Stowe Harriet Beecher

Agnes of Sorrento

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Содержание

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

In the summer of 1859, Mrs. Stowe made her third and last journey to Europe. During the summer, the whole family was abroad, save the youngest; but in the autumn Mr. Stowe and one of the daughters returned to America, leaving Mrs. Stowe with two daughters and a son to spend the winter in Italy. The residence there was mainly to establish the health of the family; but Mrs. Stowe had entered into engagements with the New York *Ledger* and the New York *Independent* to furnish contributions, with a design ultimately of collecting the papers and recasting them for a volume to be published in the spring of 1860 in America and England, under the title of *Leaves from Foreign Books for Home Reading*. She had indeed entered into an agreement with Sampson Low & Co., the London publishers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Dred*, for the publication of the volume, but a sudden change of plans brought her home before she had perfected her book, and it was never published.

Meanwhile her dramatic instinct had begun to work upon the material thus gathered. It was impossible for her, with her strong religious nature and her active interest in structural Christianity to avoid subjecting the great church so constantly in evidence to those tests of personal religion which had been familiar to her from childhood. Her stay in Florence brought vividly before her the figure of Savonarola, and her imagination, in seeking to recover the life of his day, instinctively invested it with the spiritual struggles so well known to her and her circle. There was no conscious protestantizing of the life, as one may say, but the story which she told naturally reflected the color of her own religious training. *Agnes of Sorrento* was begun in this Italian winter, and had its immediate origin, as she herself explains in the following note, in a friendly contest of story telling. It was not completed until some time after the return to America, finding its first publication in *The Atlantic Monthly* in America and *The Cornhill Magazine* in England. In *The Atlantic* it was begun in May, 1861, and finished in April, 1862.

In the party with Mrs. Stowe were Mr. and Mrs. Howard of Brooklyn, and their children. When the tale made its final appearance in book form, it was accompanied by the following passages from a letter to the publishers by Mrs. Stowe. The "Annie" referred to was Miss Annie Howard.

> "The author was spending some weeks with a party of choice and very dear friends, on an excursion to southern Italy. Nothing could have been more fabulously and dreamily bright and beautiful than the whole time thus employed. Naples, Sorrento, Salerno, Pæstum, Pompeii, are names of enchantment which will never fade from the remembrance of any of that party. At Salerno, within a day's ride of Pæstum, the whole company were detained by a storm for a day and a night. The talents of the whole company were called in requisition to make the gloomy evening pass pleasantly with song and jest and story. The first chapters of this story were there written and read, to the accompanying dash of the Mediterranean. The plan of the whole future history was then sketched out. Whether it ever find much favor in the eyes of the world or not, sure it is, the story was a child of love in its infancy, and its flowery Italian cradle rocked it with an indulgent welcome.
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> "The writer and the party were fresh from strolls and rambles about charming Sorrento; they had explored the gloomy gorge, and carried away golden boughs of fruits and blossoms from her orange orchards. Under the shadow of the old arched gateway they had seen, sitting at her orange stand, a beautiful young girl, whose name became Agnes in the story; and in the shadows of the gorge they met that

woman straight and tall, with silver hair, Roman nose, and dark eyes, whose name became Elsie. The whole golden scene receded centuries back, and they saw them in a vision as they might and must have been in other days.

"The author begs to say that this story is a mere dreamland, that it neither assumes nor will have responsibility for historical accuracy. It merely reproduces to the reader the visionary region that appeared to the writer; and if some critic says this date be wrong, or that incident out of place, let us answer, 'Who criticises perspective and distances, that looks down into a purple lake at eventide? All dates shall give way to the fortunes of our story, and our lovers shall have the benefit of fairy-land; and whoso wants history will not find it here, except to our making, and as it suits our purpose.'

"The story is dedicated to the dear friends, wherever scattered, who first listened to it at Salerno. Alas! in writing this, a sorrow falls upon us, – the brightest, in youth and beauty, and in promise of happy life, who listened to that beginning, has passed to the land of silence.

"When our merry company left Sorrento, all the younger members adorned themselves with profuse knots of roses, which grew there so abundantly that it would seem no plucking could exhaust them. A beautiful girl sat opposite the writer in the carriage and said, 'Now I will count my roses; I have just seven knots, and in each seven roses.' And in reply, another remarked, 'Seven is the perfect number, and seven times seven is perfection.' 'It is no emblem,' she said gayly, 'of what a perfect time of enjoyment we have had.' One month later, and this rose had faded and passed away.

"There be many who will understand and tenderly feel the meaning, when we say that this little history is dedicated to the memory of Annie."

CHAPTER I
THE OLD TOWN

The setting sunbeams slant over the antique gateway of Sorrento, fusing into a golden bronze the brown freestone vestments of old Saint Antonio, who with his heavy stone mitre and upraised hands has for centuries kept watch thereupon.

A quiet time he has of it up there in the golden Italian air, in petrified act of blessing, while orange lichens and green mosses from year to year embroider quaint patterns on the seams of his sacerdotal vestments, and small tassels of grass volunteer to ornament the folds of his priestly drapery, and golden showers of blossoms from some more hardy plant fall from his ample sleeve-cuffs. Little birds perch and chitter and wipe their beaks unconcernedly, now on the tip of his nose and now on the point of his mitre, while the world below goes on its way pretty much as it did when the good saint was alive, and, in despair of the human brotherhood, took to preaching to the birds and the fishes.

Whoever passed beneath this old arched gateway, thus saint-guarded, in the year of our Lord's grace – , might have seen under its shadow, sitting opposite to a stand of golden oranges, the little Agnes.

A very pretty picture was she, reader, – with such a face as you sometimes see painted in those wayside shrines of sunny Italy, where the lamp burns pale at evening, and gillyflower and cyclamen are renewed with every morning.

She might have been fifteen or thereabouts, but was so small of stature that she seemed yet a child. Her black hair was parted in a white unbroken seam down to the high forehead, whose serious arch, like that of a cathedral door, spoke of thought and prayer. Beneath the shadows of this brow lay brown, translucent eyes, into whose thoughtful depths one might look as pilgrims gaze into the waters of some saintly well, cool and pure down to the unblemished sand at the bottom. The small lips had a gentle compression, which indicated a repressed strength of feeling; while the straight line of the nose, and the flexible, delicate nostril, were perfect as in those sculptured fragments of the antique which the soil of Italy so often gives forth to the day from the sepulchres of the past. The habitual pose of the head and face had the shy uplooking grace of a violet; and yet there was a grave tranquillity of expression, which gave a peculiar degree of character to the whole figure.

At the moment at which we have called your attention, the fair head is bent, the long eyelashes lie softly down on the pale, smooth cheek; for the Ave Maria bell is sounding from the Cathedral of Sorrento, and the child is busy with her beads.

By her side sits a woman of some threescore years, tall, stately, and squarely formed, with ample breadth of back and size of chest, like the robust dames of Sorrento. Her strong Roman nose, the firm, determined outline of her mouth, and a certain energy in every motion, speak the woman of will and purpose. There is a degree of vigor in the decision with which she lays down her spindle and bows her head, as a good Christian of those days would, at the swinging of the evening bell.

But while the soul of the child in its morning freshness, free from pressure or conscience of earthly care, rose like an illuminated mist to heaven, the words the white-haired woman repeated were twined with threads of worldly prudence, – thoughts of how many oranges she had sold, with a rough guess at the probable amount for the day, – and her fingers wandered from her beads a moment to see if the last coin had been swept from the stand into her capacious pocket, and her eyes wandering after them suddenly made her aware of the fact that a handsome cavalier was standing in the gate, regarding her pretty grandchild with looks of undisguised admiration.

"Let him look!" she said to herself, with a grim clasp on her rosary; "a fair face draws buyers, and our oranges must be turned into money; but he who does more than look has an affair with me;

so gaze away, my master, and take it out in buying oranges! —*Ave Maria! ora pro nobis, nunc et*," etc., etc.

A few moments, and the wave of prayer which had flowed down the quaint old shadowy street, bowing all heads as the wind bowed the scarlet tassels of neighboring clover-fields, was passed, and all the world resumed the work of earth just where they left off when the bell began.

"Good even to you, pretty maiden!" said the cavalier, approaching the stall of the orange-woman with the easy, confident air of one secure of a ready welcome, and bending down on the yet prayerful maiden the glances of a pair of piercing hazel eyes that looked out on each side of his aquiline nose with the keenness of a falcon's.

"Good even to you, pretty one! We shall take you for a saint, and worship you in right earnest, if you raise not those eyelashes soon."

"Sir! my lord!" said the girl, – a bright color flushing into her smooth brown cheeks, and her large dreamy eyes suddenly upraised with a flutter, as of a bird about to take flight.

"Agnes, bethink yourself!" said the white-haired dame; "the gentleman asks the price of your oranges; be alive, child!"

"Ah, my lord," said the young girl, "here are a dozen fine ones."

"Well, you shall give them me, pretty one," said the young man, throwing a gold piece down on the stand with a careless ring.

"Here, Agnes, run to the stall of Raphael the poulterer for change," said the adroit dame, picking up the gold.

"Nay, good mother, by your leave," said the unabashed cavalier; "I make my change with youth and beauty thus!" And with the word he stooped down and kissed the fair forehead between the eyes.

"For shame, sir!" said the elderly woman, raising her distaff, – her great glittering eyes flashing beneath her silver hair like tongues of lightning from a white cloud. "Have a care! – this child is named for blessed Saint Agnes, and is under her protection."

"The saints must pray for us, when their beauty makes us forget ourselves," said the young cavalier, with a smile. "Look me in the face, little one," he added; "say, wilt thou pray for me?"

The maiden raised her large serious eyes, and surveyed the haughty, handsome face with that look of sober inquiry which one sometimes sees in young children, and the blush slowly faded from her cheek, as a cloud fades after sunset.

"Yes, my lord," she answered, with a grave simplicity, "I will pray for you."

"And hang this upon the shrine of Saint Agnes for my sake," he added, drawing from his finger a diamond ring, which he dropped into her hand; and before mother or daughter could add another word or recover from their surprise, he had thrown the corner of his mantle over his shoulder and was off down the narrow street, humming the refrain of a gay song.

"You have struck a pretty dove with that bolt," said another cavalier, who appeared to have been observing the proceeding, and now, stepping forward, joined him.

"Like enough," said the first, carelessly.

"The old woman keeps her mewed up like a singing-bird," said the second; "and if a fellow wants speech of her, it's as much as his crown is worth; for Dame Elsie has a strong arm, and her distaff is known to be heavy."

"Upon my word," said the first cavalier, stopping and throwing a glance backward, "where do they keep her?"

"Oh, in a sort of pigeon's nest up above the Gorge; but one never sees her, except under the fire of her grandmother's eyes. The little one is brought up for a saint, they say, and goes nowhere but to mass, confession, and the sacrament."

"Humph!" said the other, "she looks like some choice old picture of Our Lady, – not a drop of human blood in her. When I kissed her forehead, she looked into my face as grave and innocent as a babe. One is tempted to try what one can do in such a case."

"Beware the grandmother's distaff!" said the other, laughing.

"I've seen old women before," said the cavalier, as they turned down the street and were lost to view.

Meanwhile the grandmother and grand-daughter were roused from the mute astonishment in which they were gazing after the young cavalier by a tittering behind them; and a pair of bright eyes looked out upon them from beneath a bundle of long, crimson-headed clover, whose rich carmine tints were touched to brighter life by setting sunbeams.

There stood Giulietta, the head coquette of the Sorrento girls, with her broad shoulders, full chest, and great black eyes, rich and heavy as those of the silver-haired ox for whose benefit she had been cutting clover. Her bronzed cheek was smooth as that of any statue, and showed a color like that of an open pomegranate; and the opulent, lazy abundance of her ample form, with her leisurely movements, spoke an easy and comfortable nature, – that is to say, when Giulietta was pleased; for it is to be remarked that there lurked certain sparkles deep down in her great eyes, which might, on occasion, blaze out into sheet-lightning, like her own beautiful skies, which, lovely as they are, can thunder and sulk with terrible earnestness when the fit takes them. At present, however, her face was running over with mischievous merriment, as she slyly pinched little Agnes by the ear.

"So you know not yon gay cavalier, little sister?" she said, looking askance at her from under her long lashes.

"No, indeed! What has an honest girl to do with knowing gay cavaliers?" said Dame Elsie, bestirring herself with packing the remaining oranges into a basket, which she covered trimly with a heavy linen towel of her own weaving. "Girls never come to good who let their eyes go walking through the earth, and have the names of all the wild gallants on their tongues. Agnes knows no such nonsense, – blessed be her gracious patroness, with Our Lady and Saint Michael!"

"I hope there is no harm in knowing what is right before one's eyes," said Giulietta. "Anybody must be blind and deaf not to know the Lord Adrian. All the girls in Sorrento know him. They say he is even greater than he appears, – that he is brother to the King himself; at any rate, a handsomer and more gallant gentleman never wore spurs."

"Let him keep to his own kind," said Elsie. "Eagles make bad work in dove-cots. No good comes of such gallants for us."

"Nor any harm, that I ever heard of," said Giulietta. "But let me see, pretty one, – what did he give you? Holy Mother! what a handsome ring!"

"It is to hang on the shrine of Saint Agnes," said the younger girl, looking up with simplicity.

A loud laugh was the first answer to this communication. The scarlet clover-tops shook and quivered with the merriment.

"To hang on the shrine of Saint Agnes!" Giulietta repeated. "That is a little too good!"

"Go, go, you baggage!" said Elsie, wrathfully brandishing her spindle. "If ever you get a husband, I hope he'll give you a good beating! You need it, I warrant! Always stopping on the bridge there, to have cracks with the young men! Little enough you know of saints, I dare say! So keep away from *my* child! Come, Agnes," she said, as she lifted the orange-basket on to her head; and, straightening her tall form, she seized the girl by the hand to lead her away.

CHAPTER II
THE DOVE-COT

The old town of Sorrento is situated on an elevated plateau, which stretches into the sunny waters of the Mediterranean, guarded on all sides by a barrier of mountains which defend it from bleak winds and serve to it the purpose of walls to a garden. Here, groves of oranges and lemons, with their almost fabulous coincidence of fruitage with flowers, fill the air with perfume, which blends with that of roses and jessamines; and the fields are so starred and enameled with flowers that they might have served as the type for those Elysian realms sung by ancient poets. The fervid air is fanned by continual sea-breezes, which give a delightful elasticity to the otherwise languid climate. Under all these cherishing influences, the human being develops a wealth and luxuriance of physical beauty unknown in less favored regions. In the region about Sorrento one may be said to have found the land where beauty is the rule and not the exception. The singularity there is not to see handsome points of physical proportion, but rather to see those who are without them. Scarce a man, woman, or child you meet who has not some personal advantage to be commended, while even striking beauty is common. Also, under these kindly skies, a native courtesy and gentleness of manner make themselves felt. It would seem as if humanity, rocked in this flowery cradle, and soothed by so many daily caresses and appliances of nursing Nature, grew up with all that is kindliest on the outward, – not repressed and beat in, as under the inclement atmosphere and stormy skies of the North.

The town of Sorrento itself overhangs the sea, skirting along rocky shores, which, hollowed here and there into picturesque grottoes, and fledged with a wild plumage of brilliant flowers and trailing vines, descend in steep precipices to the water. Along the shelly beach, at the bottom, one can wander to look out on the loveliest prospect in the world. Vesuvius rises with its two peaks softly clouded in blue and purple mists, which blend with its ascending vapors, – Naples and the adjoining villages at its base gleaming in the distance like a fringe of pearls on a regal mantle. Nearer by, the picturesque rocky shores of the island of Capri seem to pulsate through the dreamy, shifting mists that veil its sides; and the sea shimmers and glitters like the neck of a peacock with an iridescent mingling of colors: the whole air is a glorifying medium, rich in prismatic hues of enchantment.

The town on three sides is severed from the main land by a gorge two hundred feet in depth and forty or fifty in breadth, crossed by a bridge resting on double arches, the construction of which dates back to the time of the ancient Romans. This bridge affords a favorite lounging-place for the inhabitants, and at evening a motley assemblage may be seen lolling over its moss-grown sides, – men with their picturesque knit caps of scarlet or brown falling gracefully on one shoulder, and women with their shining black hair and the enormous pearl ear-rings which are the pride and heirlooms of every family. The present traveler at Sorrento may remember standing on this bridge and looking down the gloomy depths of the gorge, to where a fair villa, with its groves of orange-trees and gardens, overhangs the tremendous depths below.

Hundreds of years since, where this villa now stands was the simple dwelling of the two women whose history we have begun to tell you. There you might have seen a small stone cottage with a two-arched arcade in front, gleaming brilliantly white out of the dusky foliage of an orange-orchard. The dwelling was wedged like a bird-box between two fragments of rock, and behind it the land rose rocky, high, and steep, so as to form a natural wall. A small ledge or terrace of cultivated land here hung in air, – below it, a precipice of two hundred feet down into the Gorge of Sorrento. A couple of dozen orange-trees, straight and tall, with healthy, shining bark, here shot up from the fine black volcanic soil, and made with their foliage a twilight shadow on the ground, so deep that no vegetation, save a fine velvet moss, could dispute their claim to its entire nutritious offices. These trees were the sole wealth of the women and the sole ornament of the garden; but, as they stood there, not only laden

with golden fruit, but fragrant with pearly blossoms, they made the little rocky platform seem a perfect Garden of the Hesperides. The stone cottage, as we have said, had an open, whitewashed arcade in front, from which one could look down into the gloomy depths of the gorge, as into some mysterious underworld. Strange and weird it seemed, with its fathomless shadows and its wild grottoes, over which hung, silently waving, long pendants of ivy, while dusky gray aloes uplifted their horned heads from great rock-rifts, like elfin spirits struggling upward out of the shade. Nor was wanting the usual gentle poetry of flowers; for white iris leaned its fairy pavilion over the black void like a pale-cheeked princess from the window of some dark enchanted castle, and scarlet geranium and golden broom and crimson gladiolus waved and glowed in the shifting beams of the sunlight. Also there was in this little spot what forms the charm of Italian gardens always, – the sweet song and prattle of waters. A clear mountain-spring burst through the rock on one side of the little cottage, and fell with a lulling noise into a quaint moss-grown water-trough, which had been in former times the sarcophagus of some old Roman sepulchre. Its sides were richly sculptured with figures and leafy scrolls and arabesques, into which the sly-footed lichens with quiet growth had so insinuated themselves as in some places almost to obliterate the original design; while, round the place where the water fell, a veil of ferns and maiden's-hair, studded with tremulous silver drops, vibrated to its soothing murmur. The superfluous waters, drained off by a little channel on one side, were conducted through the rocky parapet of the garden, whence they trickled and tinkled from rock to rock, falling with a continual drip among the swaying ferns and pendent ivy wreaths, till they reached the little stream at the bottom of the gorge. This parapet or garden-wall was formed of blocks or fragments of what had once been white marble, the probable remains of the ancient tomb from which the sarcophagus was taken. Here and there a marble acanthus-leaf, or the capital of an old column, or a fragment of sculpture jutted from under the mosses, ferns, and grasses with which prodigal Nature had filled every interstice and carpeted the whole. These sculptured fragments everywhere in Italy seem to whisper, from the dust, of past life and death, of a cycle of human existence forever gone, over whose tomb the life of to-day is built.

"Sit down and rest, my dove," said Dame Elsie to her little charge, as they entered their little enclosure.

Here she saw for the first time, what she had not noticed in the heat and hurry of her ascent, that the girl was panting and her gentle bosom rising and falling in thick heartbeats, occasioned by the haste with which she had drawn her onward.

"Sit down, dearie, and I will get you a bit of supper."

"Yes, grandmother, I will. I must tell my beads once for the soul of the handsome gentleman that kissed my forehead to-night."

"How did you know that he was handsome, child?" said the old dame, with some sharpness in her voice.

"He bade me look on him, grandmother, and I saw it."

"You must put such thoughts away, child," said the old dame.

"Why must I?" said the girl, looking up with an eye as clear and unconscious as that of a three-year-old child.

"If she does not think, why should I tell her?" said Dame Elsie, as she turned to go into the house, and left the child sitting on the mossy parapet that overlooked the gorge. Thence she could see far off, not only down the dim, sombre abyss, but out to the blue Mediterranean beyond, now calmly lying in swathing-bands of purple, gold, and orange, while the smoky cloud that overhung Vesuvius became silver and rose in the evening light.

There is always something of elevation and purity that seems to come over one from being in an elevated region. One feels morally as well as physically above the world, and from that clearer air able to look down on it calmly with disengaged freedom. Our little maiden sat for a few moments gazing, her large brown eyes dilating with a tremulous lustre, as if tears were half of a mind to start in them, and her lips apart with a delicate earnestness, like one who is pursuing some pleasing inner thought.

Suddenly rousing herself, she began by breaking the freshest orange-blossoms from the golden-fruited trees, and, kissing and pressing them to her bosom, she proceeded to remove the faded flowers of the morning from before a little rude shrine in the rock, where, in a sculptured niche, was a picture of the Madonna and Child, with a locked glass door in front of it. The picture was a happy transcript of one of the fairest creations of the religious school of Florence, done by one of those rustic copyists of whom Italy is full, who appear to possess the instinct of painting, and to whom we owe many of those sweet faces which sometimes look down on us by the wayside from rudest and homeliest shrines.

The poor fellow by whom it had been painted was one to whom years before Dame Elsie had given food and shelter for many months during a lingering illness; and he had painted so much of his dying heart and hopes into it that it had a peculiar and vital vividness in its power of affecting the feelings. Agnes had been familiar with this picture from early infancy. No day of her life had the flowers failed to be freshly placed before it. It had seemed to smile down sympathy on her childish joys, and to cloud over with her childish sorrows. It was less a picture to her than a presence; and the whole air of the little orange-garden seemed to be made sacred by it. When she had arranged her flowers, she kneeled down and began to say prayers for the soul of the young gallant.

"Holy Jesus," she said, "he is young, rich, handsome, and a king's brother; and for all these things the Fiend may tempt him to forget his God and throw away his soul. Holy Mother, give him good counsel!"

"Come, child, to your supper," said Dame Elsie. "I have milked the goats, and everything is ready."

CHAPTER III
THE GORGE

After her light supper was over, Agnes took her distaff, wound with shining white flax, and went and seated herself in her favorite place, on the low parapet that overlooked the gorge.

This ravine, with its dizzy depths, its waving foliage, its dripping springs and the low murmur of the little stream that pursued its way far down at the bottom, was one of those things which stimulated her impressible imagination, and filled her with a solemn and vague delight. The ancient Italian tradition made it the home of fauns and dryads, wild woodland creatures, intermediate links between vegetable life and that of sentiment and reasoning humanity. The more earnest faith that came in with Christianity, if it had its brighter lights in an immortality of blessedness, had also its deeper shadows in the intenser perceptions it awakened of sin and evil, and of the mortal struggle by which the human spirit must avoid endless woe and rise to endless felicity. The myths with which the colored Italian air was filled in mediæval ages no longer resembled those graceful, floating, cloud-like figures one sees in the ancient chambers of Pompeii, – the bubbles and rainbows of human fancy, rising aimless and buoyant, with a mere freshness of animal life, against a black background of utter and hopeless ignorance as to man's past or future. They were rather expressed by solemn images of mournful, majestic angels and of triumphant saints, or fearful, warning presentations of loathsome fiends. Each lonesome gorge and sombre dell had tales no more of tricky fauns and dryads, but of those restless, wandering demons who, having lost their own immortality of blessedness, constantly lie in wait to betray frail humanity, and cheat it of that glorious inheritance bought by the Great Redemption.

The education of Agnes had been one which rendered her whole system peculiarly sensitive and impressible to all influences from the invisible and unseen. Of this education we shall speak more particularly hereafter. At present we see her sitting in the twilight on the moss-grown marble parapet, her distaff, with its silvery flax, lying idly in her hands, and her widening dark eyes gazing intently into the gloomy gorge below, from which arose the far-off complaining babble of the brook at the bottom and the shiver and sigh of evening winds through the trailing ivy. The white mist was slowly rising, wavering, undulating, and creeping its slow way up the sides of the gorge. Now it hid a tuft of foliage, and now it wreathed itself around a horned clump of aloes, and, streaming far down below it in the dimness, made it seem like the goblin robe of some strange, supernatural being.

The evening light had almost burned out in the sky; only a band of vivid red lay low in the horizon out to sea, and the round full moon was just rising like a great silver lamp, while Vesuvius with its smoky top began in the obscurity to show its faintly flickering fires. A vague agitation seemed to oppress the child; for she sighed deeply, and often repeated with fervor the Ave Maria.

At this moment there began to rise from the very depths of the gorge below her the sound of a rich tenor voice, with a slow, sad modulation, and seeming to pulsate upward through the filmy, shifting mists. It was one of those voices which seem fit to be the outpouring of some spirit denied all other gifts of expression, and rushing with passionate fervor through this one gate of utterance. So distinctly were the words spoken, that they seemed each one to rise as with a separate intelligence out of the mist, and to knock at the door of the heart.

Sad is my life, and lonely!
No hope for me,
Save thou, my love, my only,
I see!

Where art thou, O my fairest?

Where art thou gone?
Dove of the rock, I languish
Alone!

They say thou art so saintly,
Who dare love thee?
Yet bend thine eyelids holy
On me!

Though heaven alone possess thee,
Thou dwell'st above,
Yet heaven, didst thou but know it,
Is love.

There was such an intense earnestness in these sounds, that large tears gathered in the wide dark eyes, and fell one after another upon the sweet alyssum and maiden's-hair that grew in the crevices of the marble wall. She shivered and drew away from the parapet, and thought of stories she had heard the nuns tell of wandering spirits who sometimes in lonesome places pour forth such entrancing music as bewilders the brain of the unwary listener, and leads him to some fearful destruction.

"Agnes!" said the sharp voice of old Elsie, appearing at the door, "here! where are you?"

"Here, grandmamma."

"Who's that singing this time o' night?"

"I don't know, grandmamma."

Somehow the child felt as if that singing were strangely sacred to her, – a *rapport* between her and something vague and invisible which might yet become dear.

"Is't down in the gorge?" said the old woman, coming with her heavy, decided step to the parapet, and looking over, her keen black eyes gleaming like dagger-blades into the mist. "If there's anybody there," she said, "let them go away, and not be troubling honest women with any of their caterwauling. Come, Agnes," she said, pulling the girl by the sleeve, "you must be tired, my lamb! and your evening prayers are always so long, best be about them, girl, so that old grandmamma may put you to bed. What ails the girl? Been crying! Your hand is cold as a stone."

"Grandmamma, what if that might be a spirit?" she said. "Sister Rosa told me stories of singing spirits that have been in this very gorge."

"Likely enough," said Dame Elsie; "but what's that to us? Let 'em sing! – so long as we don't listen, where's the harm done? We will sprinkle holy water all round the parapet, and say the office of Saint Agnes, and let them sing till they are hoarse."

Such was the triumphant view which this energetic good woman took of the power of the means of grace which her church placed at her disposal.

Nevertheless, while Agnes was kneeling at her evening prayers, the old dame consoled herself with a soliloquy, as with a brush she vigorously besprinkled the premises with holy water.

"Now, here's the plague of a girl! If she's handsome, – and nobody wants one that isn't, – why, then, it's a purgatory to look after her. This one is good enough, – none of your hussies, like Giulietta: but the better they are, the more sure to have fellows after them. A murrain on that cavalier, – king's brother, or what not! – it was he serenading, I'll be bound. I must tell Antonio, and have the girl married, for aught I see: and I don't want to give her to him either; he didn't bring her up. There's no peace for us mothers. Maybe I'll tell Father Francesco about it. That's the way poor little Isella was carried away. Singing is of the Devil, I believe; it always bewitches girls. I'd like to have poured some hot oil down the rocks: I'd have made him squeak in another tone, I reckon. Well, well! I hope

I shall come in for a good seat in paradise for all the trouble I've had with her mother, and am like to have with her, – that's all!"

In an hour more, the large, round, sober moon was shining fixedly on the little mansion in the rocks, silvering the glossy darkness of the orange-leaves, while the scent of the blossoms arose like clouds about the cottage. The moonlight streamed through the unglazed casement, and made a square of light on the little bed where Agnes was sleeping, in which square her delicate face was framed, with its tremulous and spiritual expression most resembling in its sweet plaintive purity some of the Madonna faces of Fra Angelico, – those tender wild flowers of Italian religion and poetry.

By her side lay her grandmother, with those sharp, hard, clearly cut features, so worn and bronzed by time, so lined with labor and care, as to resemble one of the Fates in the picture of Michel Angelo; and even in her sleep she held the delicate lily hand of the child in her own hard, brown one, with a strong and determined clasp.

While they sleep, we must tell something more of the story of the little Agnes, – of what she is, and what are the causes which have made her such.

CHAPTER IV
WHO AND WHAT

Old Elsie was not born a peasant. Originally she was the wife of a steward in one of those great families of Rome whose estate and traditions were princely. Elsie, as her figure and profile and all her words and movements indicated, was of a strong, shrewd, ambitious, and courageous character, and well disposed to turn to advantage every gift with which Nature had endowed her.

Providence made her a present of a daughter whose beauty was wonderful, even in a country where beauty is no uncommon accident. In addition to her beauty, the little Isella had quick intelligence, wit, grace, and spirit. As a child she became the pet and plaything of the Princess whom Elsie served. This noble lady, pressed by the *ennui* which is always the moth and rust on the purple and gold of rank and wealth, had, as other noble ladies had in those days, and have now, sundry pets: greyhounds, white and delicate, that looked as if they were made of Sèvres china; spaniels with long silky ears and fringy paws; apes and monkeys, that made at times sad devastations in her wardrobe; and a most charming little dwarf, that was ugly enough to frighten the very owls, and spiteful as he was ugly. She had, moreover, peacocks, and macaws, and parrots, and all sorts of singing-birds, and falcons of every breed, and horses, and hounds, – in short, there is no saying what she did *not* have. One day she took it into her head to add the little Isella to the number of her acquisitions. With the easy grace of aristocracy, she reached out her jeweled hand and took Elsie's one flower to add to her conservatory, – and Elsie was only too proud to have it so.

Her daughter was kept constantly about the person of the Princess, and instructed in all the wisdom which would have been allowed her, had she been the Princess's own daughter, which, to speak the truth, was in those days nothing very profound, – consisting of a little singing and instrumentation, a little embroidery and dancing, with the power of writing her own name and of reading a love letter.

All the world knows that the very idea of a pet is something to be spoiled for the amusement of the pet-owner; and Isella was spoiled in the most particular and circumstantial manner. She had suits of apparel for every day in the year, and jewels without end, – for the Princess was never weary of trying the effect of her beauty in this and that costume; so that she sported through the great grand halls and down the long aisles of the garden much like a bright-winged humming-bird, or a damsel-fly all green and gold. She was a genuine child of Italy, – full of feeling, spirit, and genius, – alive in every nerve to the finger-tips; and under the tropical sunshine of her mistress's favor she grew as an Italian rosebush does, throwing its branches freakishly over everything in a wild labyrinth of perfume, brightness, and thorns.

For a while her life was a triumph, and her mother triumphed with her at an humble distance. The Princess was devoted to her with the blind fatuity with which ladies of rank at times will invest themselves in a caprice. She arrogated to herself all the praises of her beauty and wit, allowed her to flirt and make conquests to her heart's content, and engaged to marry her to some handsome young officer of her train, when she had done being amused with her.

Now we must not wonder that a young head of fifteen should have been turned by this giddy elevation, nor that an old head of fifty should have thought all things were possible in the fortune of such a favorite. Nor must we wonder that the young coquette, rich in the laurels of a hundred conquests, should have turned her bright eyes on the son and heir, when he came home from the University of Bologna. Nor is it to be wondered at, that this same son and heir, being a man as well as a Prince, should have done as other men did, – fallen desperately in love with this dazzling, sparkling, piquant mixture of matter and spirit, which no university can prepare a young man to comprehend, – which always seemed to run from him, and yet always threw a Parthian shot behind her as she fled.

Nor is it to be wondered at, if this same Prince, after a week or two, did not know whether he was on his head or his heels, or whether the sun rose in the east or the south, or where he stood, or whither he was going.

In fact, the youthful pair very soon came into that dreamland where are no more any points of the compass, no more division of time, no more latitude and longitude, no more up and down, but only a general wandering among enchanted groves and singing nightingales.

It was entirely owing to old Elsie's watchful shrewdness and address that the lovers came into this paradise by the gate of marriage; for the young man was ready to offer anything at the feet of his divinity, as the old mother was not slow to perceive.

So they stood at the altar for the time being a pair of as true lovers as Romeo and Juliet: but then, what has true love to do with the son of a hundred generations and heir to a Roman principality?

Of course, the rose of love, having gone through all its stages of bud and blossom into full flower, must next begin to drop its leaves. Of course. Who ever heard of an immortal rose?

The time of discovery came. Isella was found to be a mother; and then the storm burst upon her and drabbled her in the dust as fearlessly as the summer wind sweeps down and besmirches the lily it has all summer been wooing and flattering.

The Princess was a very pious and moral lady, and of course threw her favorite out into the street as a vile weed, and virtuously ground her down under her jeweled high-heeled shoes.

She could have forgiven her any common frailty; of course it was natural that the girl should have been seduced by the all-conquering charms of her son, – but aspire to marriage with their house! – pretend to be her son's wife! Since the time of Judas had such treachery ever been heard of?

Something was said of the propriety of walling up the culprit alive, – a mode of disposing of small family matters somewhat *à la mode* in those times. But the Princess acknowledged herself foolishly tender, and unable quite to allow this very obvious propriety in the case.

She contented herself with turning mother and daughter into the streets with every mark of ignominy, which was reduplicated by every one of her servants, lackeys, and court-companions, who, of course, had always known just how the thing must end.

As to the young Prince, he acted as a well-instructed young nobleman should, who understands the great difference there is between the tears of a duchess and those of low-born women. No sooner did he behold his conduct in the light of his mother's countenance than he turned his back on his low marriage with edifying penitence. He did not think it necessary to convince his mother of the real existence of a union whose very supposition made her so unhappy, and occasioned such an uncommonly disagreeable and tempestuous state of things in the well-bred circle where his birth called him to move. Being, however, a religious youth, he opened his mind to his family-confessor, by whose advice he sent a messenger with a large sum of money to Elsie, piously commending her and her daughter to the Divine protection. He also gave orders for an entire new suit of raiment for the Virgin Mary in the family chapel, including a splendid set of diamonds, and promised unlimited candles to the altar of a neighboring convent. If all this could not atone for a youthful error, it was a pity. So he thought, as he drew on his riding gloves and went off on a hunting party, like a gallant and religious young nobleman.

Elsie, meanwhile, with her forlorn and disgraced daughter, found a temporary asylum in a neighboring mountain village, where the poor, bedrabbled, broken-winged song-bird soon panted and fluttered her little life away.

When the once beautiful and gay Isella had been hidden in the grave, cold and lonely, there remained a little wailing infant, which Elsie gathered to her bosom.

Grim, dauntless, and resolute, she resolved, for the sake of this hapless one, to look life in the face once more, and try the battle under other skies.

Taking the infant in her arms, she traveled with her far from the scene of her birth, and set all her energies at work to make for her a better destiny than that which had fallen to the lot of her unfortunate mother.

She set about to create her nature and order her fortunes with that sort of downright energy with which resolute people always attack the problem of a new human existence. This child should be happy: the rocks on which her mother was wrecked she should never strike upon, – they were all marked on Elsie's chart. Love had been the root of all poor Isella's troubles, – and Agnes never should know love, till taught it safely by a husband of Elsie's own choosing.

The first step of security was in naming her for the chaste Saint Agnes, and placing her girlhood under her special protection. Secondly, which was quite as much to the point, she brought her up laboriously in habits of incessant industry, – never suffering her to be out of her sight, or to have any connection or friendship, except such as could be carried on under the immediate supervision of her piercing black eyes. Every night she put her to bed as if she had been an infant, and, wakening her again in the morning, took her with her in all her daily toils, – of which, to do her justice, she performed all the hardest portion, leaving to the girl just enough to keep her hands employed and her head steady.

The peculiar circumstance which had led her to choose the old town of Sorrento for her residence, in preference to any of the beautiful villages which impearl that fertile plain, was the existence there of a flourishing convent dedicated to Saint Agnes, under whose protecting shadow her young charge might more securely spend the earlier years of her life.

With this view, having hired the domicile we have already described, she lost no time in making the favorable acquaintance of the sisterhood, – never coming to them empty-handed. The finest oranges of her garden, the whitest flax of her spinning, were always reserved as offerings at the shrine of the patroness whom she sought to propitiate for her grandchild.

In her earliest childhood the little Agnes was led toddling to the shrine by her zealous relative, and at the sight of her fair, sweet, awestruck face, with its viny mantle of encircling curls, the torpid bosoms of the sisterhood throbbed with a strange, new pleasure, which they humbly hoped was not sinful, – as agreeable things, they found, generally were. They loved the echoes of her little feet down the damp, silent aisles of their chapel, and her small, sweet, slender voice, as she asked strange baby-questions, which, as usual with baby-questions, hit all the insoluble points of philosophy and theology exactly on the head.

The child became a special favorite with the Abbess, Sister Theresa, a tall, thin, bloodless, sad-eyed woman, who looked as if she might have been cut out of one of the glaciers of Monte Rosa, but in whose heart the little fair one had made herself a niche, pushing her way up through, as you may have seen a lovely blue-fringed gentian standing in a snowdrift of the Alps with its little ring of melted snow around it.

Sister Theresa offered to take care of the child at any time when the grandmother wished to be about her labors; and so, during her early years, the little one was often domesticated for days together at the Convent. A perfect mythology of wonderful stories encircled her, which the good sisters were never tired of repeating to each other. They were the simplest sayings and doings of childhood, – handfuls of such wild flowers as bespread the green turf of nursery-life everywhere, but miraculous blossoms in the eyes of these good women, whom Saint Agnes had unwittingly deprived of any power of making comparisons or ever having Christ's sweetest parable of the heavenly kingdom enacted in homes of their own.

Old Jocunda, the portress, never failed to make a sensation with her one stock-story of how she found the child standing on her head and crying, – having been put into this reversed position in consequence of climbing up on a high stool to get her little fat hand into the vase of holy water, failing in which Christian attempt, her heels went up and her head down, greatly to her dismay.

"Nevertheless," said old Jocunda, gravely, "it showed an edifying turn in the child; and when I lifted the little thing up, it stopped crying the minute its little fingers touched the water, and it made a cross on its forehead as sensible as the oldest among us. Ah, sisters, there's grace there, or I'm mistaken."

All the signs of an incipient saint were, indeed, manifested in the little one. She never played the wild and noisy plays of common children, but busied herself in making altars and shrines, which she adorned with the prettiest flowers of the gardens, and at which she worked hour after hour in the quietest and happiest earnestness. Her dreams were a constant source of wonder and edification in the Convent, for they were all of angels and saints; and many a time, after hearing one, the sisterhood crossed themselves, and the Abbess said, "*Ex oribus parvulorum*." Always sweet, dutiful, submissive, cradling herself every night with a lulling of sweet hymns and infant murmur of prayers, and found sleeping in her little white bed with her crucifix clasped to her bosom, it was no wonder that the Abbess thought her the special favorite of her divine patroness, and like her the subject of an early vocation to be the celestial bride of One fairer than the children of men, who should snatch her away from all earthly things, to be united to Him in a celestial paradise.

As the child grew older, she often sat at evening with wide, wondering eyes, listening over and over again to the story of the fair Saint Agnes, – how she was a princess, living in her father's palace, of such exceeding beauty and grace that none saw her but to love her, yet of such sweetness and humility as passed all comparison; and how, when a heathen prince would have espoused her to his son, she said, "Away from me, tempter! for I am betrothed to a lover who is greater and fairer than any earthly suitor, – he is so fair that the sun and moon are ravished by his beauty, so mighty that the angels of heaven are his servants;" how she bore meekly with persecutions and threatenings and death for the sake of this unearthly love; and when she had poured out her blood, how she came to her mourning friends in ecstatic vision, all white and glistening, with a fair lamb by her side, and bade them weep not for her, because she was reigning with Him whom on earth she had preferred to all other lovers. There was also the legend of the fair Cecilia, the lovely musician whom angels had rapt away to their choirs; the story of that queenly saint, Catharine, who passed through the courts of heaven, and saw the angels crowned with roses and lilies, and the Virgin on her throne, who gave her the wedding ring that espoused her to be the bride of the King Eternal.

Fed with such legends, it could not be but that a child with a sensitive, nervous organization and vivid imagination, should have grown up with an unworldly and spiritual character, and that a poetic mist should have enveloped all her outward perceptions similar to that palpitating veil of blue and lilac vapor that enshrouds the Italian landscape.

Nor is it to be marveled at, if the results of this system of education went far beyond what the good old grandmother intended. For, though a stanch good Christian, after the manner of those times, yet she had not the slightest mind to see her grand-daughter a nun; on the contrary, she was working day and night to add to her dowry, and had in her eye a reputable middle-aged blacksmith, who was a man of substance and prudence, to be the husband and keeper of her precious treasure. In a home thus established she hoped to enthrone herself, and provide for the rearing of a generation of stout-limbed girls and boys who should grow up to make a flourishing household in the land. This subject she had not yet broached to her grand-daughter, though daily preparing to do so, – deferring it, it must be told, from a sort of jealous, yearning craving to have wholly to herself the child for whom she had lived so many years.

Antonio, the blacksmith to whom this honor was destined, was one of those broad-backed, full-chested, long-limbed fellows one shall often see around Sorrento, with great, kind, black eyes like those of an ox, and all the attributes of a healthy, kindly, animal nature. Contentedly he hammered away at his business; and certainly, had not Dame Elsie of her own providence elected him to be the husband of her fair grand-daughter, he would never have thought of the matter himself; but, opening the black eyes aforenamed upon the girl, he perceived that she was fair, and also received an

inner light through Dame Elsie as to the amount of her dowry; and, putting these matters together, conceived a kindness for the maiden, and awaited with tranquillity the time when he should be allowed to commence his wooing.

CHAPTER V
IL PADRE FRANCESCO

The next morning Elsie awoke, as was her custom, when the very faintest hue of dawn streaked the horizon. A hen who has seen a hawk balancing his wings and cawing in mid-air over her downy family could not have awakened with her feathers, metaphorically speaking, in a more bristling state of caution.

"Spirits in the gorge, quotha?" said she to herself, as she vigorously adjusted her dress. "I believe so, – spirits in good sound bodies, I believe; and next we shall hear, there will be rope-ladders, and climbings, and the Lord knows what. I shall go to confession this very morning, and tell Father Francesco the danger; and instead of taking her down to sell oranges, suppose I send her to the sisters to carry the ring and a basket of oranges?"

"Ah, ah!" she said, pausing, after she was dressed, and addressing a coarse print of Saint Agnes pasted against the wall, – "you look very meek there, and it was a great thing, no doubt, to die as you did; but if you'd lived to be married and bring up a family of girls, you'd have known something greater. Please, don't take offense with a poor old woman who has got into the way of speaking her mind freely! I'm foolish, and don't know much, – so, dear lady, pray for me!" And old Elsie bent her knee and crossed herself reverently, and then went out, leaving her young charge still sleeping.

It was yet dusky dawn when she might have been seen kneeling, with her sharp, clear-cut profile, at the grate of a confession-box in a church in Sorrento. Within was seated a personage who will have some influence on our story, and who must therefore be somewhat minutely introduced to the reader.

Il Padre Francesco had only within the last year arrived in the neighborhood, having been sent as superior of a brotherhood of Capuchins, whose convent was perched on a crag in the vicinity. With this situation came a pastoral care of the district; and Elsie and her grand-daughter found in him a spiritual pastor very different from the fat, jolly, easy Brother Girolamo, to whose place he had been appointed. The latter had been one of those numerous priests taken from the peasantry, who never rise above the average level of thought of the body from which they are drawn. Easy, gossipy, fond of good living and good stories, sympathetic in troubles and in joys, he had been a general favorite in the neighborhood, without exerting any particularly spiritualizing influence.

It required but a glance at Father Francesco to see that he was in all respects the opposite of this. It was evident that he came from one of the higher classes, by that indefinable air of birth and breeding which makes itself felt under every change of costume. Who he might be, what might have been his past history, what rank he might have borne, what part played in the great warfare of life, was all of course sunk in the oblivion of his religious profession, where, as at the grave, a man laid down name and fame and past history and worldly goods, and took up a coarse garb and a name chosen from the roll of the saints, in sign that the world that had known him should know him no more.

Imagine a man between thirty and forty, with that round, full, evenly developed head, and those chiseled features, which one sees on ancient busts and coins no less than in the streets of modern Rome. The cheeks were sunken and sallow; the large, black, melancholy eyes had a wistful, anxious, penetrative expression, that spoke a stringent, earnest spirit, which, however deep might be the grave in which it lay buried, had not yet found repose. The long, thin, delicately formed hands were emaciated and bloodless; they clasped with a nervous eagerness a rosary and crucifix of ebony and silver, – the only mark of luxury that could be discerned in a costume unusually threadbare and squalid. The whole picture of the man, as he sat there, had it been painted and hung in a gallery, was such as must have stopped every person of a certain amount of sensibility before it with the conviction that behind that strong, melancholy, earnest figure and face lay one of those hidden histories of human passion in which the vivid life of mediæval Italy was so fertile.

He was listening to Elsie, as she kneeled, with that easy air of superiority which marks a practiced man of the world, yet with a grave attention which showed that her communication had awakened the deepest interest in his mind. Every few moments he moved slightly in his seat, and interrupted the flow of the narrative by an inquiry concisely put, in tones which, clear and low, had a solemn and severe distinctness, producing, in the still, dusky twilight of the church, an almost ghostly effect.

When the communication was over, he stepped out of the confessional and said to Elsie in parting, "My daughter, you have done well to take this in time. The devices of Satan in our corrupt times are numerous and artful, and they who keep the Lord's sheep must not sleep. Before many days I will call and examine the child; meanwhile I approve your course."

It was curious to see the awestruck, trembling manner in which old Elsie, generally so intrepid and commanding, stood before this man in his brown rough woolen gown with his corded waist; but she had an instinctive perception of the presence of the man of superior birth no less than a reverence for the man of religion.

After she had departed from the church, the Capuchin stood lost in thought; and to explain his revery, we must throw some further light on his history.

Il Padre Francesco, as his appearance and manner intimated, was in truth from one of the most distinguished families of Florence. He was one of those whom an ancient writer characterizes as "men of longing desire." Born with a nature of restless stringency that seemed to doom him never to know repose, excessive in all things, he had made early trial of ambition, of war, and of what the gallants of his time called love, – plunging into all the dissipated excesses of a most dissolute age, and outdoing in luxury and extravagance the foremost of his companions.

The wave of a great religious impulse – which in our times would have been called a revival – swept over the city of Florence, and bore him, with multitudes of others, to listen to the fervid preaching of the Dominican monk, Jerome Savonarola; and amid the crowd that trembled, wept, and beat their breasts under his awful denunciations, he, too, felt within himself a heavenly call, – the death of an old life, and the uprising of a new purpose.

The colder manners and more repressed habits of modern times can give no idea of the wild fervor of a religious revival among a people so passionate and susceptible to impressions as the Italians. It swept society like a spring torrent from the sides of the Apennines, bearing all before it. Houses were sacked with religious fervor by penitent owners, and licentious pictures and statuary and books, and all the thousand temptations and appliances of a luxurious age, were burned in the great public square. Artists convicted of impure and licentious designs threw their palettes and brushes into the expiatory flames, and retired to convents, till called forth by the voice of the preacher, and bid to turn their art into higher channels. Since the days of Saint Francis no such profound religious impulse had agitated the Italian community.

In our times a conversion is signalized by few outward changes, however deep the inner life; but the life of the Middle Ages was profoundly symbolical, and always required the help of material images in its expression.

The gay and dissolute young Lorenzo Sforza took leave of the world with rites of awful solemnity. He made his will and disposed of all his worldly property, and assembling his friends, bade them the farewell of a dying man. Arrayed as for the grave, he was laid in his coffin, and thus carried from his stately dwelling by the brethren of the Misericordia, who, in their ghostly costume, with mournful chants and lighted candles, bore him to the tomb of his ancestors, where the coffin was deposited in the vault, and its occupant passed the awful hours of the night in darkness and solitude. Thence he was carried, the next day, almost in a state of insensibility, to a neighboring convent of the severest order, where, for some weeks, he observed a penitential retreat of silence and prayer, neither seeing nor hearing any living being but his spiritual director.

The effect of all this on an ardent and sensitive temperament can scarcely be conceived; and it is not to be wondered at that the once gay and luxurious Lorenzo Sforza, when emerging from this tremendous discipline, was so wholly lost in the worn and weary Padre Francesco that it seemed as if in fact he had died and another had stepped into his place. The face was ploughed deep with haggard furrows, and the eyes were as those of a man who has seen the fearful secrets of another life. He voluntarily sought a post as far removed as possible from the scenes of his early days, so as more completely to destroy his identity with the past; and he devoted himself with enthusiasm to the task of awakening to a higher spiritual life the indolent, self-indulgent monks of his order, and the ignorant peasantry of the vicinity.

But he soon discovered, what every earnest soul learns who has been baptized into a sense of things invisible, how utterly powerless and inert any mortal man is to inspire others with his own insights and convictions. With bitter discouragement and chagrin, he saw that the spiritual man must forever lift the dead weight of all the indolence and indifference and animal sensuality that surround him, – that the curse of Cassandra is upon him, forever to burn and writhe under awful visions of truths which no one around him will regard. In early life the associate only of the cultivated and the refined, Father Francesco could not but experience at times an insupportable *ennui* in listening to the confessions of people who had never learned either to think or to feel with any degree of distinctness, and whom his most fervent exhortations could not lift above the most trivial interests of a mere animal life. He was weary of the childish quarrels and bickerings of the monks, of their puerility, of their selfishness and self-indulgence, of their hopeless vulgarity of mind, and utterly discouraged with their inextricable labyrinths of deception. A melancholy deep as the grave seized on him, and he redoubled his austerities, in the hope that by making life painful he might make it also short.

But the first time that the clear, sweet tones of Agnes rang in his ears at the confessional, and her words, so full of unconscious poetry and repressed genius, came like a strain of sweet music through the grate, he felt at his heart a thrill to which it had long been a stranger, and which seemed to lift the weary, aching load from off his soul, as if some invisible angel had borne it up on his wings.

In his worldly days he had known women as the gallants in Boccaccio's romances knew them, and among them one enchantress whose sorceries had kindled in his heart one of those fatal passions which burn out the whole of a man's nature, and leave it, like a sacked city, only a smouldering heap of ashes. Deepest, therefore, among his vows of renunciation had been those which divided him from all womankind. The gulf that parted him and them was in his mind deep as hell, and he thought of the sex only in the light of temptation and danger. For the first time in his life, an influence serene, natural, healthy, and sweet breathed over him from the mind of a woman, – an influence so heavenly and peaceful that he did not challenge or suspect it, but rather opened his worn heart insensibly to it, as one in a fetid chamber naturally breathes freer when the fresh air is admitted.

How charming it was to find his most spiritual exhortations seized upon with the eager comprehension of a nature innately poetic and ideal! Nay, it sometimes seemed to him as if the suggestions which he gave her dry and leafless she brought again to him in miraculous clusters of flowers, like the barren rod of Joseph, which broke into blossoms when he was betrothed to the spotless Mary; and yet, withal, she was so humbly unconscious, so absolutely ignorant of the beauty of all she said and thought, that she impressed him less as a mortal woman than as one of those divine miracles in feminine form of which he had heard in the legends of the saints.

Thenceforward his barren, discouraged life began to blossom with wayside flowers, – and he mistrusted not the miracle, because the flowers were all heavenly. The pious thought or holy admonition that he saw trodden under the swinish feet of the monks he gathered up again in hope, —*she* would understand it; and gradually all his thoughts became like carrier-doves, which, having once learned the way to a favorite haunt, are ever fluttering to return thither.

Such is the wonderful power of human sympathy, that the discovery even of the existence of a soul capable of understanding our inner life often operates as a perfect charm; every thought, and

feeling, and aspiration carries with it a new value, from the interwoven consciousness that attends it of the worth it would bear to that other mind; so that, while that person lives, our existence is doubled in value, even though oceans divide us.

The cloud of hopeless melancholy which had brooded over the mind of Father Francesco lifted and sailed away, he knew not why, he knew not when. A secret joyfulness and alacrity possessed his spirits; his prayers became more fervent and his praises more frequent. Until now, his meditations had been most frequently those of fear and wrath, – the awful majesty of God, the terrible punishment of sinners, which he conceived with all that haggard, dreadful sincerity of vigor which characterized the modern Etruscan phase of religion of which the "Inferno" of Dante was the exponent and the outcome. His preachings and his exhortations had dwelt on that lurid world seen by the severe Florentine, at whose threshold hope forever departs, and around whose eternal circles of living torture the shivering spirit wanders dismayed and blasted by terror.

He had been shocked and discouraged to find how utterly vain had been his most intense efforts to stem the course of sin by presenting these images of terror: how hard natures had listened to them with only a coarse and cruel appetite, which seemed to increase their hardness and brutality; and how timid ones had been withered by them, like flowers scorched by the blast of a furnace; how, in fact, as in the case of those cruel executions and bloody tortures then universal in the jurisprudence of Europe, these pictures of eternal torture seemed to exert a morbid demoralizing influence which hurried on the growth of iniquity.

But since his acquaintance with Agnes, without his knowing exactly why, thoughts of the Divine Love had floated into his soul, filling it with a golden cloud like that which of old rested over the mercy-seat in that sacred inner temple where the priest was admitted alone. He became more affable and tender, more tolerant to the erring, more fond of little children; would stop sometimes to lay his hand on the head of a child, or to raise up one who lay overthrown in the street. The song of little birds and the voices of animal life became to him full of tenderness; and his prayers by the sick and dying seemed to have a melting power, such as he had never known before. It was spring in his soul, – soft, Italian spring, – such as brings out the musky breath of the cyclamen, and the faint, tender perfume of the primrose, in every moist dell of the Apennines.

A year passed in this way, perhaps the best and happiest of his troubled life, – a year in which, insensibly to himself, the weekly interviews with Agnes at the confessional became the rallying points around which the whole of his life was formed, and she the unsuspected spring of his inner being.

It was his duty, he said to himself, to give more than usual time and thought to the working and polishing of this wondrous jewel which had so unexpectedly been intrusted to him for the adorning of his Master's crown; and so long as he conducted with the strictest circumspection of his office, what had he to fear in the way of so delightful a duty? He had never touched her hand; never had even the folds of her passing drapery brushed against his garments of mortification and renunciation; never, even in pastoral benediction, had he dared lay his hand on that beautiful head. It is true, he had not forbidden himself to raise his glance sometimes when he saw her coming in at the church door and gliding up the aisle with downcast eyes, and thoughts evidently so far above earth that she seemed, like one of Fra Angelico's angels, to be moving on a cloud, so encompassed with stillness and sanctity that he held his breath as she passed.

But in the confession of Dame Elsie that morning he had received a shock which threw his whole interior being into a passionate agitation which dismayed and astonished him.

The thought of Agnes, his spotless lamb, exposed to lawless and licentious pursuit, of whose nature and probabilities his past life gave him only too clear an idea, was of itself a very natural source of anxiety. But Elsie had unveiled to him her plans for her marriage, and consulted him on the propriety of placing Agnes immediately under the protection of the husband she had chosen for her; and it was this part of her communication which had awakened the severest internal recoil, and raised a tumult of passions which the priest vainly sought either to assuage or understand.

As soon as his morning duties were over, he repaired to his convent, sought his cell, and, prostrate on his face before the crucifix, began his internal reckoning with himself. The day passed in fasting and solitude.

It is now golden evening, and on the square, flat roof of the convent, which, high-perched on a crag, overlooks the bay, one might observe a dark figure slowly pacing backward and forward. It is Father Francesco; and as he walks up and down, one could see by his large, bright, dilated eye, by the vivid red spot on either sunken cheek, and by the nervous energy of his movements, that he is in the very height of some mental crisis, – in that state of placid *extase* in which the subject supposes himself perfectly calm, because every nerve is screwed to the highest point of tension and can vibrate no more.

What oceans had that day rolled over him and swept him, as one may see a little boat rocked on the capricious surges of the Mediterranean! Were, then, all his strivings and agonies in vain? Did he love this woman with any earthly love? Was he jealous of the thought of a future husband? Was it a tempting demon that said to him, "Lorenzo Sforza might have shielded this treasure from the profanation of lawless violence, from the brute grasp of an inappreciative peasant, but Father Francesco cannot"? There was a moment when his whole being vibrated with a perception of what a marriage bond might have been that was indeed a sacrament, and that bound together two pure and loyal souls who gave life and courage to each other in all holy purposes and heroic deeds; and he almost feared that he had cursed his vows, – those awful vows, at whose remembrance his inmost soul shivered through every nerve.

But after hours of prayer and struggle, and wave after wave of agonizing convulsion, he gained one of those high points in human possibility where souls can stand a little while at a time, and where all things seem so transfigured and pure that they fancy themselves thenceforward forever victorious over evil.

As he walks up and down in the gold-and-purple evening twilight, his mind seems to him calm as that glowing sea that reflects the purple shores of Ischia, and the quaint, fantastic grottoes and cliffs of Capri. All is golden and glowing; he sees all clear; he is delivered from his spiritual enemies; he treads them under his feet.

Yes, he says to himself, he loves Agnes, – loves her all-sacredly as her guardian angel does, who ever beholdeth the face of her Father in Heaven. Why, then, does he shrink from her marriage? Is it not evident? Has that tender soul, that poetic nature, that aspiring genius, anything in common with the vulgar coarse details of a peasant's life? Will not her beauty always draw the eye of the licentious, expose her artless innocence to solicitation which will annoy her and bring upon her head the inconsiderate jealousy of her husband? Think of Agnes made subject to the rude authority, to the stripes and correction, which men of the lower class, under the promptings of jealousy, do not scruple to inflict on their wives! What career did society, as then organized, present to such a nature, so perilously gifted in body and mind? He has the answer. The Church has opened a career to woman which all the world denies her.

He remembers the story of the dyer's daughter of Siena, the fair Saint Catharine. In his youth he had often visited the convent where one of the first artists of Italy has immortalized her conflicts and her victories, and knelt with his mother at the altar where she now communes with the faithful. He remembered how, by her sanctity, her humility, and her holy inspirations of soul, she had risen to the courts of princes, whither she had been sent as ambassadress to arrange for the interests of the Church; and then rose before his mind's eye the gorgeous picture of Pinturicchio, where, borne in celestial repose and purity amid all the powers and dignitaries of the Church, she is canonized as one of those that shall reign and intercede with Christ in heaven.

Was it wrong, therefore, in him, though severed from all womankind by a gulf of irrevocable vows, that he should feel a kind of jealous property in this gifted and beautiful creature? and though he might not, even in thought, dream of possessing her himself, was there sin in the vehement energy

with which his whole nature rose up in him to say that no other man should, – that she should be the bride of Heaven alone?

Certainly, if there were, it lurked far out of sight, and the priest had a case that might have satisfied a conscience even more fastidious; and he felt a sort of triumph in the results of his mental scrutiny.

Yes, she should ascend from glory to glory, – but his should be the hand that should lead her upward. He would lead her within the consecrated grate, – he would pronounce the awful words that should make it sacrilege for all other men to approach her; and yet through life he should be the guardian and director of her soul, the one being to whom she should render an obedience as unlimited as that which belongs to Christ alone.

Such were the thoughts of this victorious hour, which, alas! were destined to fade as those purple skies and golden fires gradually went out, leaving, in place of their light and glory, only the lurid glow of Vesuvius.

CHAPTER VI
THE WALK TO THE CONVENT

Elsie returned from the confessional a little after sunrise, much relieved and satisfied. Padre Francesco had shown such a deep interest in her narrative that she was highly gratified. Then he had given her advice which exactly accorded with her own views; and such advice is always regarded as an eminent proof of sagacity in the giver.

On the point of the marriage he had recommended delay, – a course quite in accordance with Elsie's desire, who, curiously enough, ever since her treaty of marriage with Antonio had been commenced, had cherished the most whimsical, jealous dislike of him, as if he were about to get away her grandchild from her; and this rose at times so high that she could scarcely speak peaceably to him, – a course of things which caused Antonio to open wide his great soft ox-eyes, and wonder at the ways of womankind; but he waited the event in philosophic tranquillity.

The morning sunbeams were shooting many a golden shaft among the orange-trees when Elsie returned and found Agnes yet kneeling at her prayers.

"Now, my little heart," said the old woman, when their morning meal was done, "I am going to give you a holiday to-day. I will go with you to the Convent, and you shall spend the day with the sisters, and so carry Saint Agnes her ring."

"Oh, thank you, grandmamma! how good you are! May I stop a little on the way, and pick some cyclamen and myrtles and daisies for her shrine?"

"Just as you like, child; but if you are going to do that, we must be off soon, for I must be at my stand betimes to sell oranges: I had them all picked this morning while my little darling was asleep."

"You always do everything, grandmamma, and leave me nothing to do: it is not fair. But, grandmamma, if we are going to get flowers by the way, let us follow down the stream, through the gorge, out upon the sea-beach, and so walk along the sands, and go by the back path up the rocks to the Convent: that walk is so shady and lovely at this time in the morning, and it is so fresh along by the seaside!"

"As you please, dearie; but first fill a little basket with our best oranges for the sisters."

"Trust me for that!" And the girl ran eagerly to the house, and drew from her treasures a little white wicker basket, which she proceeded to line curiously with orange-leaves, sticking sprays of blossoms in a wreath round the border.

"Now for some of our best blood-oranges!" she said; "old Jocunda says they put her in mind of pomegranates. And here are some of these little ones, – see here, grandmamma!" she exclaimed as she turned and held up a branch just broken, where five small golden balls grew together with a pearly spray of white buds just beyond them.

The exercise of springing up for the branch had sent a vivid glow into her clear brown cheek, and her eyes were dilated with excitement and pleasure; and as she stood joyously holding the branch, while the flickering shadows fell on her beautiful face, she seemed more like a painter's dream than a reality.

Her grandmother stood a moment admiring her.

"She's too good and too pretty for Antonio or any other man: she ought to be kept to look at," she said to herself. "If I could keep her always, no man should have her; but death will come, and youth and beauty go, and so somebody must care for her."

When the basket was filled and trimmed, Agnes took it on her arm. Elsie raised and poised on her head the great square basket that contained her merchandise, and began walking erect and straight down the narrow rocky stairs that led into the gorge, holding her distaff with its white flax in her hands, and stepping as easily as if she bore no burden.

Agnes followed her with light, irregular movements, glancing aside from time to time, as a tuft of flowers or a feathery spray of leaves attracted her fancy. In a few moments her hands were too full, and her woolen apron of many-colored stripes was raised over one arm to hold her treasures, while a hymn to Saint Agnes, which she constantly murmured to herself, came in little ripples of sound, now from behind a rock, and now out of a tuft of bushes, to show where the wanderer was hid. The song, like many Italian ones, would be nothing in English, – only a musical repetition of sweet words to a very simple and childlike idea, the *bella*, *bella*, *bella* ringing out in every verse with a tender joyousness that seemed in harmony with the waving ferns and pendent flowers and long ivy-wreaths from among which its notes issued. "Beautiful and sweet Agnes," it said, in a thousand tender repetitions, "make me like thy little white lamb! Beautiful Agnes, take me to the green fields where Christ's lambs are feeding! Sweeter than the rose, fairer than the lily, take me where thou art!"

At the bottom of the ravine a little stream tinkles its way among stones so mossy in their deep, cool shadow as to appear all verdure; for seldom the light of the sun can reach the darkness where they lie. A little bridge, hewn from solid rock, throws across the shrunken stream an arch much wider than its waters seem to demand; for in spring and autumn, when the torrents wash down from the mountains, its volume is often suddenly increased.

This bridge was so entirely and evenly grown over with short thick moss that it might seem cut of some strange kind of living green velvet, and here and there it was quaintly embroidered with small blossoming tufts of white alyssum, or feathers of ferns and maiden's-hair which shook and trembled to every breeze. Nothing could be lovelier than this mossy bridge, when some stray sunbeam, slanting up the gorge, took a fancy to light it up with golden hues, and give transparent greenness to the tremulous thin leaves that waved upon it.

On this spot Elsie paused a moment, and called back after Agnes, who had disappeared into one of those deep grottoes with which the sides of the gorge are perforated, and which are almost entirely veiled by the pendent ivy-wreaths.

"Agnes! Agnes! wild girl! come quick!"

Only the sound of "*Bella, bella Agnella*" came out of the ivy-leaves to answer her; but it sounded so happy and innocent that Elsie could not forbear a smile, and in a moment Agnes came springing down with a quantity of the feathery lycopodium in her hands, which grows nowhere so well as in moist and dripping places.

Out of her apron were hanging festoons of golden broom, crimson gladiolus, and long, trailing sprays of ivy; while she held aloft in triumph a handful of the most superb cyclamen, whose rosy crowns rise so beautifully above their dark quaint leaves in moist and shady places.

"See, see, grandmother, what an offering I have! Saint Agnes will be pleased with me to-day; for I believe in her heart she loves flowers better than gems."

"Well, well, wild one, – time flies, we must hurry." And crossing the bridge quickly, the grandmother struck into a mossy footpath that led them, after some walking, under the old Roman bridge at the gateway of Sorrento. Two hundred feet above their heads rose the mighty arches, enameled with moss and feathered with ferns all the way; and below this bridge the gorge grew somewhat wider, its sides gradually receding and leaving a beautiful flat tract of land, which was laid out as an orange-orchard. The golden fruit was shut in by rocky walls on either side which here formed a perfect hotbed, and no oranges were earlier or finer.

Through this beautiful orchard the two at length emerged from the gorge upon the sea-sands, where lay the blue Mediterranean swathed in bands of morning mist, its many-colored waters shimmering with a thousand reflected lights, and old Capri panting through sultry blue mists, and Vesuvius with his cloud-spotted sides and smoke-wreathed top burst into view. At a little distance a boat-load of bronzed fishermen had just drawn in a net, from which they were throwing out a quantity of sardines, which flapped and fluttered in the sunshine like scales of silver. The wind blowing freshly

bore thousands of little purple waves to break one after another at the foamy line which lay on the sand.

Agnes ran gayly along the beach with her flowers and vines fluttering from her gay striped apron, and her cheeks flushed with exercise and pleasure, – sometimes stopping and turning with animation to her grandmother to point out the various floral treasures that enameled every crevice and rift of the steep wall of rock which rose perpendicularly above their heads in that whole line of the shore which is crowned with the old city of Sorrento: and surely never did rocky wall show to the open sea a face more picturesque and flowery. The deep red cliff was hollowed here and there into fanciful grottoes, draped with every varied hue and form of vegetable beauty. Here a crevice high in air was all abloom with purple gillyflower, and depending in festoons above it the golden blossoms of the broom; here a cleft seemed to be a nestling-place for a colony of gladiolus, with its crimson flowers and blade-like leaves; here the silver-frosted foliage of the miller-geranium, or of the wormwood, toned down the extravagant brightness of other blooms by its cooler tints. In some places it seemed as if a sort of floral cascade were tumbling confusedly over the rocks, mingling all hues and all forms in a tangled mass of beauty.

"Well, well," said old Elsie, as Agnes pointed to some superb gillyflowers which grew nearly half-way up the precipice, "is the child possessed? You have all the gorge in your apron already. Stop looking, and let us hurry on."

After a half-hour's walk, they came to a winding staircase cut in the rock, which led them a zigzag course up through galleries and grottoes looking out through curious windows and loop-holes upon the sea, till finally they emerged at the old sculptured portal of a shady garden which was surrounded by the cloistered arcades of the Convent of Saint Agnes.

The Convent of Saint Agnes was one of those monuments in which the piety of the Middle Ages delighted to commemorate the triumphs of the new Christianity over the old Heathenism.

The balmy climate and paradisiacal charms of Sorrento and the adjacent shores of Naples had made them favorite resorts during the latter period of the Roman Empire, – a period when the whole civilized world seemed to human view about to be dissolved in the corruption of universal sensuality. The shores of Baiæ were witnesses of the orgies and cruelties of Nero and a court made in his likeness, and the palpitating loveliness of Capri became the hotbed of the unnatural vices of Tiberius. The whole of Southern Italy was sunk in a debasement of animalism and ferocity which seemed irrecoverable, and would have been so, had it not been for the handful of salt which a Galilean peasant had about that time cast into the putrid, fermenting mass of human society.

We must not wonder at the zeal which caused the artistic Italian nature to love to celebrate the passing away of an era of unnatural vice and demoniac cruelty by visible images of the purity, the tenderness, the universal benevolence which Jesus had brought into the world.

Sometime about the middle of the thirteenth century, it had been a favorite enterprise of a princess of a royal family in Naples to erect a convent to Saint Agnes, the guardian of female purity, out of the wrecks and remains of an ancient temple of Venus, whose white pillars and graceful acanthus-leaves once crowned a portion of the precipice on which the town was built, and were reflected from the glassy blue of the sea at its feet. It was said that this princess was the first lady abbess. Be that as it may, it proved to be a favorite retreat for many ladies of rank and religious aspiration, whom ill-fortune in some of its varying forms led to seek its quiet shades, and it was well and richly endowed by its royal patrons.

It was built after the manner of conventual buildings generally, – in a hollow square, with a cloistered walk around the inside looking upon a garden.

The portal at which Agnes and her grandmother knocked, after ascending the winding staircase cut in the precipice, opened through an arched passage into this garden.

As the ponderous door swung open, it was pleasant to hear the lulling sound of a fountain, which came forth with a gentle patter, like that of soft summer rain, and to see the waving of rose-

bushes and golden jessamines, and smell the perfumes of orange-blossoms mingling with those of a thousand other flowers.

The door was opened by an odd-looking portress. She might be seventy-five or eighty; her cheeks were of the color of very yellow parchment drawn in dry wrinkles; her eyes were those large, dark, lustrous ones so common in her country, but seemed, in the general decay and shrinking of every other part of her face, to have acquired a wild, unnatural appearance; while the falling away of her teeth left nothing to impede the meeting of her hooked nose with her chin. Add to this, she was humpbacked, and twisted in her figure; and one needs all the force of her very good-natured, kindly smile to redeem the image of poor old Jocunda from association with that of some Thracian witch, and cause one to see in her the appropriate portress of a Christian institution.

Nevertheless, Agnes fell upon her neck and imprinted a very fervent kiss upon what was left of her withered cheek, and was repaid by a shower of those epithets of endearment which in the language of Italy fly thick and fast as the petals of the orange blossom from her groves.

"Well, well," said old Elsie, "I'm going to leave her here to-day. You've no objections, I suppose?"

"Bless the sweet lamb, no! She belongs here of good right. I believe blessed Saint Agnes has adopted her; for I've seen her smile, plain as could be, when the little one brought her flowers."

"Well, Agnes," said the old woman, "I shall come for you after the Ave Maria." Saying which, she lifted her basket and departed.

The garden where the two were left was one of the most peaceful retreats that the imagination of a poet could create.

Around it ran on all sides the Byzantine arches of a cloistered walk, which, according to the quaint, rich fashion of that style, had been painted with vermilion, blue, and gold. The vaulted roof was spangled with gold stars on a blue ground, and along the sides was a series of fresco pictures representing the various scenes in the life of Saint Agnes; and as the foundress of the Convent was royal in her means, there was no lack either of gold or gems or of gorgeous painting.

Full justice was done in the first picture to the princely wealth and estate of the fair Agnes, who was represented as a pure-looking, pensive child, standing in a thoughtful attitude, with long ripples of golden hair flowing down over a simple white tunic, and her small hands clasping a cross on her bosom, while, kneeling at her feet, obsequious slaves and tire-women were offering the richest gems and the most gorgeous robes to her serious and abstracted gaze.

In another, she was represented as walking modestly to school, and winning the admiration of the son of the Roman Prætor, who fell sick – so says the legend – for the love of her.

Then there was the demand of her hand in marriage by the princely father of the young man, and her calm rejection of the gorgeous gifts and splendid gems which he had brought to purchase her consent.

Then followed in order her accusation before the tribunals as a Christian, her trial, and the various scenes of her martyrdom.

Although the drawing of the figures and the treatment of the subjects had the quaint stiffness of the thirteenth century, their general effect, as seen from the shady bowers of the garden, was of a solemn brightness, a strange and fanciful richness, which was poetical and impressive.

In the centre of the garden was a fountain of white marble, which evidently was the wreck of something that had belonged to the old Greek temple. The statue of a nymph sat on a green mossy pedestal in the midst of a sculptured basin, and from a partially reversed urn on which she was leaning, a clear stream of water dashed down from one mossy fragment to another, till it lost itself in the placid pool.

The figure and face of this nymph, in their classic finish of outline, formed a striking contrast to the drawing of the Byzantine paintings within the cloisters, and their juxtaposition in the same enclosure seemed a presentation of the spirit of a past and present era: the past so graceful in line,

so perfect and airy in conception, so utterly without spiritual aspiration or life; the present limited in artistic power, but so earnest, so intense, seeming to struggle and burn, amid its stiff and restricted boundaries, for the expression of some diviner phase of humanity.

Nevertheless, the nymph of the fountain, different in style and execution as it was, was so fair a creature, that it was thought best, after the spirit of those days, to purge her from all heathen and improper histories by baptizing her in the waters of her own fountain, and bestowing on her the name of the saint to whose convent she was devoted. The simple sisterhood, little conversant in nice points of antiquity, regarded her as Saint Agnes dispensing the waters of purity to her convent; and marvelous and sacred properties were ascribed to the water, when taken fasting with a sufficient number of prayers and other religious exercises. All around the neighborhood of this fountain the ground was one bed of blue and white violets, whose fragrance filled the air, and which were deemed by the nuns to have come up there in especial token of the favor with which Saint Agnes regarded the conversion of this heathen relic to pious and Christian uses.

This nymph had been an especial favorite of the childhood of Agnes, and she had always had a pleasure which she could not exactly account for in gazing upon it. It is seldom that one sees in the antique conception of the immortals any trace of human feeling. Passionless perfection and repose seem to be their uniform character. But now and then from the ruins of Southern Italy fragments have been dug, not only pure in outline, but invested with a strange pathetic charm, as if the calm, inviolable circle of divinity had been touched by some sorrowing sense of that unexplained anguish with which the whole lower creation groans. One sees this mystery of expression in the face of that strange and beautiful Psyche which still enchants the Museum of Naples. Something of this charm of mournful pathos lingered on the beautiful features of this nymph, – an expression so delicate and shadowy that it seemed to address itself only to finer natures. It was as if all the silent, patient woe and discouragement of a dumb antiquity had been congealed into this memorial. Agnes was often conscious, when a child, of being saddened by it, and yet drawn towards it with a mysterious attraction.

About this fountain, under the shadow of bending rose trees and yellow jessamines, was a circle of garden seats, adopted also from the ruins of the past. Here a graceful Corinthian capital, with every white acanthus-leaf perfect, stood in a mat of acanthus-leaves of Nature's own making, glossy green and sharply cut; and there was a long portion of a frieze sculptured with graceful dancing figures; and in another place a fragment of a fluted column, with lycopodium and colosseum vine hanging from its fissures in graceful draping. On these seats Agnes had dreamed away many a tranquil hour, making garlands of violets, and listening to the marvelous legends of old Jocunda.

In order to understand anything of the true idea of conventual life in those days, we must consider that books were as yet unknown, except as literary rarities, and reading and writing were among the rare accomplishments of the higher classes; and that Italy, from the time that the great Roman Empire fell and broke into a thousand shivers, had been subject to a continual series of conflicts and struggles, which took from life all security. Norman, Dane, Sicilian, Spaniard, Frenchman, and German mingled and struggled, now up and now down; and every struggle was attended by the little ceremonies of sacking towns, burning villages, and routing out entire populations to utter misery and wretchedness. During these tumultuous ages, those buildings consecrated by a religion recognized alike by all parties afforded to misfortune the only inviolable asylum, and to feeble and discouraged spirits the only home safe from the prospect of reverses.

If the destiny of woman is a problem that calls for grave attention even in our enlightened times, and if she is too often a sufferer from the inevitable movements of society, what must have been her position and needs in those ruder ages, unless the genius of Christianity had opened refuges for her weakness, made inviolable by the awful sanctions of religion?

What could they do, all these girls and women together, with the twenty-four long hours of every day, without reading or writing, and without the care of children? Enough; with their multiplied diurnal prayer periods, with each its chants and ritual of observances, – with the preparation for meals,

and the clearing away thereafter, – with the care of the chapel, shrine, sacred gifts, drapery, and ornaments, – with embroidering altar-cloths and making sacred tapers, – with preparing conserves of rose leaves and curious spiceries, – with mixing drugs for the sick, – with all those mutual offices and services to each other which their relations in one family gave rise to, – and with divers feminine gossipries and harmless chatterings and cooings, one can conceive that these dove-cots of the Church presented often some of the most tranquil scenes of those convulsive and disturbed periods.

Human nature probably had its varieties there as otherwhere. There were there the domineering and the weak, the ignorant and the vulgar, and the patrician and the princess, and though professedly all brought on the footing of sisterly equality, we are not to suppose any Utopian degree of perfection among them. The way of pure spirituality was probably, in the convent as well as out, that strait and narrow one which there be few to find. There, as elsewhere, the devotee who sought to progress faster toward heaven than suited the paces of her fellow-travelers was reckoned a troublesome enthusiast, till she got far enough in advance to be worshiped as a saint.

Sister Theresa, the abbess of this convent, was the youngest daughter in a princely Neapolitan family, who from her cradle had been destined to the cloister, in order that her brother and sister might inherit more splendid fortunes and form more splendid connections. She had been sent to this place too early to have much recollection of any other mode of life; and when the time came to take the irrevocable step, she renounced with composure a world she had never known.

Her brother had endowed her with a *livre des heures*, illuminated with all the wealth of blue and gold and divers colors which the art of those times afforded, – a work executed by a pupil of the celebrated Fra Angelico; and the possession of this treasure was regarded by her as a far richer inheritance than that princely state of which she knew nothing. Her neat little cell had a window that looked down on the sea, – on Capri, with its fantastic grottoes, – on Vesuvius, with its weird daily and nightly changes. The light that came in from the joint reflection of sea and sky gave a golden and picturesque coloring to the simple and bare furniture, and in sunny weather she often sat there, just as a lizard lies upon a wall, with the simple, warm, delightful sense of living and being amid scenes of so much beauty. Of the life that people lived in the outer world, the struggle, the hope, the fear, the vivid joy, the bitter sorrow, Sister Theresa knew nothing. She could form no judgment and give no advice founded on any such experience.

The only life she knew was a certain ideal one, drawn from the legends of the saints; and her piety was a calm, pure enthusiasm which had never been disturbed by a temptation or a struggle. Her rule in the Convent was even and serene; but those who came to her flock from the real world, from the trials and temptations of a real experience, were always enigmas to her, and she could scarcely comprehend or aid them.

In fact, since in the cloister, as everywhere else, character will find its level, it was old Jocunda who was the real governess of the Convent. Jocunda was originally a peasant woman, whose husband had been drafted to some of the wars of his betters, and she had followed his fortunes in the camp. In the sack of a fortress, she lost her husband and four sons, all the children she had, and herself received an injury which distorted her form, and so she took refuge in the Convent. Here her energy and *savoir-faire* rendered her indispensable in every department. She made the bargains, bought the provisions (being allowed to sally forth for these purposes), and formed the medium by which the timid, abstract, defenseless nuns accomplished those material relations with the world with which the utmost saintliness cannot afford to dispense. Besides and above all this, Jocunda's wide experience and endless capabilities of narrative made her an invaluable resource for enlivening any dull hours that might be upon the hands of the sisterhood; and all these recommendations, together with a strong mother-wit and native sense, soon made her so much the leading spirit in the Convent that Mother Theresa herself might be said to be under her dominion.

"So, so," she said to Agnes, when she had closed the gate after Elsie, – "you never come empty-handed. What lovely oranges! – worth double any that one can buy of anybody else but your grandmother."

"Yes, and these flowers I brought to dress the altar."

"Ah, yes! Saint Agnes has given you a particular grace for that," said Jocunda.

"And I have brought a ring for her treasury," said Agnes, taking out the gift of the Cavalier.

"Holy Mother! here is something, to be sure!" said Jocunda, catching it eagerly. "Why, Agnes, this is a diamond, – and as pretty a one as ever I saw. How it shines!" she added, holding it up. "That's a prince's present. How did you get it?"

"I want to tell our mother about it," said Agnes.

"You do?" said Jocunda. "You'd better tell me. I know fifty times as much about such things as she."

"Dear Jocunda, I will tell you, too; but I love Mother Theresa, and I ought to give it to her first."

"As you please, then," said Jocunda. "Well, put your flowers here by the fountain, where the spray will keep them cool, and we will go to her."

CHAPTER VII
THE DAY AT THE CONVENT

The Mother Theresa sat in a sort of withdrawing-room, the roof of which rose in arches, starred with blue and gold like that of the cloister, and the sides were frescoed with scenes from the life of the Virgin. Over every door, and in convenient places between the paintings, texts of Holy Writ were illuminated in blue and scarlet and gold, with a richness and fancifulness of outline, as if every sacred letter had blossomed into a mystical flower. The Abbess herself, with two of her nuns, was busily embroidering a new altar-cloth, with a lavish profusion of adornment; and, from time to time, their voices rose in the musical tones of an ancient Latin hymn. The words were full of that quaint and mystical pietism with which the fashion of the times clothed the expression of devotional feeling: —

"Jesu, corona virginum,
Quem mater illa concepit,
Quæ sola virgo parturit,
Hæc vota clemens accipe.

"Qui pascis inter lilia
Septus choreis virginum,
Sponsus decoris gloria
Sponsisque reddens præmia.

"Quocunque pergis, virgines
Sequuntur atque laudibus
Post te canentes cursitant
Hymnosque dulces personant."[1]

This little canticle was, in truth, very different from the hymns to Venus which used to resound in the temple which the convent had displaced. The voices which sung were of a deep, plaintive contralto, much resembling the richness of a tenor, and as they moved in modulated waves of chanting sound, the effect was soothing and dreamy. Agnes stopped at the door to listen.

"Stop, dear Jocunda," she said to the old woman, who was about to push her way abruptly into the room, "wait till it is over."

Jocunda, who was quite matter-of-fact in her ideas of religion, made a little movement of impatience, but was recalled to herself by observing the devout absorption with which Agnes, with clasped hands and downcast head, was mentally joining in the hymn with a solemn brightness in her young face.

"If she hasn't got a vocation, nobody ever had one," said Jocunda, mentally. "Deary me, I wish I had more of one myself!"

When the strain died away, and was succeeded by a conversation on the respective merits of two kinds of gold embroidering thread, Agnes and Jocunda entered the apartment. Agnes went forward and kissed the hand of the Mother reverentially.

Sister Theresa we have before described as tall, pale, and sad-eyed, – a moonlight style of person, wanting in all those elements of warm color and physical solidity which give the impression

[1] "Jesus, crown of virgin spirits,Whom a virgin mother bore,Graciously accept our praisesWhile thy footsteps we adore."Thee among the lilies feedingChoirs of virgins walk beside,Bridegroom crowned with glorious beautyGiving beauty to thy bride."Where thou goest still they followSinging, singing as they move,All those souls forever virginWedded only to thy love."

of a real vital human existence. The strongest affection she had ever known had been that which had been excited by the childish beauty and graces of Agnes, and she folded her in her arms and kissed her forehead with a warmth that had in it the semblance of maternity.

"Grandmamma has given me a day to spend with you, dear mother," said Agnes.

"Welcome, dear little child!" said Mother Theresa. "Your spiritual home always stands open to you."

"I have something to speak to you of in particular, my mother," said Agnes, blushing deeply.

"Indeed!" said the Mother Theresa, a slight movement of curiosity arising in her mind as she signed to the two nuns to leave the apartment.

"My mother," said Agnes, "yesterday evening, as grandmamma and I were sitting at the gate, selling oranges, a young cavalier came up and bought oranges of me, and he kissed my forehead and asked me to pray for him, and gave me this ring for the shrine of Saint Agnes."

"Kissed your forehead!" said Jocunda, "here's a pretty go! it isn't like you, Agnes, to let him."

"He did it before I knew," said Agnes. "Grandmamma reproved him, and then he seemed to repent, and gave this ring for the shrine of Saint Agnes."

"And a pretty one it is, too," said Jocunda. "We haven't a prettier in all our treasury. Not even the great emerald the Queen gave is better in its way than this."

"And he asked you to pray for him?" said Mother Theresa.

"Yes, mother dear; he looked right into my eyes and made me look into his, and made me promise; and I knew that holy virgins never refused their prayers to any one that asked, and so I followed their example."

"I'll warrant me he was only mocking at you for a poor little fool," said Jocunda; "the gallants of our day don't believe much in prayers."

"Perhaps so, Jocunda," said Agnes, gravely; "but if that be the case, he needs prayers all the more."

"Yes," said Mother Theresa. "Remember the story of the blessed Saint Dorothea, – how a wicked young nobleman mocked at her, when she was going to execution, and said, 'Dorothea, Dorothea, I will believe, when you shall send me down some of the fruits and flowers of Paradise;' and she, full of faith, said, 'To-day I will send them;' and, wonderful to tell, that very day, at evening, an angel came to the young man with a basket of citrons and roses, and said, 'Dorothea sends thee these, wherefore believe.' See what grace a pure maiden can bring to a thoughtless young man, – for this young man was converted and became a champion of the faith."

"That was in the old times," said Jocunda, skeptically. "I don't believe setting the lamb to pray for the wolf will do much in our day. Prithee, child, what manner of man was this gallant?"

"He was beautiful as an angel," said Agnes, "only it was not a good beauty. He looked proud and sad, both, – like one who is not at ease in his heart. Indeed, I feel very sorry for him; his eyes made a kind of trouble in my mind that reminds me to pray for him often."

"And I will join my prayers to yours, dear daughter," said the Mother Theresa; "I long to have you with us, that we may pray together every day; say, do you think your grandmamma will spare you to us wholly before long?"

"Grandmamma will not hear of it yet," said Agnes; "and she loves me so, it would break her heart, if I should leave her, and she could not be happy here; but, mother, you have told me we could carry an altar always in our hearts, and adore in secret. When it is God's will I should come to you, He will incline her heart."

"Between you and me, little one," said Jocunda, "I think there will soon be a third person who will have something to say in the case."

"Whom do you mean?" said Agnes.

"A husband," said Jocunda; "I suppose your grandmother has one picked out for you. You are neither humpbacked nor cross-eyed, that you shouldn't have one as well as other girls."

"I don't want one, Jocunda; and I have promised to Saint Agnes to come here, if she will only get grandmother to consent."

"Bless you, my daughter!" said Mother Theresa; "only persevere and the way will be opened."

"Well, well," said Jocunda, "we'll see. Come, little one, if you wouldn't have your flowers wilt, we must go back and look after them."

Reverently kissing the hand of the Abbess, Agnes withdrew with her old friend, and crossed again to the garden to attend to her flowers.

"Well now, childie," said Jocunda, "you can sit here and weave your garlands, while I go and look after the conserves of raisins and citrons that Sister Cattarina is making. She is stupid at anything but her prayers, is Cattarina. Our Lady be gracious to me! I think I got my vocation from Saint Martha, and if it wasn't for me, I don't know what would become of things in the Convent. Why, since I came here, our conserves, done up in fig-leaf packages, have had quite a run at Court, and our gracious Queen herself was good enough to send an order for a hundred of them last week. I could have laughed to see how puzzled the Mother Theresa looked; much she knows about conserves! I suppose she thinks Gabriel brings them straight down from Paradise, done up in leaves of the tree of life. Old Jocunda knows what goes to their making up; she's good for something, if she is old and twisted; many a scrubby old olive bears fat berries," said the old portress, chuckling.

"Oh, dear Jocunda," said Agnes, "why must you go this minute? I want to talk with you about so many things!"

"Bless the sweet child! it does want its old Jocunda, does it?" said the old woman, in the tone with which one caresses a baby. "Well, well, it should then! Just wait a minute, till I go and see that our holy Saint Cattarina hasn't fallen a-praying over the conserving-pan. I'll be back in a moment."

So saying, she hobbled off briskly, and Agnes, sitting down on the fragment sculptured with dancing nymphs, began abstractedly pulling her flowers towards her, shaking from them the dew of the fountain.

Unconsciously to herself, as she sat there, her head drooped into the attitude of the marble nymph, and her sweet features assumed the same expression of plaintive and dreamy thoughtfulness; her heavy dark lashes lay on her pure waxen cheeks like the dark fringe of some tropical flower. Her form, in its drooping outlines, scarcely yet showed the full development of womanhood, which after-years might unfold into the ripe fullness of her country-women. Her whole attitude and manner were those of an exquisitely sensitive and highly organized being, just struggling into the life of some mysterious new inner birth, – into the sense of powers of feeling and being hitherto unknown even to herself.

"Ah," she softly sighed to herself, "how little I am! how little I can do! Could I convert one soul! Ah, holy Dorothea, send down the roses of heaven into his soul, that he also may believe!"

"Well, my little beauty, you have not finished even one garland," said the voice of old Jocunda, bustling up behind her. "Praise to Saint Martha, the conserves are doing well, and so I catch a minute for my little heart."

So saying, she sat down with her spindle and flax by Agnes, for an afternoon gossip.

"Dear Jocunda, I have heard you tell stories about spirits that haunt lonesome places. Did you ever hear about any in the gorge?"

"Why, bless the child, yes, – spirits are always pacing up and down in lonely places. Father Anselmo told me that; and he had seen a priest once that had seen that in the Holy Scriptures themselves, – so it must be true."

"Well, did you ever hear of their making the most beautiful music?"

"Haven't I?" said Jocunda, – "to be sure I have, – singing enough to draw the very heart out of your body, – it's an old trick they have. Why, I want to know if you never heard about the King of Amalfi's son coming home from fighting for the Holy Sepulchre? Why, there's rocks not far out from this very town where the Sirens live; and if the King's son hadn't had a holy bishop on board,

who slept every night with a piece of the true cross under his pillow, the green ladies would have sung him straight into perdition. They are very fair-spoken at first, and sing so that a man gets perfectly drunk with their music, and longs to fly to them; but they suck him down at last under water, and strangle him, and that's the end of him."

"You never told me about this before, Jocunda."

"Haven't I, child? Well, I will now. You see, this good bishop, he dreamed three times that they would sail past these rocks, and he was told to give all the sailors holy wax from an altar-candle to stop their ears, so that they shouldn't hear the music. Well, the King's son said he wanted to hear the music, so he wouldn't have his ears stopped; but he told 'em to tie him to the mast, so that he could hear it, but not to mind a word he said, if he begged 'em ever so hard to untie him.

"Well, you see they did it; and the old bishop, he had his ears sealed up tight, and so did all the men; but the young man stood tied to the mast, and when they sailed past he was like a demented creature. He called out that it was his lady who was singing, and he wanted to go to her, – and his mother, who they all knew was a blessed saint in paradise years before; and he commanded them to untie him, and pulled and strained on his cords to get free; but they only tied him the tighter, and so they got him past, – for, thanks to the holy wax, the sailors never heard a word, and so they kept their senses. So they all got safe home; but the young prince was so sick and pining that he had to be exorcised and prayed for seven times seven days before they could get the music out of his head."

"Why," said Agnes, "do those Sirens sing there yet?"

"Well, that was a hundred years ago. They say the old bishop, he prayed 'em down; for he went out a little after on purpose, and gave 'em a precious lot of holy water; most likely he got 'em pretty well under, though my husband's brother says he's heard 'em singing in a small way, like frogs in springtime; but he gave 'em a pretty wide berth. You see, these spirits are what's left of old heathen times, when, Lord bless us! the earth was just as full of 'em as a bit of old cheese is of mites. Now a Christian body, if they take reasonable care, can walk quit of 'em; and if they have any haunts in lonesome and doleful places, if one puts up a cross or a shrine, they know they have to go."

"I am thinking," said Agnes, "it would be a blessed work to put up some shrines to Saint Agnes and our good Lord in the gorge, and I'll promise to keep the lamps burning and the flowers in order."

"Bless the child!" said Jocunda, "that is a pious and Christian thought."

"I have an uncle in Florence who is a father in the holy convent of San Marco, who paints and works in stone, – not for money, but for the glory of God; and when he comes this way I will speak to him about it," said Agnes. "About this time in the spring he always visits us."

"That's mighty well thought of," said Jocunda. "And now, tell me, little lamb, have you any idea who this grand cavalier may be that gave you the ring?"

"No," said Agnes, pausing a moment over the garland of flowers she was weaving, – "only Giulietta told me that he was brother to the King. Giulietta said everybody knew him."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Jocunda. "Giulietta always thinks she knows more than she does."

"Whatever he may be, his worldly state is nothing to me," said Agnes. "I know him only in my prayers."

"Ay, ay," muttered the old woman to herself, looking obliquely out of the corner of her eye at the girl, who was busily sorting her flowers; "perhaps he will be seeking some other acquaintance."

"You haven't seen him since?" said Jocunda.

"Seen him? Why, dear Jocunda, it was only last evening" —

"True enough. Well, child, don't think too much of him. Men are dreadful creatures, – in these times especially; they snap up a pretty girl as a fox does a chicken, and no questions asked."

"I don't think he looked wicked, Jocunda; he had a proud, sorrowful look. I don't know what could make a rich, handsome young man sorrowful; but I feel in my heart that he is not happy. Mother Theresa says that those who can do nothing but pray may convert princes without knowing it."

"Maybe it is so," said Jocunda, in the same tone in which thrifty professors of religion often assent to the same sort of truths in our days. "I've seen a good deal of that sort of cattle in my day; and one would think, by their actions, that praying souls must be scarce where they came from."

Agnes abstractedly stooped and began plucking handfuls of lycopodium, which was growing green and feathery on one side of the marble frieze on which she was sitting; in so doing, a fragment of white marble, which had been overgrown in the luxuriant green, appeared to view. It was that frequent object in the Italian soil, – a portion of an old Roman tombstone. Agnes bent over, intent on the mystic "*Dis Manibus*," in old Roman letters.

"Lord bless the child! I've seen thousands of them," said Jocunda; "it's some old heathen's grave, that's been in hell these hundred years."

"In hell?" said Agnes, with a distressful accent.

"Of course," said Jocunda. "Where should they be? Serves 'em right, too; they were a vile old set."

"Oh, Jocunda, it's dreadful to think of, that they should have been in hell all this time."

"And no nearer the end than when they began," said Jocunda.

Agnes gave a shivering sigh, and, looking up into the golden sky that was pouring such floods of splendor through the orange trees and jasmines, thought, How could it be that the world could possibly be going on so sweet and fair over such an abyss?

"Oh, Jocunda!" she said, "it does seem too dreadful to believe! How could they help being heathen, – being born so, – and never hearing of the true Church?"

"Sure enough," said Jocunda, spinning away energetically, "but that's no business of mine; my business is to save *my* soul, and that's what I came here for. The dear saints know I found it dull enough at first, for I'd been used to jaunting round with my old man and the boy; but what with marketing and preserving, and one thing and another, I get on better now, praise to Saint Agnes!"

The large, dark eyes of Agnes were fixed abstractedly on the old woman as she spoke, slowly dilating, with a sad, mysterious expression, which sometimes came over them.

"Ah! how can the saints themselves be happy?" she said. "One might be willing to wear sackcloth and sleep on the ground, one might suffer ever so many years and years, if only one might save some of them."

"Well, it does seem hard," said Jocunda; "but what's the use of thinking of it? Old Father Anselmo told us in one of his sermons that the Lord wills that his saints should come to rejoice in the punishment of all heathens and heretics; and he told us about a great saint once, who took it into his head to be distressed because one of the old heathen whose books he was fond of reading had gone to hell, – and he fasted and prayed, and wouldn't take no for an answer, till he got him out."

"He did, then?" said Agnes, clasping her hands in an ecstasy.

"Yes; but the good Lord told him never to try it again, – and He struck him dumb, as a kind of hint, you know. Why, Father Anselmo said that even getting souls out of purgatory was no easy matter. He told us of one holy nun who spent nine years fasting and praying for the soul of her prince, who was killed in a duel, and then she saw in a vision that he was only raised the least little bit out of the fire, – and she offered up her life as a sacrifice to the Lord to deliver him, but, after all, when she died he wasn't quite delivered. Such things made me think that a poor old sinner like me would never get out at all, if I didn't set about it in earnest, – though it ain't all nuns that save their souls either. I remember in Pisa I saw a great picture of the Judgment Day in the Campo Santo, and there were lots of abbesses, and nuns, and monks, and bishops, too, that the devils were clearing off into the fire."

"Oh, Jocunda, how dreadful that fire must be!"

"Yes," said Jocunda. "Father Anselmo said hell-fire wasn't like any kind of fire we have here, – made to warm us and cook our food, – but a kind made especially to torment body and soul, and not made for anything else. I remember a story he told us about that. You see, there was an old duchess that lived in a grand old castle, – and a proud, wicked old thing enough; and her son brought home

a handsome young bride to the castle, and the old duchess was jealous of her, – 'cause, you see, she hated to give up her place in the house, and the old family jewels, and all the splendid things, – and so one time, when the poor young thing was all dressed up in a set of the old family lace, what does the old hag do but set fire to it!"

"How horrible!" said Agnes.

"Yes; and when the young thing ran screaming in her agony, the old hag stopped her and tore off a pearl rosary that she was wearing, for fear it should be spoiled by the fire."

"Holy Mother! can such things be possible?" said Agnes.

"Well, you see, she got her pay for it. That rosary was of famous old pearls that had been in the family a hundred years; but from that moment the good Lord struck it with a curse, and filled it white-hot with hell-fire, so that if anybody held it a few minutes in their hand, it would burn to the bone. The old sinner made believe that she was in great affliction for the death of her daughter-in-law, and that it was all an accident, and the poor young man went raving mad, – but that awful rosary the old hag couldn't get rid of. She couldn't give it away, – she couldn't sell it, – but back it would come every night, and lie right over her heart, all white-hot with the fire that burned in it. She gave it to a convent, and she sold it to a merchant, but back it came; and she locked it up in the heaviest chests, and she buried it down in the lowest vaults, but it always came back in the night, till she was worn to a skeleton; and at last the old thing died without confession or sacrament, and went where she belonged. She was found lying dead in her bed one morning, and the rosary was gone; but when they came to lay her out, they found the marks of it burned to the bone into her breast. Father Anselmo used to tell us this, to show us a little what hell-fire was like."

"Oh, please, Jocunda, don't let us talk about it any more," said Agnes.

Old Jocunda, with her tough, vigorous organization and unceremonious habits of expression, could not conceive the exquisite pain with which this whole conversation had vibrated on the sensitive being at her right hand, – that what merely awoke her hard-corded nerves to a dull vibration of not unpleasant excitement was shivering and tearing the tenderer chords of poor little Psyche beside her.

Ages before, beneath those very skies that smiled so sweetly over her, – amid the bloom of lemon and citron, and the perfume of jasmine and rose, the gentlest of old Italian souls had dreamed and wondered what might be the unknown future of the dead, and, learning his lesson from the glorious skies and gorgeous shores which witnessed how magnificent a Being had given existence to man, had recorded his hopes of man's future in the words —*Aut beatus, aut nihil*; but, singular to tell, the religion which brought with it all human tenderness and pities, – the hospital for the sick, the refuge for the orphan, the enfranchisement of the slave, – this religion brought also the news of the eternal, hopeless, living torture of the great majority of mankind, past and present. Tender spirits, like those of Dante, carried this awful mystery as a secret and unexplained anguish, saints wrestled with God and wept over it; but still the awful fact remained, spite of Church and sacrament, that the gospel was in effect, to the majority of the human race, not the glad tidings of salvation, but the sentence of unmitigable doom.

The present traveler in Italy sees with disgust the dim and faded frescoes in which this doom is portrayed in all its varied refinements of torture; and the vivid Italian mind ran riot in these lurid fields, and every monk who wanted to move his audience was in his small way a Dante. The poet and the artist give only the highest form of the ideas of their day, and he who cannot read the "Inferno" with firm nerves may ask what the same representations were likely to have been in the grasp of coarse and common minds.

The first teachers of Christianity in Italy read the Gospels by the light of those fiendish fires which consumed their fellows. Daily made familiar with the scorching, the searing, the racking, the devilish ingenuities of torture, they transferred them to the future hell of the torturers. The sentiment within us which asserts eternal justice and retribution was stimulated to a kind of madness by that first baptism of fire and blood, and expanded the simple and grave warnings of the gospel into a

lurid poetry of physical torture. Hence, while Christianity brought multiplied forms of mercy into the world, it failed for many centuries to humanize the savage forms of justice; and rack and wheel, fire and fagot were the modes by which human justice aspired to a faint imitation of what divine justice was supposed to extend through eternity.

But it is remarkable always to observe the power of individual minds to draw out of the popular religious ideas of their country only those elements which suit themselves, and to drop others from their thought. As a bee can extract pure honey from the blossoms of some plants whose leaves are poisonous, so some souls can nourish themselves only with the holier and more ethereal parts of popular belief.

Agnes had hitherto dwelt only on the cheering and the joyous features of her faith; her mind loved to muse on the legends of saints and angels and the glories of paradise, which, with a secret buoyancy, she hoped to be the lot of every one she saw. The mind of the Mother Theresa was of the same elevated cast, and the terrors on which Jocunda dwelt with such homely force of language seldom made a part of her instructions.

Agnes tried to dismiss these gloomy images from her mind, and, after arranging her garlands, went to decorate the shrine and altar, – a cheerful labor of love, in which she delighted.

To the mind of the really spiritual Christian of those ages the air of this lower world was not as it is to us, in spite of our nominal faith in the Bible, a blank, empty space from which all spiritual sympathy and life have fled, but, like the atmosphere with which Raphael has surrounded the Sistine Madonna, it was full of sympathizing faces, a great "cloud of witnesses." The holy dead were not gone from earth; the Church visible and invisible were in close, loving, and constant sympathy, – still loving, praying, and watching together, though with a veil between.

It was at first with no idolatrous intention that the prayers of the holy dead were invoked in acts of worship. Their prayers were asked simply because they were felt to be as really present with their former friends and as truly sympathetic as if no veil of silence had fallen between. In time this simple belief had its intemperate and idolatrous exaggerations, – the Italian soil always seeming to have a fiery and volcanic forcing power, by which religious ideas overblossomed themselves, and grew wild and ragged with too much enthusiasm; and, as so often happens with friends on earth, these too much loved and revered invisible friends became eclipsing screens instead of transmitting mediums of God's light to the soul.

Yet we can see in the hymns of Savonarola, who perfectly represented the attitude of the highest Christian of those times, how perfect might be the love and veneration for departed saints without lapsing into idolatry, and with what an atmosphere of warmth and glory the true belief of the unity of the Church, visible and invisible, could inspire an elevated soul amid the discouragements of an unbelieving and gainsaying world.

Our little Agnes, therefore, when she had spread all her garlands out, seemed really to feel as if the girlish figure that smiled in sacred white from the altar-piece was a dear friend who smiled upon her, and was watching to lead her up the path to heaven.

Pleasantly passed the hours of that day to the girl, and when at evening old Elsie called for her, she wondered that the day had gone so fast.

Old Elsie returned with no inconsiderable triumph from her stand. The cavalier had been several times during the day past her stall, and once, stopping in a careless way to buy fruit, commented on the absence of her young charge. This gave Elsie the highest possible idea of her own sagacity and shrewdness, and of the promptitude with which she had taken her measures, so that she was in as good spirits as people commonly are who think they have performed some stroke of generalship.

As the old woman and young girl emerged from the dark-vaulted passage that led them down through the rocks on which the convent stood to the sea at its base, the light of a most glorious sunset burst upon them, in all those strange and magical mysteries of light which any one who has walked that beach of Sorrento at evening will never forget.

Agnes ran along the shore, and amused herself with picking up little morsels of red and black coral, and those fragments of mosaic pavements, blue, red, and green, which the sea is never tired of casting up from the thousands of ancient temples and palaces which have gone to wreck all around these shores.

As she was busy doing this, she suddenly heard the voice of Giulietta behind her.

"So ho, Agnes! where have you been all day?"

"At the Convent," said Agnes, raising herself from her work, and smiling at Giulietta, in her frank, open way.

"Oh, then you really did take the ring to Saint Agnes?"

"To be sure I did," said Agnes.

"Simple child!" said Giulietta, laughing; "that wasn't what he meant you to do with it. He meant it for you, – only your grandmother was by. You never will have any lovers, if she keeps you so tight."

"I can do without," said Agnes.

"I could tell you something about this one," said Giulietta.

"You did tell me something yesterday," said Agnes.

"But I could tell you some more. I know he wants to see you again."

"What for?" said Agnes.

"Simpleton, he's in love with you. You never had a lover; it's time you had."

"I don't want one, Giulietta. I hope I never shall see him again."

"Oh, nonsense, Agnes! Why, what a girl you are! Why, before I was as old as you, I had half-a-dozen lovers."

"Agnes," said the sharp voice of Elsie, coming up from behind, "don't run on ahead of me again; and you, Mistress Baggage, let my child alone."

"Who's touching your child?" said Giulietta, scornfully. "Can't a body say a civil word to her?"

"I know what you would be after," said Elsie, "filling her head with talk of all the wild, loose gallants; but she is for no such market, I promise you! Come, Agnes."

So saying, old Elsie drew Agnes rapidly along with her, leaving Giulietta rolling her great black eyes after them with an air of infinite contempt.

"The old kite!" she said; "I declare he shall get speech of the little dove, if only to spite her. Let her try her best, and see if we don't get round her before she knows it. Pietro says his master is certainly wild after her, and I have promised to help him."

Meanwhile, just as old Elsie and Agnes were turning into the orange orchard which led into the Gorge of Sorrento, they met the cavalier of the evening before.

He stopped, and, removing his cap, saluted them with as much deference as if they had been princesses. Old Elsie frowned, and Agnes blushed deeply; both hurried forward. Looking back, the old woman saw that he was walking slowly behind them, evidently watching them closely, yet not in a way sufficiently obtrusive to warrant an open rebuff.

CHAPTER VIII
THE CAVALIER

Nothing can be more striking, in common Italian life, than the contrast between out-doors and in-doors. Without, all is fragrant and radiant; within, mouldy, dark, and damp. Except in the well-kept palaces of the great, houses in Italy are more like dens than habitations, and a sight of them is a sufficient reason to the mind of any inquirer, why their vivacious and handsome inhabitants spend their life principally in the open air. Nothing could be more perfectly paradisiacal than this evening at Sorrento. The sun had sunk, but left the air full of diffused radiance, which trembled and vibrated over the thousand many-colored waves of the sea. The moon was riding in a broad zone of purple, low in the horizon, her silver forehead somewhat flushed in the general rosiness that seemed to penetrate and suffuse every object. The fishermen, who were drawing in their nets, gayly singing, seemed to be floating on a violet-and-gold-colored flooring that broke into a thousand gems at every dash of the oar or motion of the boat. The old stone statue of Saint Antonio looked down in the rosy air, itself tinged and brightened by the magical colors which floated round it. And the girls and men of Sorrento gathered in gossiping knots on the old Roman bridge that spanned the gorge, looked idly down into its dusky shadows, talking the while, and playing the time-honored game of flirtation which has gone on in all climes and languages since man and woman began.

Conspicuous among them all was Giulietta, her blue-black hair recently braided and polished to a glossy radiance, and all her costume arranged to show her comely proportions to the best advantage, – her great pearl ear-rings shaking as she tossed her head, and showing the flash of the emerald in the middle of them. An Italian peasant-woman may trust Providence for her gown, but ear-rings she attends to herself, – for what is life without them? The great pearl ear-rings of the Sorrento women are accumulated, pearl by pearl, as the price of years of labor. Giulietta, however, had come into the world, so to speak, with a gold spoon in her mouth, – since her grandmother, a thriving, stirring, energetic body, had got together a pair of ear-rings of unmatched size, which had descended as heirlooms to her, leaving her nothing to do but display them, which she did with the freest good-will. At present she was busily occupied in coquetting with a tall and jauntily-dressed fellow, wearing a plumed hat and a red sash, who seemed to be mesmerized by the power of her charms, his large dark eyes following every movement, as she now talked with him gayly and freely, and now pretended errands to this and that and the other person on the bridge, stationing herself here and there, that she might have the pleasure of seeing herself followed.

"Giulietta," at last said the young man, earnestly, when he found her accidentally standing alone by the parapet, "I must be going to-morrow."

"Well, what is that to me?" said Giulietta, looking wickedly from under her eyelashes.

"Cruel girl! you know" —

"Nonsense, Pietro! I don't know anything about you;" but as Giulietta said this, her great, soft, dark eyes looked out furtively, and said just the contrary.

"You will go with me?"

"Did I ever hear anything like it? One can't be civil to a fellow but he asks her to go to the world's end. Pray, how far is it to your dreadful old den?"

"Only two days' journey, Giulietta."

"Two days!"

"Yes, my life; and you shall ride."

"Thank you, sir, – I wasn't thinking of walking. But seriously, Pietro, I am afraid it's no place for an honest girl to be in."

"There are lots of honest women there, – all our men have wives; and our captain has put his eye on one, too, or I'm mistaken."

"What! little Agnes?" said Giulietta. "He will be bright that gets her. That old dragon of a grandmother is as tight to her as her skin."

"Our captain is used to helping himself," said Pietro. "We might carry them both off some night, and no one the wiser; but he seems to want to win the girl to come to him of her own accord. At any rate, we are to be sent back to the mountains while he lingers a day or two more round here."

"I declare, Pietro, I think you all little better than Turks or heathens, to talk in that way about carrying off women; and what if one should be sick and die among you? What is to become of one's soul, I wonder?"

"Pshaw! don't we have priests? Why, Giulietta, we are all very pious, and never think of going out without saying our prayers. The Madonna is a kind Mother, and will wink very hard on the sins of such good sons as we are. There isn't a place in all Italy where she is kept better in candles, and in rings and bracelets, and everything a woman could want. We never come home without bringing her something; and then we have lots left to dress all our women like princesses; and they have nothing to do from morning till night but play the lady. Come now?"

At the moment this conversation was going on in the balmy, seductive evening air at the bridge, another was transpiring in the Albergo della Torre, one of those dark, musty dens of which we have been speaking. In a damp, dirty chamber, whose brick floor seemed to have been unsuspicious of even the existence of brooms for centuries, was sitting the cavalier whom we have so often named in connection with Agnes. His easy, high-bred air, his graceful, flexible form and handsome face formed a singular contrast to the dark and mouldy apartment, at whose single unglazed window he was sitting. The sight of this splendid man gave an impression of strangeness, in the general bareness, much as if some marvelous jewel had been unaccountably found lying on that dusty brick floor.

He sat deep in thought, with his elbow resting on a rickety table, his large, piercing dark eyes seeming intently to study the pavement.

The door opened, and a gray-headed old man entered, who approached him respectfully.

"Well, Paolo?" said the cavalier, suddenly starting.

"My Lord, the men are all going back to-night."

"Let them go, then," said the cavalier, with an impatient movement. "I can follow in a day or two."

"Ah, my Lord, if I might make so bold, why should you expose your person by staying longer? You may be recognized and" —

"No danger," said the other, hastily.

"My Lord, you must forgive me, but I promised my dear lady, your mother, on her death-bed" —

"To be a constant plague to me," said the cavalier, with a vexed smile and an impatient movement; "but speak on, Paolo, – for when you once get anything on your mind, one may as well hear it first as last."

"Well, then, my Lord, this girl, – I have made inquiries, and every one reports her most modest and pious, – the only grandchild of a poor old woman. Is it worthy of a great lord of an ancient house to bring her to shame?"

"Who thinks of bringing her to shame? 'Lord of an ancient house!'" added the cavalier, laughing bitterly, – "a landless beggar, cast out of everything, – titles, estates, all! Am I, then, fallen so low that my wooing would disgrace a peasant-girl?"

"My Lord, you cannot mean to woo a peasant-girl in any other way than one that would disgrace her, – one of the House of Sarelli, that goes back to the days of the old Roman Empire!"

"And what of the 'House of Sarelli that goes back to the days of the old Roman Empire'? It is lying like weeds' roots uppermost in the burning sun. What is left to me but the mountains and my

sword? No, I tell you, Paolo, Agostino Sarelli, cavalier of fortune, is not thinking of bringing disgrace on a pious and modest maiden, unless it would disgrace her to be his wife."

"Now may the saints above help us! Why, my Lord, our house in days past has been allied to royal blood. I could tell you how Joachim VI." —

"Come, come, my good Paolo, spare me one of your chapters of genealogy. The fact is, my old boy, the world is all topsy-turvy, and the bottom is the top, and it isn't much matter what comes next. Here are shoals of noble families uprooted and lying round like those aloes that the gardener used to throw over the wall in springtime; and there is that great boar of a Cæsar Borgia turned in to batten and riot over our pleasant places."

"Oh, my Lord," said the old serving-man, with a distressful movement, "we have fallen on evil times, to be sure, and they say his Holiness has excommunicated us. Anselmo heard that in Naples yesterday."

"Excommunicated!" said the young man, – every feature of his fine face, and every nerve of his graceful form seeming to quiver with the effort to express supreme contempt. "Excommunicated! I should hope so! One would hope through Our Lady's grace to act so that Alexander, and his adulterous, incestuous, filthy, false-swearing, perjured, murderous crew, would excommunicate us! In these times, one's only hope of paradise lies in being excommunicated."

"Oh, my dear master," said the old man, falling on his knees, "what is to become of us? That I should live to hear you talk like an infidel and unbeliever!"

"Why, hear you, poor old fool! Did you never hear in Dante of the Popes that are burning in hell? Wasn't Dante a Christian, I beg to know?"

"Oh, my Lord, my Lord! a religion got out of poetry, books, and romances won't do to die by. We have no business with the affairs of the Head of the Church, – it's the Lord's appointment. We have only to shut our eyes and obey. It may all do well enough to talk so when you are young and fresh; but when sickness and death come, then we *must* have religion, – and if we have gone out of the only true Roman Catholic Apostolic Church, what becomes of our souls? Ah, I misdoubted about your taking so much to poetry, though my poor mistress was so proud of it; but these poets are all heretics, my Lord, – that's my firm belief. But, my Lord, if you do go to hell, I'm going there with you; I'm sure I never could show my face among the saints, and you not there."

"Well, come, then, my poor Paolo," said the cavalier, stretching out his hand to his serving-man, "don't take it to heart so. Many a better man than I has been excommunicated and cursed from toe to crown, and been never a whit the worse for it. There's Jerome Savonarola there in Florence – a most holy man, they say, who has had revelations straight from heaven – has been excommunicated; but he preaches and gives the sacraments all the same, and nobody minds it."

"Well, it's all a maze to me," said the old serving-man, shaking his white head. "I can't see into it. I don't dare to open my eyes for fear I should get to be a heretic; it seems to me that everything is getting mixed up together. But one must hold on to one's religion; because, after we have lost everything in this world, it would be too bad to burn in hell forever at the end of that."

"Why, Paolo, I am a good Christian. I believe, with all my heart, in the Christian religion, like the fellow in Boccaccio, – because I think it must be from God, or else the Popes and Cardinals would have had it out of the world long ago. Nothing but the Lord Himself could have kept it against them."

"There you are, my dear master, with your romances. Well, well, well! I don't know how it'll end. I say my prayers, and try not to inquire into what's too high for me. But now, dear master, will you stay lingering after this girl till some of our enemies hear where you are and pounce down upon us? Besides, the troop are never so well affected when you are away; there are quarrels and divisions."

"Well, well," said the cavalier, with an impatient movement, – "one day longer. I must get a chance to speak with her once more. I must see her."

CHAPTER IX
THE ARTIST MONK

On the evening when Agnes and her grandmother returned from the Convent, as they were standing after supper looking over the garden parapet into the gorge, their attention was caught by a man in an ecclesiastical habit, slowly climbing the rocky pathway towards them.

"Isn't that Brother Antonio?" said Dame Elsie, leaning forward to observe more narrowly. "Yes, to be sure it is!"

"Oh, how glad I am!" exclaimed Agnes, springing up with vivacity, and looking eagerly down the path by which the stranger was approaching.

A few moments more of clambering, and the stranger met the two women at the gate with a gesture of benediction.

He was apparently a little past the middle point of life, and entering on its shady afternoon. He was tall and well proportioned, and his features had the spare delicacy of the Italian outline. The round brow, fully developed in all the perceptive and æsthetic regions, – the keen eye, shadowed by long, dark lashes, – the thin, flexible lips, – the sunken cheek, where, on the slightest emotion, there fluttered a brilliant flush of color, – all were signs telling of the enthusiast in whom the nervous and spiritual predominated over the animal.

At times, his eye had a dilating brightness, as if from the flickering of some inward fire which was slowly consuming the mortal part, and its expression was brilliant even to the verge of insanity.

His dress was the simple, coarse, white stuff-gown of the Dominican friars, over which he wore a darker traveling-garment of coarse cloth, with a hood, from whose deep shadows his bright mysterious eyes looked like jewels from a cavern. At his side dangled a great rosary and cross of black wood, and under his arm he carried a portfolio secured with a leathern strap, which seemed stuffed to bursting with papers.

Father Antonio, whom we have thus introduced to the reader, was an itinerant preaching monk from the Convent of San Marco in Florence, on a pastoral and artistic tour through Italy.

Convents in the Middle Ages were the retreats of multitudes of natures who did not wish to live in a state of perpetual warfare and offense, and all the elegant arts flourished under their protecting shadows. Ornamental gardening, pharmacy, drawing, painting, carving in wood, illumination, and calligraphy were not unfrequent occupations of the holy fathers, and the convent has given to the illustrious roll of Italian Art some of its most brilliant names. No institution in modern Europe had a more established reputation in all these respects than the Convent of San Marco in Florence. In its best days, it was as near an approach to an ideal community, associated to unite religion, beauty, and utility, as ever has existed on earth. It was a retreat from the commonplace prose of life into an atmosphere at once devotional and poetic; and prayers and sacred hymns consecrated the elegant labors of the chisel and the pencil, no less than the more homely ones of the still and the crucible. San Marco, far from being that kind of sluggish lagoon often imagined in conventual life, was rather a sheltered hotbed of ideas, fervid with intellectual and moral energy, and before the age in every radical movement. At this period, Savonarola, the poet and prophet of the Italian religious world of his day, was superior of this convent, pouring through all the members of the order the fire of his own impassioned nature, and seeking to lead them back to the fervors of more primitive and evangelical ages, and in the reaction of a worldly and corrupt Church was beginning to feel the power of that current which at last drowned his eloquent voice in the cold waters of martyrdom. Savonarola was an Italian Luther, – differing from the great Northern Reformer as the more ethereally strung and nervous Italian differs from the bluff and burly German; and like Luther, he became in his time the centre of every living thing in society about him. He inspired the pencils of artists, guided the

counsels of statesmen, and, a poet himself, was an inspiration to poets. Everywhere in Italy the monks of his order were traveling, restoring the shrines, preaching against the voluptuous and unworthy pictures with which sensual artists had desecrated the churches, and calling the people back by their exhortations to the purity of primitive Christianity.

Father Antonio was a younger brother of Elsie, and had early become a member of the San Marco, enthusiastic not less in religion than in Art. His intercourse with his sister had few points of sympathy, Elsie being as decided a utilitarian as any old Yankee female born in the granite hills of New Hampshire, and pursuing with a hard and sharp energy her narrow plan of life for Agnes. She regarded her brother as a very properly religious person, considering his calling, but was a little bored with his exuberant devotion, and absolutely indifferent to his artistic enthusiasm. Agnes, on the contrary, had from a child attached herself to her uncle with all the energy of a sympathetic nature, and his yearly visits had been looked forward to on her part with intense expectation. To him she could say a thousand things which she instinctively concealed from her grandmother; and Elsie was well pleased with the confidence, because it relieved her a little from the vigilant guardianship that she otherwise held over the girl. When Father Antonio was near, she had leisure now and then for a little private gossip of her own, without the constant care of supervising Agnes.

"Dear uncle, how glad I am to see you once more!" was the eager salutation with which the young girl received the monk, as he gained the little garden. "And you have brought your pictures; oh, I know you have so many pretty things to show me!"

"Well, well, child," said Elsie, "don't begin upon that now. A little talk of bread and cheese will be more in point. Come in, brother, and wash your feet, and let me beat the dust out of your cloak, and give you something to stay Nature; for you must be fasting."

"Thank you, sister," said the monk; "and as for you, pretty one, never mind what she says. Uncle Antonio will show his little Agnes everything by-and-by. A good little thing it is, sister."

"Yes, yes, – good enough, – and too good," said Elsie, bustling about; "roses can't help having thorns, I suppose."

"Only our ever-blessed Rose of Sharon, the dear mystical Rose of Paradise, can boast of having no thorns," said the monk, bowing and crossing himself devoutly.

Agnes clasped her hands on her bosom and bowed also, while Elsie stopped with her knife in the middle of a loaf of black bread, and crossed herself with somewhat of impatience, – like a worldly-minded person of our day, who is interrupted in the midst of an observation by a grace.

After the rites of hospitality had been duly observed, the old dame seated herself contentedly in her door with her distaff, resigned Agnes to the safe guardianship of her uncle, and had a feeling of security in seeing them sitting together on the parapet of the garden, with the portfolio spread out between them, – the warm twilight glow of the evening sky lighting up their figures as they bent in ardent interest over its contents. The portfolio showed a fluttering collection of sketches, – fruits, flowers, animals, insects, faces, figures, shrines, buildings, trees, – all, in short, that might strike the mind of a man to whose eye nothing on the face of the earth is without beauty and significance.

"Oh, how beautiful!" said the girl, taking up one sketch, in which a bunch of rosy cyclamen was painted rising out of a bed of moss.

"Ah, that indeed, my dear!" said the artist. "Would you had seen the place where I painted it! I stopped there to recite my prayers one morning; 'twas by the side of a beautiful cascade, and all the ground was covered with these lovely cyclamens, and the air was musky with their fragrance. Ah, the bright rose-colored leaves! I can get no color like them, unless some angel would bring me some from those sunset clouds yonder."

"And oh, dear uncle, what lovely primroses!" pursued Agnes, taking up another paper.

"Yes, child; but you should have seen them when I was coming down the south side of the Apennines; these were everywhere so pale and sweet, they seemed like the humility of our Most Blessed Mother in her lowly mortal state. I am minded to make a border of primroses to the leaf

in the Breviary where is the 'Hail, Mary!' – for it seems as if that flower doth ever say, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord!'"

"And what will you do with the cyclamen, uncle? does not that mean something?"

"Yes, daughter," replied the monk, readily entering into that symbolical strain which permeated all the heart and mind of the religious of his day, "I can see a meaning in it. For you see that the cyclamen puts forth its leaves in early spring deeply engraven with mystical characters, and loves cool shadows, and moist, dark places, but comes at length to wear a royal crown of crimson; and it seems to me like the saints who dwell in convents and other prayerful places, and have the word of God graven in their hearts in youth, till these blossom into fervent love, and they are crowned with royal graces."

"Ah!" sighed Agnes, "how beautiful and how blessed to be among such!"

"Thou sayest well, dear child. Blessed are the flowers of God that grow in cool solitudes, and have never been profaned by the hot sun and dust of this world!"

"I should like to be such a one," said Agnes. "I often think, when I visit the sisters at the Convent, that I long to be one of them."

"A pretty story!" said Dame Elsie, who had heard the last words, "go into a convent and leave your poor grandmother all alone, when she has toiled night and day for so many years to get a dowry for you and find you a worthy husband!"

"I don't want any husband in this world, grandmamma," said Agnes.

"What talk is this? Not want a good husband to take care of you when your poor old grandmother is gone? Who will provide for you?"

"He who took care of the blessed Saint Agnes, grandmamma."

"Saint Agnes, to be sure! That was a great many years ago, and times have altered since then; in these days girls must have husbands. Isn't it so, Brother Antonio?"

"But if the darling hath a vocation?" said the artist, mildly.

"Vocation! I'll see to that! She sha'n't have a vocation! Suppose I'm going to delve, and toil, and spin, and wear myself to the bone, and have her slip through my fingers at last with a vocation? No, indeed!"

"Indeed, dear grandmother, don't be angry!" said Agnes. "I will do just as you say, – only I don't want a husband."

"Well, well, my little heart, – one thing at a time; you shan't have him till you say yes willingly," said Elsie, in a mollified tone.

Agnes turned again to the portfolio and busied herself with it, her eyes dilating as she ran over the sketches.

"Ah! what pretty, pretty bird is this?" she asked.

"Knowest thou not that bird, with his little red beak?" said the artist. "When our dear Lord hung bleeding, and no man pitied him, this bird, filled with tender love, tried to draw out the nails with his poor little beak, – so much better were the birds than we hard-hearted sinners! – hence he hath honor in many pictures. See here, – I shall put him into the office of the Sacred Heart, in a little nest curiously built in a running vine of passion-flower. See here, daughter, – I have a great commission to execute a Breviary for our house, and our holy Father was pleased to say that the spirit of the blessed Angelico had in some little humble measure descended on me, and now I am busy day and night; for not a twig rustles, not a bird flies, nor a flower blossoms, but I begin to see therein some hint of holy adornment to my blessed work."

"Oh, Uncle Antonio, how happy you must be!" said Agnes, her large eyes filling with tears.

"Happy! – child, am I not?" said the monk, looking up and crossing himself. "Holy Mother, am I not? Do I not walk the earth in a dream of bliss, and see the footsteps of my Most Blessed Lord and his dear Mother on every rock and hill? I see the flowers rise up in clouds to adore them. What am I, unworthy sinner, that such grace is granted me? Often I fall on my face before the humblest

flower where my dear Lord hath written his name, and confess I am unworthy the honor of copying his sweet handiwork."

The artist spoke these words with his hands clasped and his fervid eyes upraised, like a man in an ecstasy; nor can our more prosaic English give an idea of the fluent naturalness and grace with which such images melt into that lovely tongue which seems made to be the natural language of poetry and enthusiasm.

Agnes looked up to him with humble awe, as to some celestial being; but there was a sympathetic glow in her face, and she put her hands on her bosom, as her manner often was when much moved, and, drawing a deep sigh, said, —

"Would that such gifts were mine!"

"They are thine, sweet one," said the monk. "In Christ's dear kingdom is no mine or thine, but all that each hath is the property of others. I never rejoice so much in my art as when I think of the communion of saints, and that all that our Blessed Lord will work through me is the property of the humblest soul in his kingdom. When I see one flower rarer than another, or a bird singing on a twig, I take note of the same, and say, 'This lovely work of God shall be for some shrine, or the border of a missal, or the foreground of an altar-piece, and thus shall his saints be comforted.'"

"But," said Agnes, fervently, "how little can a poor young maiden do! Ah, I do so long to offer myself up in some way to the dear Lord, who gave himself for us, and for his Most Blessed Church!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.