an old farmhouse, made of timber and stone; large, long, solid; built to resist robbers in days when robbers came in armed gangs. There was a wild garden in front of it, full of cabbage roses, lavender, myrtle, stocks and wallflowers. Over the arched door a four-season rose-

tree clambered.

The house, ancient and spacious, with its high-pitched roof of ruddy tiles, impressed Nerina with a sense of awe, almost of terror. She remained hesitating on the garden path, where white and red stocks were blossoming.

"Mother," said Adone, "here is a hungry child. Give her, in your kindness, some broth and bread."

Clelia Alba came out into the entrance, and saw the little girl with some displeasure. She was kind and charitable, but she did not love beggars and vagabonds, and this half-naked female tatterdemalion offended her sense of decency and probity, and her pride of sex. She was herself a stately and handsome woman.

"The child is famished," said Adone, seeing his mother's displeasure.

"She shall eat then, but let her eat outside," said Clelia Alba, and went back into the kitchen.

Nerina waited by the threshold, timid and mute and humble, like a lost dog; her eyes alone expressed overwhelming emotions: fear and hope and one ungovernable appetite, hunger.

Clelia Alba came out in a few minutes with a bowl of hot broth made of herbs, and a large piece of maize-flour bread.

"Take them," she said to her son.

Adone took them from her, and gave them to the child.

"Sit and eat here," he said, pointing to a stone settle by the wall under the rose of four seasons.

The hands of Nerina trembled with excitement, her eyes

looked on fire, her lips shook, her breath came feverishly and fast. The smell of the soup made her feel beside herself. She said nothing, but seized the food and began to drink the good herb-broth with thirsty eagerness though the steam of it scorched her.

Adone, with an instinct of compassion and delicacy, left her unwatched and went within.

"Where did you find that scarecrow?" asked his mother.

"Down by the river. She has nobody and nothing. She comes from the mountains."

"There are poor folks enough in Ruscino without adding to them from without," said Clelia Alba impatiently. "Mind she does not rob the fowl-house before she slips sway."

"She has honest eyes," said Adone. "I am sure she will do us no harm."

When he thought that she had been given time enough to finish her food he went out; the child was stretched at full length on the stone seat, and was already sound asleep, lying on her back; the empty bowl was on the ground, of the bread there was no longer a crumb; she was sleeping peacefully, profoundly, her thin hands crossed on her naked brown bosom, on which some rose leaves had fallen from the rose on the wall above.

He looked at her in silence for a little while, then returned to his mother.

"She is tired. She sleeps. Let her rest."

"It is unsafe."

"How unsafe, mother? She is only a child."

"She may have men behind her."

"It is not likely."

Adone could not say (for he had no idea himself) why he felt sure that this miserable little waif would not abuse hospitality: "She is a child," he answered rather stupidly, for children are often treacherous and wicked, and he knew nothing of this one except what she had chosen to tell of herself.

"She may have men behind her," repeated his mother.

"Such men as you are thinking of, mother, do not come to this valley nowadays. Ulisse Ferrero was the last of them. Indeed, I think this poor little creature is all alone in the world. Go and look at her. You will see how forlorn and small she is."

She went to the doorway and looked at the sleeping beggar; her eyes softened as she gazed, the whole attitude and appearance of the child were so miserable and so innocent, so helpless, and yet so tranquil, that her maternal heart was touched; the waif slept on the stone bench beside the door of strangers as though she were in some safe and happy home.

Clelia Alba looked down on her a few moments, then took the kerchief off her hair, and laid it gently, without awakening the sleeper, over the breast and the face of the child, on which flies were settling and the sun was shining.

Then she picked up the empty earthenware bowl, and went indoors again.

"I will go back to the river," said Adone. "I have left the net there."

His mother nodded assent.

"You will not send this little foreigner away till I return?" he asked. Every one was a foreigner who had not been born in the vale of Edera.

"No; not till you return."

He went away through the sunshine and shadow of the olive-trees. He knew that his mother never broke her word. But she thought as she washed the bowl: "A little stray mongrel bitch like that may bite badly some day. She must go. She is nothing now; but by and by she may bite."

Clelia Alba knew human nature, though she had never been out of sight of the river Edera. She took her spinning-wheel and sat down by the door. There was nothing urgent to do, and she could from the threshold keep a watch on the little vagabond, and would be aware if she awoke. All around was quiet. She could see up and down the valley, beyond the thin, silvery foliage of the great olive-trees, and across it to where the ruins of a great fortress towered in their tragic helplessness. The sun shone upon her fields of young wheat, her slopes of pasture. The cherry-trees and the pear-trees were in bloom, her trellised vines running from tree to tree. Ragged-robin, yellow crowfoot, purple orchis, filled the grass, intermixed with the blue of borage and the white and gold of the oxeye. She did not note these things. Those fancies were for her son. Herself, she would have preferred that there should be no flower in the grasses, for before the cow was fed the flowers had to be picked out of the cut grass, and had

served no good end that she could perceive, for she knew of no bees except the wild ones, whose honey no one ever tasted, hidden from sight in hollow trees as it was.

Nerina slept on in peace and without dreams. Now and then another rose let fall some petals on her, or a bee buzzed above her, but her repose remained undisturbed.

The good food filled her, even in her sleep, with deep contentment, and the brain, well nourished by the blood, was still.

Clelia Alba felt her heart soften despite herself for this lonely creature; though she was always suspicious of her, for she had never known any good thing come down from the high mountains, but only theft and arson and murder, and men banded together to solace their poverty with crime. In her youth the great brigands of the Upper Abruzzo had been names of terror in Ruscino, and in the hamlets lying along the course of the Edera, and many a time a letter written in blood had been fastened with a dagger to the door of church or cottage, intimating the will of the unseen chief to the subjugated population. Of late years less had been heard and seen of such men; but they or their like were still heard and felt sometimes, up above in lonely forests, or down where the moorland and macchia met, and the water of Edera ran deep and lonely. In her girlhood, a father, a son, and a grandson had been all killed on a lonely part of the higher valley because they had dared to occupy a farm and a water-mill after one of these hillmen had laid down the law that no one was to live on the land or to set the waterwheel moving.

That had been a good way off, indeed, and for many a year the Edera had not seen the masked men, with their belts, crammed with arms and gold, round their loins; but still, one never knew, she thought; unbidden guests were oftener devils than angels.

And it seemed to her that the child could not really be asleep all this time in a strange place and the open air. At last she got up, went again to the bench and drew her handkerchief aside, and looked down on the sleeper; on the thin, narrow chest, the small, bony hands, the tiny virginal nipples like wood strawberries.

She saw that the slumber was real, the girl very young and more than half-starved. "Let her forget while she can," she thought, and covered her face again. "It is still early in the day."

The bees hummed on; a low wind swept over a full-blown rose and shook its loose leaves to the ground. The shadow from the ruined tower began to touch the field which lay nearest the river, a sign that it was two hours after noon.

II

The large square fresh-water fishing-net had sunk under the surface, the canes which framed it were out of sight; only the great central pole, which sustained the whole, and was planted in the ground of the river-bank, remained visible as it bent and swayed but did not yield or break. Such nets as this had been washed by the clear green waters of the pools and torrents of the Edera ever since the days of Etruscan gods and Latin augurs; religions had changed, but the river, and the ways of the men of the river, had not altered.

Adone did not touch it, for it was well where it was; he seated himself on the bank ready to seize and hold it if its pole showed any sign of yielding and giving way and heeling over into the stream. He sat thus amongst the bulrushes for many an hour, on many a spring day and summer night. Although fish were not numerous he never tired of his vigil, lulled by the sound of the current as it splashed among the stones and rippled through the rushes; a deeper music coming from its higher reaches, where it fell over a ledge of rock and leapt like a live thing into the air. And, indeed, what thing could be more living than this fresh, pure, untroubled water, glad as a child, swift as a swallow, singing for sport, as a happy boy sings, as it ran down on its way from the hills?

To the young man sitting now on its bank amidst the bulrushes

it was as living as himself, his playmate, friend, and master, all in one. First of all things which he could remember were the brightness and the coolness of it as it had laved his limbs in his childhood on mid-summer noons, his mother's hands holding him safely as he waded with rosy feet and uncertain steps along its pebbly bottom! How many mornings, when he had grown to boyhood and to manhood, had he escaped from the rays of the vertical sun into its acacia-shadowed pools; how many moonlit, balmy nights had he bathed in its still reaches, the liquid silver of its surface breaking up like molten metal as he dived! How many hours of peace had he passed, as he was spending this, waiting for the fish to float into his great net, whilst the air and the water were alike so still that he could hear the little voles stealing in and out amongst the reeds, and the water-thrush pushing the pebbles on its sands in search for insects, though beast and bird were both unseen by him! How many a time upon the dawn of a holy-day had he washed and swam in its waters whilst the bells of the old church in the village above had tolled in the softness of dusk!

He thought of none of these memories distinctly, for he was young and contented, and those who are satisfied with their lot live in their present; but they all drifted vaguely through his mind as he sat by the side of the river, as the memories of friends dear from infancy drift through our waking dreams.

He was in every way a son of the Edera, for he had been born almost in the water itself; his mother had been washing linen with other women at the ford when she had been taken with the pains

of labour two months before her time. Her companions had had no time or thought to do more than to stretch her on the wet sand, with some hempen sheets, which had not yet been thrown in the water, between her and the ground; and the cries of her in her travail had echoed over the stream and had startled the kingfishers in the osiers, and the wild ducks in the marshes, and the tawny owls asleep in the belfry tower of the village. But her pains had been brief though sharp, and her son had first seen the light beside the water; a strong and healthy child, none the worse for his too early advent, and the rough river-women had dipped him in the shallows, where their linen and their wooden beaters were, and had wrapped him up in a soiled woollen shirt, and had laid him down with his face on his mother's young breast, opening his shut unconscious mouth with their rough fingers, and crying in his deaf ear, "Suck! and grow to be a man!"

Clelia Alba was now a woman of forty-one years old, and he, her only son, was twenty-four; they had named him Adone; the beautiful Greek Adonais having passed into the number of the saints of the Latin Church, by a transition so frequent in hagiology that its strangeness is not remembered save by a scholar here and there. When he had been born she had been a young creature of seventeen, with the wild grace of a forest doe; with that nobility of beauty, that purity of outline, and that harmony of structure, which still exist in those Italians in whom the pure Italiote blood is undefiled by Jew or Gentile. Now her abundant hair was white, and her features were bronzed and lined

by open-air work, and her hands of beautiful shape were hard as horn through working in the fields. She looked an old woman, and was thought so by others, and thought herself so: for youth is soon over in these parts, and there is no half-way house between youth and age for the peasant.

Clelia Alba, moreover, had lost her youth earlier even than others: lost it for ever when her husband at five-and-twenty years of age had been killed by falling from an olive-tree of which the branch sustaining him had cracked and broken under his weight. His neck had been broken in the fall. She had been dancing and shouting with her two-year-old child on the grassland not far off, romping and playing ball with some dropped chestnuts; and when their play was over she had lifted her boy on to her shoulder and run with him to find his father. Under one of the great, gnarled, wide-spreading olives she had seen him, lying asleep as she thought.

"Oh, lazy one, awake! The sun is only two hours old!" she had cried merrily, and the child on her shoulder had cooed and shouted in imitation, "Wake—wake—wake!" and she, laughing, had cast a chestnut she had carried in her hand upon the motionless figure. Then, as the prostrate form did not stir, a sudden terror had seized her, and she had set the baby down upon the grass and run to the olive-tree. There she had seen that this was death, for when she had raised him his head had dropped, and seemed to hang like a poppy broken in a blast of wind, and his eyes had no sight, and his mouth had no breath.

From that dread hour Clelia Alba had never laughed again. Her hair grew white, and her youth went away from her for ever.

She lived for the sake of her son, but she and joy had parted company for ever.

His death had made her sole ruler of the Terra Vergine; she had both the knowledge and the strength necessary for culture of the land, and she taught her boy to value and respect the soil.

"As you treat the ground ill or well, so will your ground treat you," she said to him.

She always wore the costume of the province, which was similar to that of the Abruzzo villages, and suited her cast of features and her strong and haughty carriage. On feast-days she wore three strings of fine pearls round her throat, and bracelets of massive gold and of fine workmanship, so many in number that her arms were stiff with them; they had been her mother's and grandmother's and great-grandmother's, and had been in her dower. To sell or pawn them under stress of need, had such occurred, would never have seemed to any of her race to be possible. It would have seemed as sacrilegious as to take the chalice off the church altar, and melt its silver and jewels in the fire. When she should go to her grave these ornaments would pass to Adone as heirlooms; none of her family were living. </>

"Never talk of death, mother," he said, whenever she spoke of these things. "Death is always listening; and if he hear his name he taps the talker on the shoulder, just to show that he is there and must be reckoned with."

"Not so, my son!" replied Clelia Alba, with a sigh. "He has every soul of us written down in his books from the time we are born; we all have our hour to go and none of us can alter it."

"I do not believe that," said Adone. "We kill ourselves oftentimes; or we hasten our end, as drunkards do."

"Did your father hasten his end?" said his mother. "Did not some one break that olive branch? It was not the tree itself, though the Ruscino folks would have it cut down because they called it a felon."

"Was it not the devil?" said Adone.

He believed in the devil, of course, as he had been taught to do; and had he not as a child met the infernal effigy everywhere—in marble, in stone, in wood, in colour, in the church and outside it, on water-spout and lamp-iron, and even on the leaves of his primer? But it seemed to him that the devil had "*troppo braccia*" given him, was allowed too long a tether, too free a hand; if indeed he it were that made everything go wrong, and Adone did not see who else it could be. Here, in the vale of Edera, all the world believed in Satan as in holy water, or in daily bread.

Clelia Alba crossed herself hastily, for she was a pious woman.

"We are talking blasphemy, my son," she said gravely. "Of course there is the good God who orders the number of our days for each of us, and is over us all."

Adone was silent. To him it seemed doubtful. Did the good God kill the pretty little children as the butcher in a city killed his lambs? But he never contradicted or vexed his mother; he

loved her with a great and tender affection. He was less ignorant than she was, and saw many things she could not see; he was, as it were, on a hilltop and she down in a valley, but he had a profound respect for her; he obeyed her implicitly, as if he were still a child, and he thought the world held no woman equal to her.

When he went back to his house that evening, with his great net on his shoulder and swinging in one hand some fresh-water fish, he looked at the stone bench, which was empty of all except some fallen rose-leaves, and then anxiously, questioningly, in the face of his mother.

So he answered the regard.

"The girl is gone to Gianna's custody," she said rather harshly. "Gianna will give her her supper, and will let her sleep in the loft. With the morning we will see what we can do for her, and how she can be sped upon her way."

Adone kissed her hands.

"You are always good," he said simply.

"I am weak," answered his mother, "I am weak, Adone; when you wish anything I consent to it against my judgment."

But she was not weak; or at least only weak in the way in which all generous natures are so.

On the morrow Nerina was not sped on her way. The old woman, Gianna, thought well of her.

"She is as clean as a stone in the water," she said; "she has foul-smelling rags, but her flesh is clean. She woke at dawn, and asked for something to do. She knows nought, but she is willing

and teachable. We can make her of use. She has nowhere to go. She is a stray little puppy. Her people were miserable, but they seem to have been pious folks. She has a cross pricked on her shoulder. She says her mother did it when she was a babe to scare the devil off her. I do not know what to say; she is a poor, forlorn little wretch; if you like to keep her, I for my part will see to her. I am old: it is well to do a good work before one dies."

Gianna was an old woman, half house-servant, half farm-servant, wholly friend; she had lived at the Terra Vergine all her life; big, gaunt, and very strong, she could do the work of a man, although she was over seventy years of age; burnt black by the sun, and with a pile of grey hair like the hank of flax on her distaff, she was feared by the whole district for her penetrating glance and her untiring energy. When Gianna was satisfied the stars had changed their courses, said the people, so rare was the event; therefore, that this little wanderer contented her was at once a miracle and a voucher indisputable.

So the child remained there; but her presence troubled Adone's mother, though Nerina was humble as a homeless dog, was noiseless and seldom seen, was obedient, agile, and became useful in many manners, and learned with equal eagerness the farm work taught her by Gianna, and the doctrine taught her by Don Silverio, for she was intelligent and willing in every way. Only Clelia Alba thought, "Perhaps Gianna's good heart misleads her. Gianna is rough; but she has a heart as tender at bottom as a ripe melon's flesh."

Anyhow, she took her old servant's word and allowed the child to remain. She could not bring herself to turn adrift a female thing to stray about homeless and hungry, and end in some bottomless pit. The child might be the devil's spawn. No one could be sure. But she had eyes which looked up straight and true, and were as clear as the river water where it flowed over pebbles in the shade. When the devil is in a soul he always grins behind the eyes; he cannot help it; and so you know him; thus, at least, they thought at Ruscino and in all the vale of Edera; and the devil did not lurk in the eyes of Nerina.

"Have I done right, reverend sir?" asked Clelia Alba of the Vicar of Ruscino.

"Oh, yes—yes—charity is always right," he answered, unwilling to discourage her in her benevolence; but in his own mind he thought, "The child is a child, but she will grow; she is brown, and starved, and ugly now, but she will grow; she is a female thing and she will grow, and I think she will be handsome later on; it would have been more prudent to have put some money in her hand and some linen in her wallet, and have let her pass on her way down the river. The saints forbid that I should put aloe into the honey of their hearts; but this child will grow."

Clelia Alba perceived that he had his doubts as she had hers. But they said nothing of them to each other. The issue would lie with Time, whom men always depict as a mower, but who is also a sower, too. However, for good or ill, she was there; and he knew that, having once harboured her, they would never drive her

adrift. Clelia Alba was in every sense a good woman; a little hard at times, narrow of sympathy, too much shut up in her maternal passion; but in the main merciful and correct in judgment.

"If the child were not good the river would not have given her to us," said Adone to her; and believed it.

"Good-day, my son," said the voice of the Vicar, Don Silverio Frascara, behind him, where Adone worked in the fields. "Where did you find that scarecrow whom your mother has shown me just now?"

"She was in the river, most reverend, dancing along in it, as merry as a princess."

"But she is a skeleton!"

"Almost."

"And you know nothing of her?"

"Nothing, sir."

"You were more charitable than wise."

"One cannot let a little female thing starve whilst one has bread in the hutch. My mother is a virtuous woman. She will teach the child virtue."

"Let us hope so," said Don Silverio. "But all, my son, do not take kindly to that lesson."

"What will be, will be. The river brought her."

He credited the river with a more than human sagacity. He held it in awe and in reverence as a deity, as the Greeks of old held their streams. It would have drowned the child, he thought, if she had been an evil creature or of evil augury. But he did not

say so, for he did not care to provoke Don Silverio's fine fleeting ironical smile.

A goatherd who passed some few days later with his flock on his way to the mountains recognised the little girl.

"You are Black Fausto's daughter," he said to her. "Is he dead? Eh, well, we must all die. May his soul rest."

To Gianna, who questioned him, he said, "Yes, he was a good soul. Often have I seen him down in the Roman plains. He worked himself to death. These gangs of labourers get poor pay. I saw him also in the hills where this girl comes from, ever so high up, you seem to touch the sky. I summered there two years ago; he had his womankind in a cabin, and he took all that he got home to them. Aye, he was a good soul. We can come away out of the heats, but they have to stay down in them; for the reaping and the sowing are their chief gain, and they get the fever into their blood, and the worms into their bellies, and it kills them mostly before they are forty. You see, at Ansaldo, where he came from, it was snow eight months out of the twelve, so the heats and the mists killed him: for the air you are born in you want, and if you do not get it in time you sicken."

"Like enough," said Gianna, who herself had never been out of sight of the river Edera ever since she had been a babe in swaddling clothes. "Tell me, gossip, was the child born in wedlock?"

"Eh, eh!" said the goatherd grinning. "That I would not take on me to say. But like enough, like enough; they are always ready

to go before the priest in those high hills."

The little girl glided into her place humbly and naturally, with no servility but with untiring willingness and thankfulness. It seemed to her an amazing favour of heaven to live with these good people; to have a roof over her head and food regularly every day. Up there in her home, amongst the crags of Ansalda, she had never known what it was not to have a daily hunger gnawing always in her entrails, and making her writhe at night on her bed of dry leaves. In her thirteen years of life she had never once had enough—no one ever had. A full stomach had been a thing unknown.

She began to grow, she began to put a little flesh on her bones; they had cut her hair short, for it had been so rough, and it grew again burnished and bright like copper; colour came into her cheeks and lips; she seemed to spring upward, visibly, like a young cane. She worked hard, but she worked willingly, and she was well nourished on sound food, though it had little variety and was entirely vegetable; and every day she went down and bathed in the river at the same place where she had sat nude under the dock leaves whilst her skirt dried in the sun.

To her the Terra Vergine was Paradise itself; to be fed, to be clothed, to have a mattress to sleep on, to work amongst the flowers and the grass and the animals—it was all so beautiful, she thought sometimes that she must be in heaven.

She spoke little. Since she had been under this roof she had grown ashamed of the squalor and starvation and wretchedness

of her past existence. She did not like to think of it even; it had been no fault of hers, but she felt ashamed that she ever should have been that little, filthy, unkempt, naked thing, grovelling on the clay floor, and fighting for mouldy crusts with the other children on the rock of Ansaldo.

"If I had only known when father was alive," she thought; but even if she had known all she knew now, what could she have done? There had been nothing to use, nothing to eat, nothing to wear, and the rain and the snow and the wind had come in on them where they had lain huddled together on their bed of rotten leaves. Now and then she said something of that rude childhood of hers to Adone; she was afraid of the women, but not of him; she trotted after him as the little white curly dog Signorino trotted after Don Silverio.

"Do not think of those dark days, little one," he said to her. "They are gone by. Think of your parents and pray for their souls; but let the rest go; you have all your life to live."

"My mother was young when she died," said the child. "If she had had food she would not have died. She said so. She kept on gnawing a bit of rag which was soaked in water; you cheat hunger that way, you know, but it does not fill you."

"Pour soul! Poor soul!" said Adone, and he thought of the great markets he had seen in the north, the droves of oxen, the piles of fruits, the long lines of wine carts, the heaps of slaughtered game, the countless shops with their electric light, the trains running one after another all the nights and every night

to feed the rich; and he thought, as he had thought when a boy, that the devil had *troppo braccio*, if any devil indeed there were beside man himself.

Should there be anywhere on the face of the earth, young women, good women, mothers of babes who died of sheer hunger like this mother of Nerina's up yonder in the snows of the Abruzzo? He thought not; his heart revolted at the vision of her, a living skeleton on her heap of leaves.

"Father brought all he had," continued the child, "but he could not come back until after harvest, and when he came back she had been in the ground two months and more. They put him in the same ditch when his turn came; but she was no longer there, for they take up the bones every three years and burn them. They say they must, else the ditch would get too full."

Adone shuddered. He knew that tens of thousands died so, and had died so ever since the days of Phenicians and Gauls and Goths. But it revolted him. The few gorged, the many famished—strange disproportion! unkind and unfair balance!

But what remedy was there?

Adone had read some socialistic and communistic literature; but it had not satisfied him; it had seemed to him vain, verbose, alluring, but unreal, no better adapted to cure any real hunger than the soaked rag of Nerina's mother.

III

The Valdedera is situated on the south of the Marches, on the confines of what is now the territorial division of the Abruzzo-Molese, and so lies between the Apennines and the Adriatic, fanned by cool winds in summer from the eternal snow of the mountain peaks, and invigorated in all seasons by breezes from the Adrian Sea.

Ruscino, placed midway in the valley, is only a village to which no traveller has for many years come, and of which no geographer ever speaks; it is marked on the maps of military topographers, and is, of course, inscribed on the fiscal rolls, but is now no more than a village; though once, when the world was young, it was the Etruscan Rusciae, and then the Latin Ruscinonis; and then, when the Papacy was mighty, it was the militant principality of the fortified town of Ruscino. But it was, when the parish of Don Silverio, an almost uninhabited village; a pale, diminutive, shrunken relic of its heroic self; and of it scarcely any man knows anything except the few men who make their dwelling there; sons of the soil, who spring from its marble dust and return to it.

It had shrunk to a mere hamlet as far as its population was counted; it shrank more and more with every census. There was but a handful of poor people who, when gathered together in the great church, looked no more than a few flies on a slab of marble.

The oldest men and women of the place could recall the time when it had been still of some importance as a posting place on the mountain route between the markets of the coast and the western towns, when its highway had been kept clean and clear through the woods for public and private conveyance, and when the clatter of horses' hoofs and merry notes of horns had roused the echoes of its stones. In that first half of the century, too, they had lived fairly well, and wine and fowls had cost next to nothing, and home-made loaves had been always large enough to give a beggar or a stray dog a slice. But these times had long been over; every one was hungry now, and every one a beggar, by way of change, and to make things equal, as the people said, with dreary mirth and helpless acquiescence in their lot. Like most riverain people, they lived chiefly by the river, cutting and selling its canes, its sallows, its osiers, its sedges, catching its fish, digging its sand; but there were few buyers in this depopulated district.

Don Silverio Frascara, its vicar, had been sent thither as a chastisement for his too sceptical and inquiring mind, his too undisciplined temper. Nearly twenty years in this solitude had chastened both; the fire had died out of his soul and the light out of his eyes. His days were as monotonous as those of the blinded ass set to turn the wine-press. All the steel of his spirit rusted, all the brilliancy of his brain clouded; his life was like a fine rapier which is left in a corner of a dusty attic and forgotten.

In certain rare states of the atmosphere the gold cross on

St. Peter's is visible from some of the peaks of the Abruzzese Apennines. It looks like a speck of light far, far away in the silver-green of the western horizon. When one day he climbed to such an altitude and saw it thus, his heart contracted with a sickly pain, for in Rome he had dreamed many dreams; and in Rome, until his exile to the Vale of Edera, he had been a preacher of noted eloquence, of brilliant fascination, and of daring thought.

There had been long cypress alleys which at sunset had glowed with rose and gold, where he had in his few leisure hours builded up such visions for the future as illumined the unknown years to the eyes of an Ignatius, a Hildebrand, a Lacordaire, a Bossuet. On the place where those grand avenues had stretched their green length in the western light, and the seminarist had paced over the sward, there were now long, dreary lines of brick and stone, the beaten dust of roadways, the clang and smoke of engines: as the gardens had passed away so had passed his ambitions and visions; as the cypresses had been ground to powder in the steam mill, so was he crushed and effaced under an inexorable fate. The Church, intolerant of individuality, like all despotisms, had broken his spirit; like all despotisms the tyranny had been blind. But he had been rebellious to doctrine; she had bound him to her stake.

He would have been a great prelate, perhaps even a great Pope; but he would have been also a great reformer, so she stamped him down into nothingness under her iron heel. And for almost a score of years she had kept him in Ruscino, where he buried

and baptized the old and new creatures who squirmed in the dust, where any ordinary country priest able to gabble through the ritual could have done as well as he. Some few of the more liberal and learned dignitaries of the Church did indeed think that it was waste of great powers, but he had the Sacred College against him, and no one ventured to speak in his favour at the Vatican. He had no pious women of rank to plead for him, no millionaires and magnates to solicit his preferment. He was with time forgotten as utterly as a folio is forgotten on a library shelf until mildew eats its ink away and spiders nest between its leaves. He had the thirty pounds a year which the State pays to such parish priests; and he had nothing else.

He was a tall and naturally stately man, but his form was bent by that want of good food which is the chronic malady of many parts of Italy. There was little to eat in Ruscino, and had there been more there would have been no one who knew how to prepare it. Bread, beans, a little oil, a little lard, herbs which grew wild, goat's milk, cheese, and at times a few small river fish; these were all his sustenance: his feasts and his fasts were much alike, and the little wine he had he gave away to the sick and the aged. For this reason his high stature was bent and his complexion was of the clear, yellow pallor of old marbles; his profile was like the Caesarian outline on a medallion, and his eyes were deep wells of impenetrable thought; his finely cut lips rarely smiled, they had always upon them an expression of bitterness, as though the apple of life in its eating had been harsh and hard as a crab.

His presbytery was close to his church, a dreary place with only a few necessities and many books within it, and his only servant was an old man, lame and stupid, who served also as sacristan.

It was a cure of souls which covered many miles but counted few persons. Outside the old walls of Ruscino nearly all the land of vale of Edera was untilled, and within them a few poverty-stricken people dragged out their days uncared for by any one, only remembered by the collectors of fiscal dues. "*They* never forget," said the people. "As soon as one is born, always and in every season, until one's bones rattle down into the ditch of the dead, *they* remember always."

The grasp of an invisible power took the crust off their bread, the toll off their oil, off their bed of sacking, off their plate of fish, and took their children when they grew to manhood and sent them into strange lands and over strange seas; they felt the grip of that hard hand as their forefathers had felt it under the Caesars, under the Popes, under the feudal lords, under the foreign kings; they felt it so now under the Casa Sabauda; the same, always the same; for the manners and titles of the State may change, but its appetite never lessens, and its greed never spares. For twice a thousand years their blood had flowed and their earnings had been wrung out of them in the name of the State, and nothing was changed in that respect; the few lads they begot amongst them went to Africa, now as under Pompeius or Scipio; and their corn sack was taken away from them under Depretis or Crispi, as

under the Borgia or the Malatesta; and their grape skins soaked in water were taxed as wine, their salt for their soup-pot was seized as contraband, unless it bore the government stamp, and, if they dared say a word of resistance, there were the manacles and the prison under Vittorio and Umberto as under Bourbon or Bonaparte; for there are some things which are immutable as fate. At long intervals, during the passing of ages, the poor stir, like trodden worms, under this inexorable monotony of their treatment by their rulers; and then baleful fires redden the sky, and blood runs in the conduits, and the rich man trembles; but the cannon are brought up at full gallop and it is soon over; there is nothing ever really altered; the iron wheels only press the harder on the unhappy worm, and there is nothing changed.

Here at Ruscino there were tombs of nenfro which had overhung the river for thirty centuries; but those tombs have never seen any other thing than this, nor ever will, until the light and the warmth of the sun shall be withdrawn for ever, and the earth shall remain alone with her buried multitudes.

There was only Don Silverio who thought of such a thing as this, a scholar all alone amongst barbarians; for his heart ached for his barbarians, though they bore him no love in return for his pity. They would have liked better a gossiping, rotund, familiar, ignorant, peasant priest, one of themselves, chirping formula comfortably over skeleton corpses.

In default of other interests he interested himself in this ancient place, passing from neglect into oblivion, as his own life

was doing. There were Etruscan sepulchres and Pelasgic caves which had been centuries earlier rifled of their objects of value, but still otherwise remained untouched under the acacia woods by the river. There were columns and terraces and foundations of marble which had been there when the Latin city of Ruscinonis had flourished, from the time of Augustus until its destruction by Theodoric. And nearest of all these to him were the Longobardo church and the ancient houses and the dismantled fortress and the ruined walls of what had been the fief of the Toralba, the mediaeval fortified town of Ruscino. It still kept this, its latest, name, but it kept little else. Thrice a thousand centuries had rolled over it, eating it away as the sea eats away a cliff. War and fire and time had had their will with it for so long that dropped acorns and pine-pips had been allowed leisure to sink between the stones, and sprout and bud and rise and spread, and were now hoary and giant trees, of which the roots were sunk deep into its ruins, its graves, its walls.

It had been Etruscan, it had been Latin, it had been Longobardo, it had been BORGIAN and Papal; through all these changes a fortified city, then a castellated town, then a walled village; and a village it now remained. It will never be more; before many generations pass it will probably have become still less; a mere tumulus, a mere honeycomb of buried tombs. It was now perishing, surely though slowly, but in peace, with the grass growing on its temple stairs and the woodbine winding round its broken columns.

The trained and stored intellect of Don Silverio could set each period of its story apart, and read all the vestiges remaining of each. Ruscino was now to all others a mere poverty-stricken place, brown and gaunt and sorrowful, scorching in the sun, with only the river beneath it to keep it clean and alive. But to him it was as a palimpsest of surpassing value and interest, which, sorely difficult to decipher, held its treasures close from the profane and the ignorant, but tempted and rewarded the scholar, like the lettering on a Pompeian nuptial ring, the cyphers on a funeral urn of Herculaneum. "After all, my lot might be worse than it is," he thought with philosophy. "They might have sent me to a modern manufacturing town in one of the Lombard provinces, or exiled me to some native settlement in Eritrea."

Here, at least, he had history and nature, and he enjoyed thousands of hours undisturbed in which to read or write, or muse and ponder on this chronicle of brick and stone, this buried mass of dead men's labours and of dead men's dust.

Doubtless, his manuscripts would lie unknown, unread; no man would care for them; but the true scholar cares neither for public nor posterity; he lives for the work he loves; and if he knows that he will have few readers in the future—maybe none—how many read Grotius, or Boethius, or Chrysostom, or Jerome?

Here, like a colony of ants, the generations had crowded one on another, now swept away by the stamp of a conqueror's heel and now succeeded by another toiling swarm, building anew each time out of ruin, undaunted by the certainty of destruction, taught

nothing by the fate of their precursors. From the profound sense of despair which the contemplation of the uselessness of human effort, and the waste of human life, produces on the scholar's mind, it was a relief to him to watch the gladness of its river, the buoyancy of its currents, the foam of white blossom on its acacia and syringa thickets, the gold sceptres and green lances of its iris-pseudacorus, the sweep of the winds through its bulrushes and canebreaks, the glory of colour in the blue stars of its veronica, the bright rosy spikes of its epilobium. The river seemed always happy, even when the great rainfall of autumn churned it into froth and the lightnings illumined its ink-black pools.

It was on the river that he had first made friends with Adone, then a child of six, playing and splashing in the stream, on a midsummer noon. Don Silverio also was bathing. Adone, a little nude figure, as white as alabaster in the hot light, for he was very fair of skin, sprang suddenly out of the water on to the turf above where his breeches and shirt had been left; he was in haste, for he had heard his mother calling to him from their fields; an adder started out of a coil of bindweed and would itself round his ankle as he stooped for his clothes.

The priest, standing waist-deep in the river a few yards away, saw it before the child did, and cried out to him: "Stand still till I come! Be not afraid!" Adone understood, and, although trembling with terror and loathing as he realised his danger, and felt the slimy clasp of the snake, remained motionless as he was bidden to do. In a second of time the priest had leaped through

the water to his side, seized the adder, and killed it.

"Good boy," he said to the child. "If you had moved your foot the creature would have bitten you."

Adone's eyes filled with tears.

"Thank you, sir; thank you for mother," he said very gently, for he was a shy child, though courageous.

The priest stroked his curls.

"There is death in the grass very often. We should not fear death, but neither should we run risk of it uselessly, especially when we have a mother whom it would grieve. Come and bathe at this spot, at this hour, to-morrow and every day, if you like. I will be here and look after you, you are little to be alone."

They were often together from that day onwards.

The brutishness and greed of his flock oppressed him. He was sent here to have care of their souls, but where were their souls? They would all have sold them to the foul fiend for a mess of artichokes fried in oil. In such a solitude as this he had been glad to be able to teach and move the young malleable mind of Adone Alba; the only one of them who seemed to have any mind at all. Adone also had a voice as sweet as a nightingale in the syringa bushes in May; and it pierced the gloom of the old naked gaunt church as a nightingale's thrills through the dark hour before dawn.

There was no other music in that choir except the children's or youths' voices; there was nothing to make music with except those flexible pipes of the boyish throats; and Don Silverio loved

and understood choral music; he had studied it in Rome. Adone never refused to sing for him, and when the voice of adolescence had replaced that of childhood, he would still stand no less docilely by the old marble lectern, and wake the melodies of early masters from the yellow pages.

The church was as damp as a vault of the dead; cold even when the dog-star reigned in the heavens. The brasses and bronzes were rusted with moisture, and the marbles were black with the spores of mould; rain dripped through the joints of the roof, and innumerable sparrows made their nests there; the mosaics of the floor were green from these droppings, and from those of the rain; the sun never entered through any of the windows, which were yellow with age and dust; but here, with a lantern for their only light, they solaced each other with the song of the great choral masters. Only Adone, although he never said or showed it, was glad when the huge key groaned in the lock of the outer door, and he ran out into the evening starlight, down the steep streets, across the bridge, and felt the fresh river air blowing on him, and heard the swirling of the water amongst the frost-stiffened canes, and saw far off in the darkened fields the glimmer of a light—the light of home.

That old home was the dearest thing on earth to the young man. He had never been away from it but once, when the conscription called him. In that time, which had been to him like a nightmare, the time of his brief exile to the army, because he was the only son of a widow, he had been sent to a northern city,

one of commerce and noise and crowded, breathless life; he had been cooped up in it like a panther in a den, like a hawk in a cage. What he saw of the vices and appetites of men, the pressure of greed and of gain, the harsh and stupid tyranny of the few, the slavish and ignoble submission of the many, the brutish bullying, the crouching obedience, the deadly routine, the lewd licence of reaction—all filled him with disdain and with disgust. When he returned to his valley he bathed in the waters of Edera before he crossed his mother's threshold.

"Make me clean as I was when I left you!" he cried, and took the water in the hollow of his hands and kissed it.

But no water flows on the earth, from land to sea, which can wholly cleanse the soul as it cleanses the body.

That brief time under arms he cursed as thousands of youths have cursed it. Its hated stigma and pollution never wholly passed away. It left a bitterness on his lips, a soil upon his memories. But how sweet to him beyond expression, on his return, were the sound of the rushing river in the silence of the night, the pure odours of the blossoming beanfields, the clear dark sky with its radiant stars, the sense of home, the peace of his own fields!

"Mother, whether life for me shall be long or short, here its every hour shall be spent!" he said, as he stood on his own ground and looked through the olive-trees to the river, running swiftly and strong beneath the moon.

"Those are good words, my son," said Clelia Alba, and her hands rested on his bowed head.

He adored both the soil and the water of this place of his birth; no toil upon either seemed to him hard or mean. All which seemed to him to matter much in the life of a man was to be free, and he was so. In that little kingdom of fertile soil and running stream no man could bid him come and go, no law ruled his uprising and his down lying; he had enough for his own wants and the wants of those about him, enough for the needs of the body, and the mind here had not many needs; at the Terra Vergine he was his own master, except so far as he cheerfully deferred to his mother; and all which he put into the earth he could take out of it for his own usage, though indeed the fiscal authorities claimed well nigh one-half, rating his land at far more than its worth. No doubt scientific agriculture might have made it yield more than he did; but he was content to follow the ways of old; he farmed as men did when the Sun-god was the farm slave of Admetus. The hellebore and the violets grew at will in his furrows; the clematis and the ivy climbed his figtrees; the fritillaria and daphne grew in his pastures, and he never disturbed them, or scared the starling and the magpie which fluttered in the wake of his wooden plough. The land was good land, and gave him whatever he wanted; he grudged nothing off it to bird, or beast, or leaf, or flower, or to the hungry wayfarer who chanced to pass by his doors. In remote places the old liberal, frank, open-handed hospitality of an earlier time is still in Italy a practice as well as a tradition.

The house was their own, and the earth gave them their bread,

their wine, their vegetables, their oil, hemp, and flax for their linen, and herbs for their soup; of the olive-oil they had more than enough for use, and the surplus was sold once a year in the nearest town, San Beda, and served to meet the fiscal demands. They had rarely any ready money, but no peasant in Italy ever expects, unless by some luck at lotto, to have money in his pocket.

He worked hard; at some seasons extremely hard; he hired labour sometimes, but not often, for to pay for the hiring takes the profit off the land. But he had been used to such work from childhood, and it was never irksome to him; even though he rose in the dark, and rarely went home to supper till the stars were shining. He had no near neighbours except the poor folks in Ruscino. All surrounding him was grass and moor and wood, called communal property, but in reality belonging legally to no one; vast, still, fragrant leagues of uninhabited country stretching away to the blue hills, home of the fox and the hare and the boar, of the hawk and the woodpecker and the bittern.

Through those wilds he loved to wander alone; the sweet stillness of a countryside which was uncontaminated by the residence of men stilling the vague unrest of his youth, and the mountains towering in the light lending to the scene the charm of the unknown.

In days of storm or rain he read with Don Silverio or sang in the church; on fine holy-days he roamed far afield in the lonely heatherlands and woodlands which were watered by the Edera. He carried a gun, for defence if need be, for there were boars and

wolves in these solitudes; but he never used it upon bird or beast.

Like St. Francis of Assissi, both he and Don Silverio took more pleasure in the life than in the death of fair winged things.

"We are witness, twice in every year, of that great and inexplicable miracle," the priest said often, "that passage of small, frail, unguided creatures, over seas and continents, through tempests and simoons, and with every man's hand against them, and death waiting to take them upon every shore, by merciless and treacherous tricks, and we think nought of it; we care nought for it; we spread the nets and the gins—that is all. We are unworthy of all which makes the earth beautiful—vilely unworthy!"

One of the causes of his unpopularity in Ruscino was the inexorable persistence with which he broke their gins, lifted their nets, cleared off their birdlime, dispersed their watertraps, and forbade the favourite night poaching by lanterns in the woods. More than once they threatened his life, but he only smiled.

"*Faccia pure!*" he said, "you will cut a knot which I did not tie, and which I cannot myself undo."

But they held him in too much awe to dare to touch him, and they knew that again and again he went on bread and water himself to give his wine to their sick, or his strip of meat to their old people.

Moreover, they feared Adone.

"If you touch a hair of Don Silverio's head, or the hem of his cassock, I will burn Ruscino," said Adone to one of those who

had threatened his friend, "and you will all burn with it, for the river will not help you; the river will turn to oil and make the flames rage tenfold."

The people were afraid as they heard him, for the wrath of the gentle is terrible from its rarity.

"For sure 'tis the dead Tor'alba as speak in him," they said with fright under their breath, for there was a tale told in the district that Adone Alba was descended from the old war-lords.

The veterans of the village and the countryside remembered hearing their fathers say that the family of the Terra Vergine were descended from those great marquises who had reigned for centuries in that Rocca which was now a grim, ivy-covered ruin on the north of the Edera water. But more than this no one could say; no one could tell how the warlike race had become mere tillers of the soil, or how those who had measured out life and death up and down the course of the valley had lost their power and possessions. There were vague traditions of a terrible siege, following on a great battle in the vale; that was all.

IV

The church in which Don Silverio officiated every morning and evening for the benefit of a few old crones, had once been a Latin temple; it had been built from the Corinthian pillars, the marble peristyle, the rounded, open dome, like that of the Pantheon, of a pagan edifice; and to these had been added a Longobardo belfry and chancel; pigeons and doves roosted and nested in it, and within it was cold even in midsummer, and dark always as a vault. It was dedicated to St. Jerome, and was a world too wide for the shrunken band of believers who came to worship in it; there was a high, dark altar said to have been painted by Ribera, and nothing else that spoke in any way of art, except the capitals of its pillars and the Roman mosaics of its floor.

The Longobardo bell-tower was of vast height and strength; within it were various chambers, and these chambers had served through many ages as muniment-rooms. There were innumerable documents of many different epochs, almost all in Latin, a few in Greek. Don Silverio, who was a fine classic as well as a learned archæologist, spent all his lonely and cold winter evenings in the study of these early chronicles, his oil lamp burning pale and low, his little white dog lying on his knees.

These manuscripts gave him great trouble, and were in many parts almost unintelligible, in others almost effaced by damp, in others again gnawed by rats and mice. But he was interested in

his labours and in his subject, and after several years of work on them, he was able to make out a consecutive history of the Valdedera, and he was satisfied that the peasant of the Terra Vergine had been directly descended from the feudal-lords of Ruscino. That pittance of land by the waterside under the shadow of the ruined citadel was all which remained of the great fief of the youth in whose veins ran the blood of men who had given princes, and popes, and cardinals, and captains of condottieri, and patrons of art, and conquerors or revolted provinces, to the Italy of old from the beginning of the thirteenth century to the end of the sixteenth. For three hundred years the Tor'alba had been lords there, owning all their eyes could reach from mountain to sea; then after long siege the walled town and their adjacent stronghold had fallen into the hands of hereditary foes whose forces had been united against them. Fire and steel had done their worst, and only a month-old child had escaped from the burning Rocca, being saved in a boat laden with reeds at anchor in the river, and hidden by a faithful vassal. The child had grown to manhood and had lived to old age, leading a peasant's life on the banks of the Edera; the name had been mutilated in common usage amongst those who spoke only the dialect of the province, and for three more centuries father and son had succeeded each other, working for their daily bread where their ancestors had defied Borgia and Della Rovere, and Feltrio, and Malatesta; the gaunt dark shade of the dismantled citadel lying athwart their fields between them and the setting sun.

Should he tell Adone this or not?

Would the knowledge of his ancestry put a thorn in the boy's contented heart? Would it act as a spur to higher things, or be merely as the useless sting of a nettle?

Who could say?

Don Silverio remembered the gorgeous dreams of his own youth; and what had been their issue?

At fifty years old he was buried in a deserted village, never hearing from year's end to year's end one word of friendship or phrase of culture.

Would it be well or would it be wrong to disturb that tranquil acquiescence in a humble destiny? He could not decide. He dared not take upon himself so much responsibility. "In doubt do nothing" has been the axiom of many wise men. The remembrance of the maxim closed his lips. He had himself been in early manhood passionately ambitious; he was only a priest, but of priests are made the Gregorio, the Bonifazio, the Leone of the Papal throne; to the dreams of a seminarist nothing is impossible. But Adone had no such dreams; he was as satisfied with his lot as any young steer which wants nothing more than the fair, fresh fields of its birth. But one day as he was sitting with the boy, then fifteen years old, on the south bank of the Edera, the spirit moved him and he spake. It was the day of San Benedetto, when the swallows come. The grass was full of pink lychnis and yellow buttercups. A strong east wind was blowing from the sea. A number of martins, true to the proverb, were

circling gaily above the stream. The water, reflecting the brilliant hues of the heavens, was hurrying on its seaward way, swollen by recent rains and hastened by a strong wind blowing from the eastern mountains.

The lands of the Terra Vergine lay entirely on the south-east bank of the river, and covered many acres, of which some was moorland still. Almost opposite to it was the one-arched stone bridge, attributed to Theodoric, and on the northern bank was the ruined Rocca, towering above the trees which had grown up around it; whilst hidden by it and by the remains of the fortifications was that which was now the mere village of Ruscino.

"Listen, Adone!" he said in his deep, melodious voice, grave and sweet as a mass of Palestrina. "Listen, and I will tell you the tale of yonder donjon and village, and of the valley of the Edera, so far as I have been able to make it out for myself."

According to the writers whose manuscripts he had discovered the town of Ruscino, like Cremona, had existed before the siege of Troy, that is, six hundred years before the foundation of Rome. Of this there was no proof except tradition, but the ruins of the walls and the tombs by the riverside and in the fields proved that it had been an Etruscan city, and of some considerable extent and dignity, in those remote ages.

"The foundations of the Rocca," he continued, "were probably part of a great stronghold raised by the Gauls, who undoubtedly conquered the whole of this valley at the time when they settled

themselves in what is now the Marches, and founded Senegallia. It was visited by Asdrubal, and burned by Alaric; then occupied by the Greek free lances of Justinian; in the time of the Frankish victories, in common with greater places, it was forced to swear allegiance to the first papal Adrian. After that it had been counted as one of the fiefs comprised in the possessions of the Pentapolis; and later on, when the Saracens ravaged the shores of the Adriatic, they had come up the Valdedera and pillaged and burned again. Gregory the Ninth gave the valley to the family of its first feudal lords, the Tor'alba, in recompense for military service, and they, out of the remains of the Gallic, Etruscan, and Roman towns, rebuilt Ruscino and raised the Rocca on the ruins of the castle of the Gauls. There, though at feud many time with their foes, the Della Rovere, the Malatesta, and the Dukes of Urbino, they held their own successfully, favoured usually by Rome, and for three centuries grew in force and in possessions. But they lost the favour of Rome by their haughtiness and independence; and under pretext that they merited punishment, Cesare Borgia brought troops of mercenaries against them, and after a fierce conflict in the valley (the terrible battle of which the villagers preserved the memory) the town was besieged and sacked.

"After this battle, which must have taken place on yonder moor, to the north-west, for the assailants had crossed the Apennines, the Tor'alba and the remnant of men remaining to them retreated within the walls of Ruscino.

"The whole place and the citadel were burning, set on fire by order of Borgia. The church alone was spared, and the dead men were as thick as stones on the walls, and in the streets, and in the nave of the church, and on the streets, and in the houses. This river was choked with corpses, and dark with blood. The black smoke towered to the sky in billows like a sea. The mercenaries swarmed over the bastions and violated the women, and cut off their breasts and threw their bodies down into the stream and their children after them. The Lady of Tor'alba, valiant as Caterina Sforza, was the first slain.

"The whole place was given up to flame and carnage, and the great captains were as helpless as dead oxen. They were all slain amongst their troopers and their vassals, and their bodies were burnt when the fortress was fired.

"Only one little child escaped the massacre, a month-old babe, son of the Marquis of Tor'alba, who was hidden by a faithful servant amongst the reeds of the Edera in a basket. This servant was the only male who escaped slaughter.

"The river rushes were more merciful than man, they kept the little new-born lordling safe until his faithful vassal, under cover of the night, when the assailants were drunk and stupid with licence gratified, could take him to a poor woman to be suckled in a cottage farther down the river. How he grew up I know not, but certain it is that thirty years later one Federigo Tor'alba was living where you live, and your house and land have never changed hands or title since; only your name has been truncated,

as often happens in the speech of the people. How this land called the Terra Vergine was first obtained I cannot say; the vassal may have saved some gold or jewels which belonged to his masters, and have purchased these acres, or the land may have been taken up and put gradually into cultivation without any legal right to it, of this there is no explanation, no record. But from that time the mighty lordship of Tor'alba has been extinct, and scarcely exists now even in local tradition; although their effigies are on their tombs, and the story of their reign can be deciphered by any one who can read a sixteenth-century manuscript, as you might do for yourself, my son, had you been diligent."

Adone was silent. He had listened with attention, as he did to everything which was said or read to him by Don Silverio. But he was not astonished, because he had often heard, though vaguely, the legend of his descent.

"Of what use is it?" he said, as he sat moving the bright water with his bare slim feet. "Nothing will bring it all back."

"It should serve some great end," said Don Silverio, not knowing very well what he meant or to what he desired to move the young man's mind. "Nobility of blood should make the hands cleaner, the heart higher, the aims finer."

Adone had shrugged his shoulders.

"We are all equal!" he answered.

"We are not all equal," the priest said curtly. "There is not equality in nature. Are there even two pebbles alike in the bed of the river?"

Don Silverio, for the first time in his life, could have willingly let escape him some unholy word. It incensed him that he could not arouse in the boy any of that interest and excitement which had moved his own feelings so strongly as he had spent his spare evenings poring over the crabbed characters and the dust-weighted vellum of the charred and mutilated archives discovered by him in a secret closet in the bell-tower of his church. With infinite toil, patience, and ability he had deciphered the Latin of rolls, registers, letters, chronicles, so damaged by water, fire, and the teeth of rats and mice, that it required all an archæologist's ingenuity and devotion to make out any sense from them. Summer days and winter nights had found him poring over the enigma of these documents, and now, when he had conquered and revealed their secret, he who was most concerned in it was no more stirred by curiosity or pride than if he had been one of the big tawny owls dwelling in the dusk of the belfry.

Don Silverio was a learned man and a holy man, and should have despised such vanities, but an historic past had great seduction for him; a militant race fascinated him against his conscience, and aristocracy allured him despite all his better judgement; it seemed to him that if he had learned that he had come from a knightly *gens* such as this of the Tor'alba, he would have been more strongly moved to self-glorification than would have become a servant of the Church. He himself had no knowledge even of his own near parentage; he had been a forsaken child, left one dark autumn night in the iron cradle of

the gates of a foundling hospital in Reggio Calabrese. His names had been bestowed on him by the chaplain of the institution; and his education had been given him by an old nobleman of the town, attracted by his appearance and intelligence as a child. He was now fifty years of age; and he had never known anything of kith and kin, or of the mingled sweetness and importunity of any human tie.

Adone sat silent, looking up at the fortress of his forefathers. He was more moved than his words showed.

"If we were lords of the land and the town and the people, we were also lords of the river," was what he was thinking; and that thought moved him to strong pride and pleasure, for he loved the river with a great love, only equalled by that which he felt for his mother.

"They were lords of the river?" he asked aloud.

"Undoubtedly," answered the priest. "It was one of the highways of the province from east to west and *vice versâ* in that time; the signoria of this Rocca took toll, kept the fords and bridges and ferries; none could pass up and down under Ruscino without being seen by the sentinels on the ramparts here. The Edera was different then; more navigable, perhaps less beautiful. Rivers change like nations. There have been landslips which have altered its course and made its torrents. In some parts it is shallower, in others deeper. The woods which enclosed its course then have been largely felled, though not wholly. Sand has been dug from it incessantly, and rocks have fallen across

it. As you know, no boats or barges which draw any depth of water can ascend or descend it now without being towed by horses; and in some parts, as here, it is course, too precipitous in its fall for even small boats to adventure themselves upon it: its shoals of lilies can blossom unmolested where its surface is level. Yes; undoubtedly, the lords of Ruscino were also lords of the Edera, from its mouth to its source; and their river formed at once their strongest defence and their weakest point. It was difficult sufficiently to guard so many miles of water; above all because, as I say, its course was so much clearer, and its depth so much greater, that a flotilla of rafts or cutters could ascend it from its mouth as far as this town in the Middle Ages; in fact, more than once, corsairs from the Levant and from Morocco did so ascend it, and though they were driven back by the culverins of the citadel, they every time carried off to slavery some of the youths and maidens of the plain."

Adone gazed across the river to the moss-grown walls which had once been fortifications still visible on the side of the hill, and to the frowning donjon, the blackened towers, the ruined bastions, of what had been once the Rocca, with the amber light and rosy clouds of the unseen sun behind them.

"Teach me Latin, your reverence," was all he said.

"I have always offered to do so," said Don Silverio.

Adone was again silent, swinging his slender brown feet in the water, and looking always upward at the evening sky beyond the great round shape of the dismantled fortress.

He learned some Latin with much difficulty, studying hard in his evening leisure in the winters, and with time he could decipher for himself, with assistance from Don Silverio, the annals of the Tor'alba; and he saw that it was as certain as anything grown over with the lichens and cobwebs of time can be that he himself was the last of the race.

"Your father used to say something of the sort," his mother said; "but he had only heard it piecemeal from old people, and never heard enough to put the pieces together as you have done. 'What does it matter either?' he used to say; and he said those great lords had been cut-throats on the land and robbers on the river. For your father's father had worn the red shirt in his youth, as I have told you often, and thought but little of lords and princes."

But Adone was different; the past allured him with the fascination which it has for poets and scholars; he was neither of these, except in a vague, unconscious way; but his imagination was strong and fertile once aroused; the past, as suggested to him by the vicar, by degrees became to him a living thing and nearer than the present, as it is to scholars who are poets. He was neither scholar nor poet; but he loved to muse upon that far-off time when his forefathers had been lords of the land and of the water.

He did not want the grandeur, he did not envy the power which they had possessed; but he wished that, like them, he could own the Edera from its rise in the hills to its fall into the sea.

"Oh, dear river!" he sang to it tenderly, "I love you. I love you

as the dragon-flies do, as the wagtails do, as the water voles do; I am you and you are me. When I lean over you and smile, you smile back to me. You are beautiful in the night and the morning, when you mirror the moon and play with the sunbeams, when you are angry under the wind, and when you are at peace in the heat of the noon. You have been purple with the blood of my people, and now you are green and fresh as the leaves of the young vine. You have been black with powder and battle, now you are fair with the hue of the sky and the blue of the myosotis. You are the same river as you were a thousand years ago, and yet you only come down to-day from the high hills, young and strong, and ever renewing. What is the life of man beside yours?"

That was the ode which he sang in the dialect of the province, and the stream washed his feet as he sang; and with his breath on his long reed flute—the same flute as youths have made and used ever since the days that Apollo reigned on Saracte—he copied the singing of the river, which piped as it ran, like birds at dawn.

But this was only at such times as daybreak or early night when he was alone.

There were but a few people within the ruined walls of Ruscino; most of the houses were tenantless and tottering to their fall. A few old bent men and weather-beaten women and naked children climbed its steep lanes and slept under its red-brown roofs, bawled to each other from its deep arched doorways to tell of death or birth, and gathered dandelion leaves upon its ramparts to cure their shrunk and swollen bladders. He knew them every

one, he was familiar with and kind to them; but he was aloof from them by temperament and thought, and he showed them his soul no more than the night birds in the towers showed their tawny breasts and eyes of topaz to the hungry and ragged fowls which scratched amongst the dust and refuse on the stones in the glare of day.

"*Il Bel Adone!*" sighed matrons and the maidens of the scattered farms and the old gloomy castellated granges which here and there, leagues distant from one another, broke the green and silent monotony of the vast historic country whose great woods sloped from hill to plain. But to these, too, he was indifferent, though they had the stern and solid beauty of the Latium women on their broad low brows, their stately busts, their ox-like eyes, their shapely feet and limbs; and often, joined to that, the red-gold hair and the fair skin of the Adriatic type. As they bound the sheaves, and bore the water-jars, and went in groups through the seeding grass to chapel, or fountain, or shrine, they had the free, frank grace of an earlier time; just such as these had carried the votive doves to the altars of Venus and chanted by the waters of the Edera the worship of Isis and her son. But to Adone they had no charm. What did he desire or dream of? Himself he could not have said. Perhaps they were too warm; it was certain that they left him cold.

Sometimes he leaned over the river and looked longingly into its depths.

"Show me the woman I shall love," he said to the water, but

it hastened on, glad, tumultuous, unheeding; and he only saw the reflection of the white jonquils or of the golden sword rush on its banks.

V

Fruits ripen quickly in these provinces, and children become women in a summer hour; but with Nerina, through want and suffering and hunger, physical growth had been slow, and she remained long a child in many things and many ways. Only in her skill and strength for work was she older than her actual age.

She could hoe and reap and sow: she could row and steer the boat amongst the shallows as well as any man; she could milk the cow, and put the steers in the waggon; she could card hemp and flax, and weave and spin either; she could carry heavy weights balanced on her head; she was strong and healthy and never ill, and with it all she was happy. Her large bright eyes were full of contentment, and her rosy mouth often smiled out of the mere gladness of living. Her senses were still asleep and her young soul wanted nothing more than life gave her.

"You can earn your bread anywhere now, little one," said Clelia Alba to her one day, when she had been there three years.

The girl shrank as under a blow; her brown and rosy face grew colourless. "Do you wish me to go away?" she said humbly.

"No, no," said Clelia, although that was what she did desire. "No, not while I live. But should I die, you could not stay here with my son."

"Why?" said Nerina. She did not understand why. Clelia hesitated.

"You ought to feel that yourself," she said harshly. "Young men and young maids do not dwell together, unless"

"Unless what?" asked Nerina.

"You are a simpleton indeed, or you are shamming," thought Adone's mother; but aloud she only said, "It is not in our usage."

"But you will not die," said Nerina anxiously. "Why should you think of dying, madonna? You are certainly old, but you are not so very, very old."

Clelia smiled.

"You do not flatter, child. So much the better. Run away and drive in those fowls. They are making havoc in the beanfield."

She could not feel otherwise than tenderly towards this young creature, always so obedient, so tractable, so contented, so grateful; but she would willingly have placed her elsewhere could she have done so with a clear conscience.

"My son will never do ill by any creature under his roof," she thought. "But still youth is youth; and the girl grows."

"We must dower her and mate her; eh, your reverence?" she said to Don Silverio when he passed by later in that day.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.