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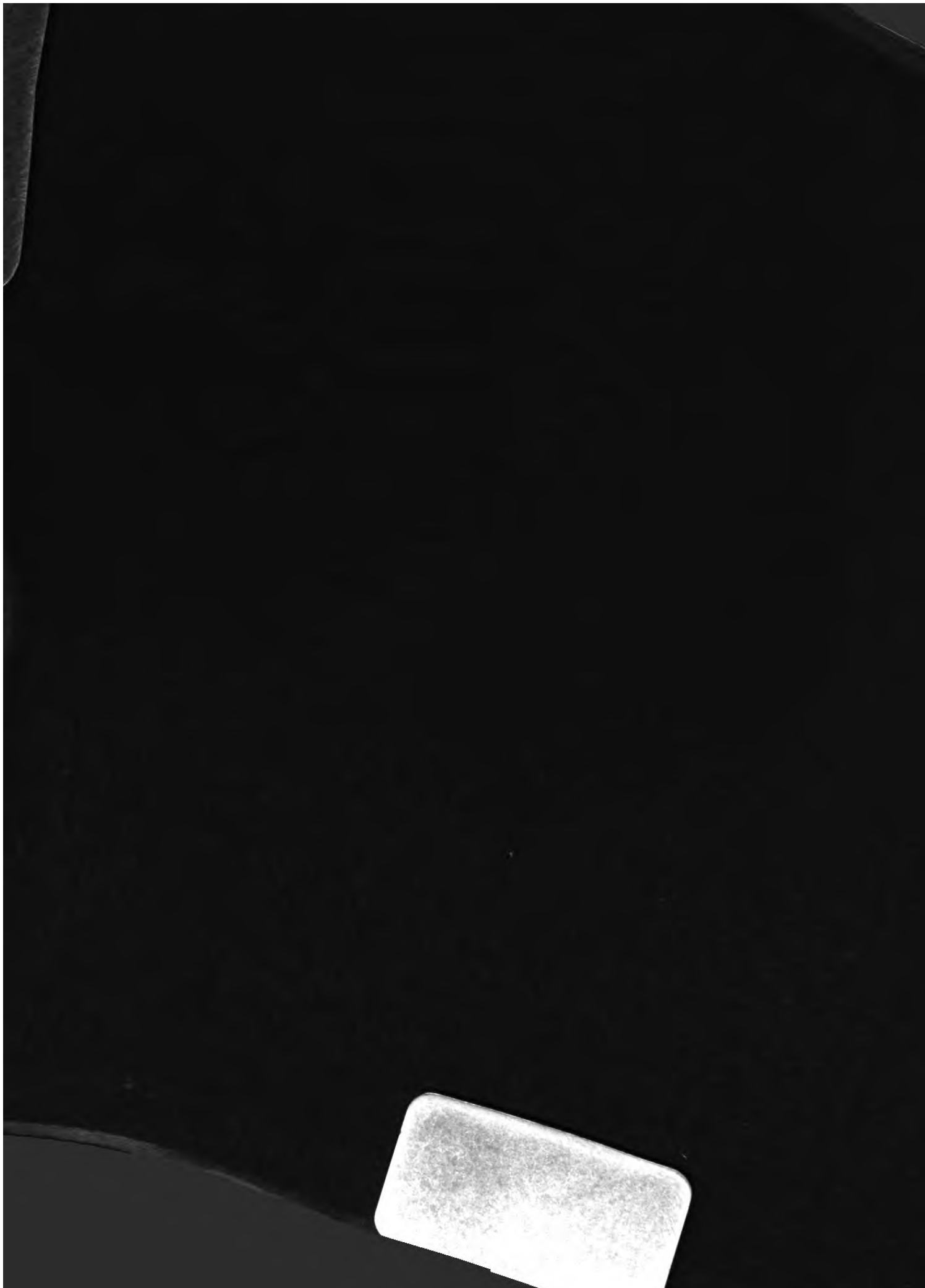


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Brothers in Arms



*A TALE OF
THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE*



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BROTHERS IN ARMS:

A TALE OF

THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"ULRIC: A TALE OF THE NOVATIAN HERESY."



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Henry Newman's Essay on Benedictine Schools.

Miscellaneous readings.

DATE.

The best authorities seem to fix the date of the Children's Crusade at A.D. 1213, alluding especially to errors which have crept in, placing it earlier in some histories. The number of children who enlisted is variously estimated from 50,000 to 90,000. Probabilities seem on the whole in favour of the larger number.

NOTE TO CHAPTER III.

The "Fountain in the Sea" really exists in the Gulf of Spezia, though, owing to its course having been diverted in an unsuccessful attempt to supply the Arsenal, the beautiful jet has been destroyed, and the sweet water can now only be obtained by dipping a vessel deep beneath the surface. This singular phenomenon was first brought to the writer's notice from having been used as an illustration in a sermon preached in the English church at Aix les Bains.

BROTHERS IN ARMS:

A Tale of the Children's Crusade.



CHAPTER I.

AN APENNINE MONASTERY.

“THE world is very large, Pietro, and it looks so lonely.”

The remark came naturally from the lips of a child only eight years of age, for “the world” as viewed from the Benedictine monastery of Barcello, seemed desolate from its vastness, rich though it might be in the majestic loveliness of an Italian mountain landscape. Peak beyond peak of solemn Apennines, full of wild grace in their fantastic shapes, jewel-like in the hues borrowed from the late August sunset, stretched away into the distance in ever-receding chains, until the wearied eye could follow them no further. Over the low-lying plains and valleys flowed a sea of gold and purple mist, being the vapours which a recent thunderstorm, succeeded by a white hot sunshine, had drawn from the teeming soil. The sultriness was very oppressive even at the height on which the monastery stood, for the air felt like a steam bath, unfitting mind and body for the least exertion. Beautiful was that flood of haze rolling in waves of gorgeous colour through the lowlands, or here and there

veiling the slopes of the wooded hills, until only their crested heads uprose like isles from some tropical ocean. It was a beauty suggestive of death, however, to an eye familiar with the region, and Pietro drew the woollen folds of little Anselmo's robe more closely around him, and proposed they should seek brother Filippo in the dispensary, to claim from him the cordial which, by order of the Abbot, was bestowed at sunset on the young, old, or infirm members of the community. Anselmo seemed, however, disinclined to move from his seat, on the step of the sculptured stone fountain that watered a little olive grove adjacent to the cloister. He was tired and depressed, poor child, for no reason which he could define, though many others shared with him the lassitude caused by that chronic low fever, which, without developing into positive illness, hangs for months about its victims, until strength and energy are wasted away. No wonder the fragile boy should cling to the monastic home which had protected him from infancy, and of which the substantial walls stood as a rampart between him and the influences of a very tempest-tossed and stormy world.

The two sat silent for some minutes, and then Anselmo, whose mind still followed the same train of thought, repeated, "Yes ; it is such a wide and dreary world ! It wearies me only to think there is yet more of it than we can see from hence, Pietro. Why did not our parents give us to the monastery, that we might have lived here always, safe in the kind care of the good Abbot and the brethren ?"

"But the Abbot is only our father under God ; we are safe in His keeping everywhere, and all men are our brethren—that is," added Pietro, as he dropped a pebble into the well and listened to its low musical gurgle, "all except the infidels."

"Yet our Lord died for them too," said Anselmo musingly.

"Ay, truly, and that makes their sin the greater," cried

Pietro, with severity, "I am well pleased that we are not cowed monks, Anselmo, for now we can sally forth to slay the Saracens, and raise the sign of our salvation on the hills of Palestine."

"I like not to slay men ; I would fain teach them, if go forth I must," rejoined Anselmo : "yet far rather would I dwell here, where all is love and peace."

"You cannot dwell here, brother ; you must go forth to the battle at my side ; for fight I will ; and conquer I could not if I were parted from you. I believe there is only one soul in us twain," added Pietro, as he flung two sturdy arms around his gentle little comrade's neck.

"My son, be not thus pitiless ; pray for the infidels, and so shall you best fight for God, and do His will and help to spread the knowledge of His love. The Christian's warfare is against the hosts of Satan, and they are best vanquished when a follower is gained for the ranks of the Crucified."

The Abbot had drawn near unheeded by the children, and a very winning and indulgent smile played round his lips as the boys rose and saluted him respectfully. His rule, although strict to austerity, was one of love, and there were none who felt that gentle presence a restraint on any innocent freedom of speech or manner. He had not outlived sympathy with childhood, although he was in that vigorous prime of middle age which is, morally speaking, the point furthest removed from it, and it was a part of his system to let individual characters expand into the beautiful diversity which God has ordained for them. "Freedom within the limits of the Rule," was his enlightened motto, and he sought especially to train the powers of the secular pupils for a life of Christian usefulness in the wild world which surged beyond the convent walls. Even those destined from their infancy to the religious life, to whom of necessity less scope could be allowed, were not ruthlessly fettered on every side, nor modelled upon one uniform pattern. The care bestowed on each

was strictly individual, and the good Abbot's constant aim was not to hinder God's work in the soul by any indiscreet zeal of his own.

"Anselmo is a sluggard, father," said Pietro in a tone half deprecating and half roguish, as he raised a pair of dark eyes dancing with health and merriment to the Abbot's face. "He would like to dream all his life away in singing rhythms or illuminating beetles, when the very babes of Christendom should be rising in arms to snatch the Holy City from the unbelievers!" Pietro's tone, playful at first, had deepened to enthusiasm as he struck the chord which, unknown to himself, was even then thrilling through many a childish bosom, and which, a few years later, developed into one of the most startling spectacles that the world has ever known.

Pietro's words in disparagement of Anselmo would have been reproved severely, had they been spoken by any other child against his fellow; but the love between these two was a proverb in the community, and Father Benedict never inflicted a needless rebuke. He only answered in the pleasant tones which so endeared him to all over whom he ruled, "Anselmo is fitting himself to be a brave knight by learning obedience, and by contentment with his present lot. Methinks, my son, those fair works of God's Hand, the flying turquoise gems wherewith thy brother enriched his missal yesterday, were fitter adornments for the sacred page than those which I beheld this morn upon a Psalter that Brother Innocent brought to my cell."

Pietro blushed, for he had been in great disgrace that morning in the schoolroom, and needed no explanation of the Abbot's words. He had been set to learn the sixty-eighth Psalm—"Let God arise, and let His enemies be scattered"—and, his task accomplished, he had filled up the few minutes which elapsed before the recitation in crowding the fair, broad margin of the vellum with turbaned heads and leering faces, these last bearing a

quaint resemblance to the gurgoyles which became so common in the Gothic architecture of a later period.

“Yes, father,” he said, in his frank, outspoken manner, “I drew seven infidels adown the page when I had learned my psalm, and had to wait till Brother Innocent called me to say it.”

“And wherefore, my son?”

“Because it pleased me well to think of them as fallen foes, slain by mine own good sword; but Brother Innocent gave me the rod, and that,” added Pietro candidly, “is why I wish to-night yet more than ever to go hence and be trained in all feats of knightly prowess in the camp and in the field.”

“My child, stern discipline is needed for the life which seems to you so brilliant. A true knight must reverence his superiors, and perform many a distasteful task, and practise wearily that lesson of patient waiting in which you have failed to-day. But now, my children,” added the kind Abbot, “I must leave you, for the recreation hour is nearly past. We shall meet anon in the refectory, and I would have you both listen with reverence to this evening’s lection. It is about a saintly youth among the Christians of Cordova, who burned to seek martyrdom at the hands of the Saracens, contrary to the commands of the Church and of his Christian parents. Long did his wilful heart rebel against authority, but finally he ceded his desire, and God was better pleased with his obedience than with the sacrifice which he had willed to offer. Instead of staining the souls of the infidels with the foul crime of bloodshed, and thus causing them to provoke God’s wrath by adding sin to sin, he lived to be the honoured instrument of winning many to the true faith by his holy life and conversation. Think you not such an one was a true soldier of the Cross?”

Anselmo had lifted his head and was drinking in every word with rapt enthusiasm, but Pietro’s convictions remained unaltered, as a glance at his truth-speaking face

revealed. The Abbot did not press the subject further, and indeed there was no time to do so, for a loud bell now summoned the pupils of the Benedictine Monastery to the *scuola*, where a half-hour of instruction on religious subjects ended the educational employments of the day, alike for the secular children and for the little monks.

CHAPTER II.

THE BABY MONKS.

THE miniature town of Barcello clustered around the base of a steep hill, and wound its way upward in straggling streets through a series of rocky clefts which were for the most part only accessible by rude and uneven flights of steps. Upon the summit was a craggy, natural platform jutting slightly outwards, and appearing, when viewed from beneath, almost as though poised in mid-air above the valley. This level space was covered with the goodly pile of conventual buildings, which comprised a little world within itself. There were the noble church, the ample library, and the long lines of cells sacred to study and devotion. There also were the workshops in which various handicrafts were taught and practised, the needs of the commonwealth supplied, and those of the surrounding poor relieved. There, separated by an open portal, were the double cloisters so common in Italy, the outer a spacious quadrangle, on one side of which opened the west door of the church, the innermost smaller, and adorned with flowers and fruit trees. In the centre was a well, which supplied drinking water to the monastery, and which had occupied the site for at least a century before the Benedictines took root at Barcello. The steps and brink were thickly encrusted with sculpture, and above it was a canopy supported by delicate pillars of precious marble bearing traces of Byzantine workmanship. A cross had been added, when the monks took possession of the well, and around it they had planted a

circle of the tall white lilies which seem to have been always linked in Italian sacred art with the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin. Both cloisters were alike surrounded by stone arches, each of which framed its own mountain peak, and both were galleries of fresco painting, every space between the arches being filled with pictured histories of biblical and Benedictine saints. The last addition, made as each one was by the permission of the ruling abbot, was a legacy of gratitude from a poor artist who had been nursed through a malaria fever in the monastic infirmary. It was a winged angel, which was recognised by all excepting the original as a portrait of little Anselmo. The exceeding beauty of the boy, with his refined Venetian face, his ruddy golden hair, and the fair skin which seemed so doubly white from its contrast with his grave habit, might well have led any painter to single him out amid a crowd of children as the one best fitted to embody a celestial thought.

The refectory at Barcello was a long wide hall, paved with grey slabs of marble, and supported by massive and somewhat rude stone columns. Very strange was the picture it presented at the *cœna*, when the whole community was gathered at the repast of bread, goat's milk, and fruit, of which a slender portion was served to each without distinction, from the Abbot to the meanest brother. There were bowed frames and hoary heads ; stalwart men in the prime of life ; youths, boys, and tiny children, all attired in the vesture which proclaimed them members of the order of St. Benedict. Quaint and sweet as a dream of Fra Angelico were the faces of some amongst these cowed babes, for there were several at Barcello who had not numbered five summers. Such little children were held in peculiar reverence, because of the promises made to them in the Word of God. In as far as consisted with their tender years, they followed the rule of their order, which moreover contained a provision for relaxing discipline in favour of the weak, the aged, and the very young. The

decree which rendered infants eligible as professed religious was passed during the lifetime of St. Benedict, and continued to prevail during the six succeeding centuries. The custom then died gradually out, probably lingering longest in those districts where the ravages of war and bloodshed in the outer world induced parents to avail themselves of a safe refuge for their helpless offspring. The practice was first introduced from Spain, and is supposed to have originated in the spirit of the Roman law, inherited by the Spaniards, which gave a father the power of life and death over his children. There were not, however, wanting divines who upheld the system upon Scriptural grounds. These viewed it as a mere extension of the principle underlying infant baptism, which pledges its recipients to the most solemn vows before they have reached years of discretion. Such advocates also dwelt strongly, as it was natural they should do, upon the dedication of the infant Samuel. The custom, once fairly established, did not fail to overspread the Benedictine homes of many lands, including England.

We learn from our early chronicles how holy and illustrious were some of the names inscribed upon this infant muster-roll. St. Boniface, the apostle of Germany, the saintly, martyred Archbishop of Mentz, was born A.D. 680, at Crediton in Devonshire, and became a monk at the age of five years. The venerable Bede was a child of seven years when he entered the monastic home at Wearmouth, to which his whole heart clung throughout life with such passionate affection. There is one instance at least on record of a babe who left the cloister to assume the cowl, and we hear of another whose guardians delayed only until he should be weaned, before causing him to take the solemn and irrevocable step, while large was the number of those who in life's earliest dawn embraced the same vocation.

There can be no doubt that the practice of binding infants by indissoluble vows was a most unwise innovation on the spirit of an earlier age. The theory in itself

was a mistaken one, and the Church acted with wisdom when her sanction to it was withdrawn. Great must have been, in many instances, the miseries springing from an enforced vocation. On the other hand, many are the authentic cases in which the entire being seemed entwined around the scenes hallowed from boyhood by familiar and loving association. There is something very touching in the picture drawn by a gifted modern pen of one who had grown up as the child of the monastery from the earliest dawn of his remembrance :

“ There were stored up the associations of his boyhood ; the hopes, fears, and interests of his maturer years. He was to seek for sympathy from his brethren, and to give them his own sympathy in return. He lived and died in their presence ; they prayed for his soul, were proud of his name, and cherished his works.”

Before the period at which our tale begins—namely, the early part of the thirteenth century—the treatment of the little monks had become modified in some important points. When first allowed to take the vows, they had been placed in all respects upon an equal footing with the rest of the community. A newly received grey-haired man ranked lower in choir and refectory than did his baby-senior in monasticism. The idea so current in that age, that the little ones of God’s kingdom spoke on weighty subjects under divine inspiration, found expression in the rule which allowed even young children to vote at the election of an abbot. It was not till a much later period that this power was withheld from them, and that they were governed by a prefect of their own, and ceased to take precedence of their elders. Reverence for age was indeed one of the precepts most strongly enforced by Father Benedict, whose humble nature would have been the first to yield homage to childhood’s innocence, had not his clear ripe judgment shown him the necessity of training the young mind in habits of obedience, order, and submission.

Throughout that evening's meal in the refectory, the steady voice of the reader proclaimed from the lectern the deeds of the saintly young Cordovan, from which all were expected to draw lessons of example and instruction. The repast went on as usual, except for one or two trifling disturbances caused by the children, who were rendered fretful by the sultry air. One baby-monk about three years of age fell fast asleep, leaning his head against the aged brother who sat next him, while his dimpled fingers clasped a bunch of grapes. Another, somewhat older, having finished his portion of figs, tried furtively to snatch from the nearest platter, which chanced to be that of Anselmo. He was reprov'd with mildness by one of the elder monks, but on repeating the offence was sent to kneel alone in a corner of the refectory until the supper should be ended. There was a short office for the little ones directly afterwards, and they were then taken by the appointed brethren to their own dormitory, and laid on their pallets fully robed, according to the rule.

More quaint than even the refectory scene was that of the monastic nursery, with its hushed silence and dim light, its half-cavernous depths of darkness and its partial flooding of southern moonbeams, amid which the consecrated babes were laid to rest. To and fro moved the clumsy yet tender nurses in their sombre vestments, while amid them slept the infant sons of St. Benedict, as still as carven effigies upon a line of tombstones. The chubby, rounded limbs were indeed hidden beneath the conventual garb, but soft were the breathings of calm repose, and sweet the cherub faces peeping from the shadow of the woollen hoods which so closely enshrouded them. There was one low wail from a wakeful babe, which was soothed quietly by the grave watcher, and then followed stillness, until voices chanting in the distance told that all except these veriest lambs of the flock were gathered for the Compline office in the church.

Pietro and Anselmo, having passed the age of seven,

took their places among the regular worshippers. The landscape of which they caught glimpses through the cloister arches was very extraordinary, being steeped in the green misty moonlight which appears peculiar to that region. The leagues of hanging forest which clothed the lower ranges of hills were blanched in the unearthly lustre. The close, heavy air felt fever-laden, for the faint ripple of sunset breeze had died away, leaving a clammy chilliness which made Anselmo shiver as he paced along in the procession at Pietro's side. The prayers and praises of the beautiful service were reviving to the spirits of the weary-hearted child. His last thought as he sank that night upon his pallet was not that another precious day of comfort and home-peace was ended, he dwelt rather upon a verse from the Psalter which seemed to echo Pietro's words, and which appeared full of deeper meaning than he had ever before discerned in it—"The earth is the Lord's, and all that therein is: the compass of the world, and they that dwell therein."

And Father Benedict felt as he did that the poor infidels were objects of compassion rather than of hatred and revenge. If he could help to lead them to the fold of the Good Shepherd, should he count the cost of quitting his own peaceful and secure retreat? Anselmo's heart throbbed high as he responded to the inward call, and for the first time within his recollection he lay quietly thinking, without a shudder, of the wilderness which stretched away in the blanched moonlight far beyond the monastery walls.

CHAPTER III.

THE FOUNTAIN IN THE SEA.

IT was a laughing summer day in Italy, the type of weather which a poet long resident in that country has correctly described as "less blue than radiant." There was no azure hue in the clear sky; only a marvellous transparency which seemed to lead the gaze upward and onward until it was lost in depths of light. The distant outlines were not bold, sharp, and metallic as in other brilliant climates, for land, sea, and sky were softened by that ineffable tenderness which seems peculiar to Italy. The beauteous shores of the Gulf of Spezia slumbered in a golden languor suggestive of noontide, although it was still an early hour of the young July morning. The last snowflakes had long since melted from the Carrara mountains, but the pure white veins of marble which glittered among their peaks were scarcely less refreshing to the eye amid the blaze of a midsummer landscape in the south. Equally grateful were the hanging olive woods of dusky silver, beneath which, watered by hidden rills, gleamed turf of vivid emerald, which retained its freshness throughout the long sultry months of drought. Close to the sea there was a rosy flush of oleander trees, springing like gorgeous bouquets into the blue air. Mingled with these, late oranges and lemons lingered in the sheltered gardens, their contrasted shades of ruddy and pale gold shining amid the burnished leaves. There also were acacias, with their rounded tops, and drooping foliage like deep green velvet plumes. There were tall cypresses, like

slender columns of black marble when viewed from a distance, and amid them were scattered other trees of a leafage so delicate as to retain throughout the summer the exquisite golden green of Eastertide.

Far away stretched the coast line in graceful curves, forming a chain of mimic bays throughout the seven miles of beauty which lay between Spezia and the promontory that now bears the name of Porto di Venere. The sea just then appeared like liquid turquoise, across which the fitful breeze sent shimmering sheets of silver, or a mingling of those changeful rich hues which seem common to a dove's wing and to the waves of southern latitudes. The islands sung by Virgil lay sleeping upon the tranquil waters, and scarcely less slumberous seemed the fishing boats dotted over its shining surface.

High perched above the curving outlines of the gulf, folded away among the overhanging crests of Apennines, nestled the little Saracenic village of Biassa. It was one of the many settlements which had been formed when the coast of Italy was overrun by hordes of those Eastern invaders during the ninth and several succeeding centuries. Even in these days many an English traveller has scaled the steep hill leading from Spezia to Biassa, and then turned away in disappointment; for, despite the oriental type of its inhabitants, the village offers little to repay his pilgrimage. There is a church which may or may not occupy the site of some forsaken mosque, and around it clusters a group of cottages in no respect unlike those of the neighbouring hamlets. Even the women gathered at the fountain do not betray their exotic origin to a careless observer, for their Syrian garb is usually confined to festive seasons. A close scrutiny, however, reveals form, features, and colouring no less distinctively eastern than are the ruined Saracenic towers which rise along the lovely coast, or the date-palms that flourish in its sunniest nooks. These children of a distant land have only within the last thirty years begun to intermarry with the people

among whom they have dwelt for centuries. Ignorant of their ancestral renown, conforming their daily lives to Western usages, clinging to the faith stigmatised by their forefathers as infidelity, still some hoary, vague tradition has until this recent date preserved their nationality from being merged in that of the surrounding population. A visit to Biassa may, and most probably will, lead to disenchantment, yet the stranger's interest in its people is revived when some *festa* attracts the dwellers of the mountain villages to Spezia as to a common centre. The compact mass in the little market-place makes every step a labour. The eye fresh from England is bewildered by the rainbow tints and shifting shapes of the gay southern picture. Quaint are the costumes even now, although less rich and varied than in former years, while the head-dress peculiar to the Spezia women is one which can scarcely fail to provoke a smile. It is a hat of coarse straw trimmed with scarlet braid, about the size of those sold by dolls' milliners, and is worn merely for ornament, since it affords no more protection from the sun than would a flower or a knot of ribbon.

But, strange as this headgear may seem to unaccustomed eyes, there soon appears among the crowd another more remarkable, though also more familiar, which transports the gazer to the distant East. There is a woman with the horns of which he has so often read in narratives of Bible lands, only these are not made of metal like those of the Druses on Mount Lebanon, but of some light pliant material, covered with folds of white ribbon. Neither do they project from the forehead as we commonly see them in paintings; they are coiled in a circular form around the wearer's head. The rest of the costume is very singular. A skirt of some heavy material and subdued colour, gathered into massive plaits; a dark-blue apron reaching nearly to the feet; a bodice of clear muslin, also plaited, and adorned with gay stripes of silken embroidery, and with antique lace of extreme value and beauty. The

sleeves, enriched with the same costly fabric, are gathered above the wrist into a band, and fall over the hands in graceful folds. Earrings, necklace and other ornaments complete the attire, according to the wealth and position of its wearer, while here, as elsewhere in Italy, the gold, silver, and gems are real, and generally constitute a woman's dowry. A cross of some precious metal is of almost universal use among the peasants of Biassa. It is fearlessly displayed before the eyes of sympathising neighbours as a heritage which has descended to these children of Arabia through many centuries of Christianity. Too natural and simple is its presence to excite remark, yet, to the thoughtful student, volumes of church history are condensed in the habitual use of that holy symbol, which thus silently attests the triumph of our faith over the creed of the False Prophet.

But on that radiant morning, at the beginning of the thirteenth century, the symbol of the Crucified could not be thus openly worn by those of His followers whose lot was cast among the Saracenic towns and villages. There was no outward sign to stamp Axia as a Christian when she stood upon the threshold of her mountain dwelling. Her attire was very similar to that of her descendants in the market-place at Spezia, excepting for the absence of the cross, and for the presence of a veil which draped her stately form and hid her noble and majestic features. Her bearing was full of a gracious modesty, enhanced by a calm dignity of look and tone, which half-unconsciously challenged respect, and for the most part won it. Her mien was strangely unlike that of the oppressed women around her, but she was ennobled by the faith which raises woman to her rightful place in the scale of creation, and amid the most degrading scenes of Moslem life, she never lost her consciousness of the rank which had been conferred on her by Christianity. And now, having commended herself to God's protection, Axia stepped forth, bearing her life in her hand. Counting the cost, she was

about to undertake a duty which would almost surely end in her own death, while yet, through the mercy of heaven, it might prove the means of winning life eternal for the being to whom she had given life on earth.

Poised in the graceful Eastern mode upon her head was a large open basket, woven in close fibres, in a manner which combined lightness and strength. It was piled high with blushing flowers and fresh vine leaves, in which nestled green and purple figs, the earliest harvest of the summer. Very often Axia set forth thus laden with the produce of her husband's garden, to be sold among the servants of the wealthy families scattered along the coast. She always found a ready market for her stores, owing to the scrupulous honesty which rendered both their price and quality above suspicion. The neighbours witnessed her departure without comment; the proceeding was so in accordance with her usual habits. How should they imagine that many long days must pass ere she could reappear among them? Who could have gathered from that measured step and quiet tone, that when she did regain her husband's roof it would be only to deliver herself up to nearly certain death? The basket which she balanced with that graceful ease peculiar to those who are trained from childhood to bear heavy loads upon the head, contained an infant two months old, sleeping beneath the flowers and vine leaves. He was the first-born whom Axia had promised to the Lord, and being otherwise unable to secure for him a Christian training, she had formed the bold design of praying the monks of Barcello to receive him into their community. This end attained, she would return, and confess the course she had adopted to her husband, but without disclosing the infant's retreat. The issue of events was in God's hands, and to Him Axia felt well content to leave it. If spared, the one object of her life should be to strive and pray for the conversion of her husband, but she knew that death was nearly sure to be the penalty of

her offence, and she did not prepare to take so grave a step without entire readiness to meet its consequences.

Axia was no offspring of a mixed race, for, although born in Italy, she was a daughter of the East by virtue of her parents, both of whom claimed a descent equally pure. Her mother had been taught the true faith by a Christian slave, and had proclaimed it openly in her last illness, when the death which she had lacked courage to brave by a confession of her creed in days of health, seemed now about to overtake her. She had no human support, for Zillah, the converted Jewish maid, had previously incurred her master's displeasure, and been sold into distant captivity. Thus there was no one at hand to sustain the dying woman except Axia, then a girl about fourteen, who had been secretly instructed by her mother in the creed which the latter imperfectly understood. Axia was no coward, but the love of life throbbed strongly in her warm young heart, over which Christianity held only a partial sway. She would have died to save her mother, but she was not willing to make such a sacrifice for the belief which had as yet won from her only a faint wavering allegiance. Should she share that cup of poison which had been decreed for Selma? To do so would not avert the victim's fate, and the poor child recoiled with horror from the thought of needlessly incurring a similar doom. Selma herself did not desire it. "Live, daughter, live to be baptized," she said, while calmly awaiting the fatal draught. "You have a strong courageous soul, and you will openly confess the dear Lord's name. For me it is too late, and yet I die happy because I feel that I belong to Him." Thus did poor Selma depart, unregenerate as regards outward ordinances, while yet received into Christ's Church through the "Baptism of Desire," in itself held to be effectual where other means of grace are wanting, and which in her case was sealed yet further by the Baptism of Blood. Axia dated her first strong convictions from the moment in

which she beheld the beaming smile that triumphed over mortal weakness as her mother drained the cup offered by her own husband ; signed the Cross upon her forehead, and then meekly folded her hands to wait for death. She passed away without apparent pain, in a dull stupor, under the influence of the soporific poison which had been selected. Abdallah loved her truly, but he was a gloomy fanatic, and the laws of Mahomet denounced death against all who should embrace another creed. He would have listened to no accusation against Selma, but her own lips had sealed her apostacy, and die she must, though it should be in the most merciful manner. He thought too that Axia would be deterred from the like errors by the sight of their result, but here, as has often been the case before, he proved mistaken. The moment in which the soft eyes of the martyr closed in death was that in which the heritage of her life-giving faith appeared to have descended to her child.

Three years passed on, and Axia was promised in marriage to one not alone of her own race, but of her native village. She knew only too well the bitter fruits of a union between Christians and unbelievers, but she never dreamed of disputing her father's will, nor seeking to escape the destiny which he had chosen for her. She was still unbaptized, though she had long earnestly sought an opportunity for the reception of that holy sacrament. She rarely, if ever, exchanged a word with any except Moslems, and her patience was long tried, but God did finally open the way, and the answer to Axia's prayers came at a moment when she least expected it.

About six weeks after her marriage, she descended to the coast one morning before sunrise, hoping at that hour to make a better bargain with the fishermen upon whom she depended to supply her husband's meal. She caught sight of a boat with a single rower, who was just landing after a toilsome night in a small sheltered cove, beneath a bank covered with tangled vegetation. Axia

clambered down amid luxuriant masses of wild fig-trees, until she stood at the water's edge and accosted the boatman. He was a lay brother belonging to one of the neighbouring monasteries, and he had been despatched to procure fish for the use of his community.

"You are a Christian?" commenced Axia abruptly, and forgetful of the reason for which she had first intended to address him.

"Yea, truly, by the grace of God," said Brother Stefano, "and you, my child?"

"I am a Christian too, but only in heart and desire."

"You mean that you have never been baptized?" asked Brother Stefano with kindly interest. "Yes," replied Axia sadly, and in a few words she outpoured the history of her patient waiting. Brother Stefano had landed, and stood thoughtfully leaning upon his oar.

"I am no priest," he presently remarked, "only a poor lay brother from yon monastery up the height, yet can I do this work of mercy in case of necessity. You are quite sure, however, that the services of God's priests are beyond your reach?"

"Quite sure," said Axia, speaking with imploring fervour, "nearly fourteen moons have waned since last I held speech with a Christian."

"Come with me then, daughter," said the old man, handing her into his boat. "I know where a well of sweet water rises from these briny depths. May it be made unto thy soul a fountain springing up unto life everlasting."

He rowed in silence for some space, then paused and sheathed his oar. Axia gazed around, not knowing what should follow, yet with childlike trust in the good faith of her companion. Behind them lay the lovely coast, touched with the tender hues preceding sunrise. Before them rose the hilly crest of the Isle of Palmyra, of which the peaceful beauty is now marred to us by the sight of the convict's garb, and the clank of his heavy chain.

Beyond lay Tino, and yet further down the coast, its outer side washed by the swelling of the open sea, Tinetto, a tiny fertile islet with a convent in the centre, and a soil so rich that the flowers planted in its garden overspread the whole tract with their graceful forms and brilliant tints.

But Axia's gaze was fixed upon a nearer object. As the first sunbeams flashed from the blue glittering sky, they fell upon a little jet, which sprang at intervals from the calm bosom of the gulf, and turned the crystal drops into a shower of gold. Axia bent forward, caught the clear spray in her open palm, and tasted it. No morning dew could have been sweeter or more pure.

"I have heard of fresh fountains hid beneath the burning sands whence came my people," she said, turning in surprise to her companion; "but never did I believe the salt sea could yield wholesome drink."

"It is the work of Him who made both sea and land," replied Stefano, reverently, "and by this act I consecrate it to His glory: kneel, my daughter."

Axia knelt in the boat's stern, and Stefano drew from his robe a shell which he had found among the rocks, and which he had kept as an offering to one of the monks who had a talent for illumination. In shape it was not unlike those which are still seen in the Roman catacombs, preserved as the baptismal fonts of the primitive Christians. This shell was of pearly whiteness, iridescent with bright hues within. Thrice was the vessel filled by Brother Stefano from that mysterious spring. Thrice was the Holy Name invoked, as the wave flooded Axia's dusky forehead; then with blessings, prayers, and the sign of the cross, the rite concluded. After a short pause of silent thanksgiving, Stefano pulled hastily towards the shore; for it was late, and though his own superior would pardon a delay thus caused, Axia dared not linger. When the boat touched the strand they parted, never more to meet on earth. Axia walked rapidly to the nearest village, and was fortu-

nate in there obtaining fish, and in regaining home before her prolonged absence drew down serious displeasure from her husband. He did indeed administer a slight reproof, but the grave brightness of Axia's face disarmed him, and made him inclined to listen to her meek apologies. Thenceforth Axia bore about with her a fount of happiness too deep to be disturbed by outward trials. Beneath the bitter waters which so often threatened to engulf a Christian woman joined in wedlock to a Saracen, welled the pure stream of life which never yet had failed her ; which could even now gladden her soul as she set out bearing her infant son, upon a journey fraught with peril, if not death, to both.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BABY SARACEN.

AN extent of sixty miles divided the hill village of Biassa from the mountain city of Barcello. At best it would have proved an arduous journey when pursued on foot, even had there been on Axia's part no need for haste and secrecy. As it was, forced at times to overtax her strength by rapid walking, then to lie concealed for many hours, ever meanwhile on the alert for hidden foes, what marvel that her spirits should droop more and more at every fresh stage of the weary march? Her difficulties were increased by the necessity of choosing a route so circuitous as to treble the actual distance. She began by diverging seven miles to Porto di Venere, since she could thence plunge into the heart of a mountain tract which she had never visited, whereas the path nearest Biassa led through a region in which she was too well known to escape question and remark. She had been more than once to Porto di Venere, with its embattled towers crowning the summit of the craggy rock which they defended, and its narrow paved lanes, rising terrace above terrace to the level of the castle walls. The main thoroughfare, comparatively broad, and slightly raised above the sea, ran through the whole length of the town, presenting a specimen of street architecture unique in that age and country. It lay cool and dim under the burning noontide, for the tall grave palaces which bordered it nearly met overhead, much in the style of those in ancient Moorish cities. Where the houses ceased,

began a low line of fortified walls, extending along a narrow promontory which jutted into the sea, and ending in a mound on which stood a small chapel, built on the foundations of a temple of Venus. Changed in these days is Porto di Venere, although it still remains one of the most picturesque points on the Italian coast. The ancient towers, massive and imposing even yet, are crumbling into shapeless ruins on the hillside. A few columns of black and white marble, overarched by a roof rich with groining, alone testify to the past beauty of a church whose history has left scarcely a trace or legend. None the less is it a suggestive ruin to the mind which can delight itself with "bygone tales of no one's telling." Even apart from all imaginative interest, there is the charm of exceeding loveliness in nature: on the one hand bold white pillared cliffs, contrasting with the northern range of yellow-veined black marble; on the other, a low gentle shore-line, with a wide expanse of southern sea. Returning from the chapel to the central thoroughfare, one may dream for hours over the sealed chapters of mediæval history of which those grim old palaces now stand as the sullen depositories. Merry are the pictures of street life which they now offer, despite the cavernous doorways leading the eye onward to yet more sepulchral depths of gloom. The air is filled with the shrill cries of fruit women, and vendors of coarse lace, and boys with shells, pebbles, and fragments of coarse pottery, which they eagerly press for sale on every passer-by. On the steps of some blackened staircase, dimly visible through the yet blacker doorway, may be seen troops of little children, raised tier above tier, over each other's heads, or swarming around the knees of some hoary dame, twirling a hoarier spindle. But this is a sketch of the nineteenth century. Different indeed was the appearance of these stately dwellings, then tenanted by an exclusive wealthy aristocracy, when Axia passed through their midst, holding the babe in her arms, and stopping at a baker's

shop near the domed Saracen gateway to purchase as much bread as she could carry, knowing that it might be long before her store could be replenished.

It would be tedious to recount in full the wanderings of the fugitive, which were moreover singularly uneventful for that period. She was inured to burning heat, and the cool night air always brought refreshment; nor was there any risk of fever, as there would have been in the unhealthy autumn months. The villages were few and far between, and she would often have endured the pangs of hunger but for the hospitality of some wayside cottage, or the kindly offices of some lonely goatherd on the hills. The child laughed and flourished, and his winning ways proved Axia's greatest solace, for she resolutely put aside all those depressing thoughts of separation which might have unnerved her for her task. In general she slept under the shadow of a rock, or in the green shade of the chestnut forests which began to mingle with the olives as she steadily ascended. On the first evening a thunderstorm drove her for shelter to a cavern near Biassa, for the circuit she had been obliged to make brought her at sunset within a few miles of the spot which she had quitted at dawn. It was the grotto now commonly known as Virgil's Cave, and still a favourite resort of the more enterprising visitors to Spezia. The place cannot be safely explored, except by torchlight, being dark and of considerable extent, with black pools lurking under foot, and slimy moisture oozing from the walls. The roof is hung with beautiful stalactites, and above the entrance is a time-worn inscription which identifies it as the "home of the nymphs," sung by the classic poet many centuries ago. Its site upon the mountain slope, half buried in an undergrowth of aromatic shrubs, may even now be best discovered from the accurate description of the bard. Poor, weary Axia, with her drenched garments, might have preferred an humbler refuge for the sake of greater comfort, but she thankfully accepted the nymphs' hos-

pitality, which at the least shielded her from the red forked lightning that might have proved fatal in the forest. She found a nook in which, despite the chill and dampness, she fell peacefully asleep, with the babe folded to her breast, and when the summer morn rose clear and radiant, she proceeded with fresh hope upon her way.

After nearly four weeks of privation and fatigue, Axia reached the head of that magnificent wild pass now known as the Gorge of the Apennines, and began to descend to the more fertile tracts below. She still had about thirty miles of distance to traverse, but she was now among the kindly, simple-hearted peasantry of Lucca, most of whom were ready to afford her food and a night's shelter for the love of God. There was also much to gratify her passionate love of the beautiful during this last stage of her journey. Upon reaching the foot of the gorge her path still followed the meanderings of the Lima, at that season a mere slender rill, although in winter it became a swollen torrent, which often overflowed its banks and inundated the surrounding country. The valley was for the most part very narrow, seeming to have been originally a mere chasm worn by the passage of the water through the rocks. On either side towered lofty walls of cliff, sometimes silvered with olive trees or green with chestnuts, but in general so barren that the thin, sparse vegetation which clung to their sides only increased the look of desolation. Many a diademed city of towers was set among the crags, like a rudely-cut jewel, its turrets, portal, and embattled keep according so well with the general features of the landscape as almost to prevent an unpractised eye from discerning where the natural ramparts ended and the artificial ones began. Those Apennine towns, hoary with romance and legend, still rest on their mountain bases as securely as they did when Axia gazed upward to them as she wound her way through the depths of the valley. The whole region is unique in

its extraordinary wealth of antique monuments, combined with an almost entire dearth of actual ruins.

Despite the chequered history of the duchy of Lucca, her towns seem in some inexplicable way to have escaped the havoc and destruction which have elsewhere wasted cities equally secure in site and solid in construction. There are few of those mountain fastnesses which date back for less than a thousand years, and nearly all remain in such a state of preservation, that one fancies they might be at will re-peopled by their old inhabitants.

It was early on a brilliant August afternoon when Axia reached Barcello, and began to climb the steep street that led upward to the monastery. At its entrance she was fortunate in meeting Father Benedict himself, for, independently of his position and authority, she could not have found a more sympathising listener. With every assurance of his protection to the babe, the Abbot readily promised that the poor little one should be received upon the morrow into the community. Meanwhile he sent a lay brother to conduct Axia to a suitable lodging in the town, and feeling now safe from pursuit, the wanderer abandoned herself to the comfort of repose, and to the brief reprieve from the impending separation. The child was her own for one more precious night. Before another sunset she should have taken her leave of him for ever as regards this world, but the brave heart throbbed even then exultingly in the belief that he would be more truly hers than if nursed at her side in the home of the infidel.

In the meantime the Abbot sought the gardens where the inmates of the monastery were assembled, as it chanced to be the hour of recreation. Every eye was fixed upon him with attention while he told of his meeting with Axia, the promise she had won from him, and the coming reception of a baby monk from the ranks of the Saracens. Pietro alone looked dissatisfied, and murmured

audibly, "Good Christians deem it a boon, father, when their children are enrolled in your illustrious order, and this babe is a born infidel."

"But he will be regenerate, my son, and made a Christian, by God's blessing, with to-morrow's dawn. Tell me, Pietro, were not we too born children of wrath before, through heaven's mercy, we became children of grace?"

"I like not to consort with infidels!" muttered Pietro, but Father Benedict, who did not wish to harden the boy by reproof, allowed the words to pass unnoticed. Pietro's nature was one which could only be developed aright by consummate patience, tact, and skill. There was much that recalled his apostolic namesake, in the union of affectionate warmth and intemperate zeal which made it difficult to check the sin without blighting the virtue.

Closely akin also to the spirit of exclusiveness which made St. Peter recoil from fellowship with the Gentiles was the temper now manifest in Pietro. Would the child's fault be as nobly vanquished as that of the saint of old, transformed into a burning love and melting tenderness for the same race which he had once despised? That was a question which time only could decide.

The superior turned away from his companions and began to pace the solitary cloister, lost in thought. Anselmo had made no remark upon his tidings, and evinced little, if any interest, but the Abbot's keen eye had detected a bright momentary smile which faded while he gazed. Father Benedict mused on an observation lately made to him by Brother Innocent, that "Pietro's soul seemed a garden of roses, and Anselmo's a valley of lilies." In the one case ardent self-sacrifice and the gifts accompanying an active vocation, symbolised the splendour of the richer flower, no less than did humility, peace, gentleness, and purity the lily-like graces of the other. To tend aright both these fair gardens, and to nurture the trees of the Lord's planting therein, was a task very dear

to the spirit of Father Benedict. Pietro's failings, although graver, caused him less uneasiness than did those of Anselmo, for the latter lay less near the surface, and were often hidden even from their victim. Not that hypocrisy tainted his nature; on the contrary, the chief hope for his future lay in the truthfulness which had not even learned to scorn a lie, because of freedom from the temptation. His chief defect was an imaginative, dreamy indolence, which, while dwelling upon visionary triumphs of the faith, still shrank no less from mental than from physical exertion. There was much excuse for this in constitutional ill-health, but after making due allowance for infirmity, the boy was still in some degree to blame. His winning sweetness and obedience almost disarmed rebuke, while fatherly care for his weakness made it difficult to judge when it was needed, and in doubtful cases the kind Abbot always inclined to the side of mercy. He hoped much from the coming reception of a baby Saracen into the order. Would not the helplessness of that poor little one soften Pietro and arouse Anselmo from his gentle listlessness? Surely a spirit of holy activity must be awakened in an earnest heart by this living incentive to win other souls from the power of Satan unto the Kingdom of God and of His Christ? When the Abbot of Barcello re-entered his cell he knelt to thank God, not alone for this stray lamb about to be received into the fold, but also for the help which he foresaw, from the child's presence in their midst, to the community at large, especially the two boys who just then occasioned him the most anxiety.

Only too soon for Axia came the beauteous golden dawn which seemed the darkest hour of her life. The bitterness of the inevitable parting had been scarcely realised in the excitement and fatigue of the past journey, but it now rushed on her with the overwhelming power of a sudden blow. Though unable to be present at the infant's reception into the order, she was allowed to ac-

company him to the font, and hold him in her arms until the moment in which he was taken to yet holier keeping. Then, after kneeling to join in the thanksgiving, she pressed her lips on the child's forehead with passionate fervour and departed, without trusting herself to turn back for another look. Slowly and wearily she retraced the toilsome route to Biassa, her heart so heavy that she had ceased to dread the probable result of her husband's displeasure. To have done with a life so full of pain was rather the blessing for which she strove not to yearn unduly, but the rest that she desired was not then to be her portion. When she reached Biassa it appeared nearly deserted, for some local conflict between Saracens and Christians had begun upon the day on which she had left home, and, although now subsiding, did not yet admit of the return of the hill dwellers to their villages. Axia found only a few old men, women, and children to receive her, and there was little surprise expressed at her delay, which, indeed, seemed easily accounted for by the unsettled, dangerous state of the country. The babe was supposed to have died from exposure, since Axia made no allusion to him, and she was not forced to parry questions, for her natural reserve had always more or less deterred the neighbours from inquiring into her affairs. Besides, the present population of Biassa had abundant matter for pre-occupation in the fate of absent relatives, and thus Axia was left to the calm tenour of her daily life, devoting herself to prayer for her husband, and seeking to gain courage for whatsoever destiny might be appointed for her in the order of God's Providence.

Meanwhile the newly baptized Christian at Barcello had been duly invested with the cowl, and admitted to the ranks of the sons of St. Benedict. There seemed a touch of stoicism in the dusky Oriental babe, when he became the centre of a group which crowded round to welcome their new brother. Dismayed by the removal from his mother's arms into those of the Abbot, tired and

bewildered by the long offices which ensued, a child of European lineage would have been less enduring amid that throng of unknown faces and cowed figures. As it was, "Brother Cipriano" remained outwardly unmoved, his tiny limbs firm, and his face serene, except for the startled eyes which betrayed his terror to the Abbot, and which caused him to dismiss the bystanders. But suddenly the child's countenance lighted up, and with a gesture of infantile trust and eagerness, he stretched forth both his little bronzed hands towards Pietro. The boy's generous heart responded to the innocent appeal, and Father Benedict smiled on the pair as he resigned his charge, and noted the protecting clasp with which Pietro's arms were folded around the infant. Thus began the career of the small heaven-sent messenger, unconsciously a teacher of charity to the wilful young heart, which Father Benedict and all his monks had failed to win. Pride, prejudice, self-righteousness, and obstinacy melted away, and the love which remained faithful unto death dated from the moment in which Pietro's soul expanded to receive a baby Saracen into the bond of Christian brotherhood.

CHAPTER V.

A MEDIÆVAL CHILD-DREAM.

It was the vintage season at Barcello, and during the hours prescribed by the rule of St. Benedict for manual labour, the whole monastic family, quitting their several handicrafts, were called to unite in one common task. Continuous and systematic industry, directed by skill and intelligence, had converted their estate into a garden of fertility and beauty, such as indeed commonly sprang up around the Benedictine haunts, even in northern climates. The pride of the Barcello monks was their extensive vineyard, which, like most triumphs of agriculture, was the recompense of many years of patient toil. A hill so high as almost to deserve the name of mountain, had been slowly cut from base to summit into hanging terraces, and planted with such varieties of grape as love the uplands rather than the plain. A plenteous harvest was now waiting to be garnered, and a fairer sight could hardly have been found upon that autumn morning throughout the length and breadth of the Lucchese Hills. The vines, trained in the Italian mode into bowery arches, were ablaze with the rich colouring of September, and trembled with every dancing breeze or sunbeam, into lovelier hues, and sweeter forms of grace. The generous fruit varied in tint from regal purple to translucent amber or pale green, while many of the garlands fairly bent to earth beneath their luscious treasure. Father Benedict, in making his rounds, stopped at a vine on which he counted six and twenty golden clusters. "This must be

a thankoffering to God, my children," he said, turning to the little ones who followed in his footsteps. "Ye shall fill your basket with this bounteous store, to solace the parched fever-stricken lips in yonder village." There was a joyful assent from Pietro, ever alive to the interest of the moment, and then Father Benedict moved onward to direct the other groups and share their labour, leaving the boys to begin the pleasant task he had assigned to them.

There had been no more infants received at Barcello for the past four years; indeed the custom of admitting babes into the order was nearly obsolete, and they had virtually become ineligible unless under circumstances so exceptional as to justify a departure from the ordinary rule. The youngest child in the community was therefore Brother Cipriano, "our Baby Saracen," as he was still called by Pietro, who employed the term no longer in contempt, but in pride and affection. "Our Baby Bacchus," might have been just then the more appropriate title, could one so profane have been applied to a son of St. Benedict. The tiny Saracenic monk was standing on a mossy knoll, holding a bunch of grapes over the head of Pietro, as the latter knelt before him, like a fervent worshipper at the shrine of his deity. It needed only that the little cowl should be replaced by the scanty drapery and wreath of vineleaves of an ancient statue, to convert the merry child, with his bronzed healthy cheeks and laughing eyes, into a denizen of Olympus. But far from Pietro's thoughts were such Pagan associations. To him Cipriano was the representative of those vast hordes of infidels whom he had taken under his protection, from the moment in which the appealing baby arms had been outstretched to him in the monastic church.

The sultry noontide soon lulled Cipriano into a deep slumber, and Pietro laid him tenderly under a rock which, projecting slightly, shaded his head from the fever-giving rays of the fierce sun. Then, like a valiant little husbandman, he set to work again, clearing the portion of the

terrace which had been allotted to him. Anselmo was as usual at his side, but the other children had been called to their small separate tasks in the least sunny corners of the vineyard. Presently Brother Innocent appeared, lifted the sleeping Cipriano in his arms, and telling the two others that the recreation hour had begun, departed, leaving them to fling themselves beneath a lichened crag in all the luxury of well-earned rest.

“Anselmo,” said Pietro, almost in a whisper, “will you promise solemnly, this very moment, to be my brother in arms?”

“But I *have* promised,” cried Anselmo, with a gesture of surprise; “we have always meant to belong in that way to each other, ever since the holy palmer told us of those two brave knights in Palestine, both struck down wounded unto death, yet spared to exchange the last comforts of religion.”

“Yes,” cried Pietro, as he leant back with closed eyelids, “I can see it all like a picture, Anselmo. The crusading warriors lay there amid heaps of slain, their lances planted like a cross between them on the field of battle. The one whose life-blood could not be staunched gasped out a last confession to his brother, and heard from his lips the words of peace. Cold drops stood on the brow of him who first assumed the sacred office, for a barbed arrow rankled in his breast, yet he forbade the leech to draw it when told that he only held his life by that tenure of pain. Then kneeling in his turn, he outpoured the like confidence to his brother, who with one last effort laid his hands on the bared head, thus sealing the message of forgiveness which he scarcely had the strength to speak. This done, a comrade, who was reverently watching the scene beyond hearing, called a priest, who snatched one instant from the many souls that claimed his care, to share between those two the single wafer which was the chief token of their oneness in the Lord. Thus the twin spirits winged their flight

ere set of sun, and their bodies were buried in the same wave of that sandy sea, with the cross on their bosoms, but not raised to mark their resting place, because the infidel would have profaned the symbol of salvation."

"Shall we in like wise die on the same day, I wonder?" mused Anselmo. "That were bliss such as falls to the lot of few. I would gladly tell you all my faults, Pietro, but you know that brothers in arms cannot be as priests to each other, unless there be none at hand with leisure to administer the Church's sacraments."

"We must not speak of dying, sweet though such a death would be," returned Pietro, whose limbs, free from poisoned arrows, were reclining on a bed of moss. "We must pray like the patriarchs for length of days. We will ask God to let us live to be very old men, and gather in thousands of infidels to the true fold."

"Yes, we will pray that they may number seventy times seven, because that means without limit, like Divine forgiveness. Do you not recollect how you explained it to me last week in the Scuola?"

"I should think I *did* remember, when the telling you cost both of us our supper," said Pietro ruefully. "And after all they were good words, which I heard at the lection on the evening that you caught a chill, and were ordered to the infirmary."

"But Father Benedict says that good words are like good plants—weeds, when they grow in the wrong places. He explained to me that we are the children of a God of Order, and that our lives should be beauteous with the harmony which marks His glorious creation. He loves to see our thoughts, and words, and deeds, not only innocent, but set in their appointed course, like flowers on the earth, or stars in heaven."

The offence which had incurred so grave a sentence in the Scuola, was one of no rare occurrence in Pietro's educational career. No sooner did some fresh idea spring to life in that ardent young fancy, than it was im-

parted to his second self with utter disregard to time or place. Anselmo's share in the transgression had been simply an entreaty that his comrade should be silent, but the teacher's quick ear caught the whispered colloquy, and both the culprits were sent supperless to bed. How different might have been their fate, had the weaker spirit never yielded to its fellow in more weighty matters than these slight deviations from the discipline of the monastic school!

"Whether we live to be old men, or die young," presently resumed Anselmo, "we will love each other as those warriors in Palestine must have loved. And now we are already brethren in Christ through our baptism, even though we cannot for many years become brothers in arms."

"We can become such on this very day," exclaimed Pietro; "before vespers we will make our vow at the high altar in the church."

"But no one will be able to attend to us," rejoined the younger child. "The monks are all so busy, and I know that Father Benedict is writing out despatches for the Abbot at Pescaglia."

"I did not mean that we should take the vows in presence of the whole community, Anselmo. You and I will kneel quite by ourselves, and make the promise to God, and to each other. No one need ever be told that we have done so."

"But ought we to venture on so grave a step without the knowledge and advice of our superiors?"

"Pietro paused: "I did not think of that," he answered candidly; "yet Father Benedict smiled when I told him of our wish. He said, 'God bless both the lads, and make them so to live under the banner of His Cross, that they may attain unto a blissful brotherhood in Heaven!'"

Anselmo offered no further remonstrance, and the two boys stole away to the cloistered church, which seemed gratefully cool and dim after the sultry glow of the vine-

yard. Holding each other's hands they paced the aisle, until they paused at the high altar, around which already gathered the most sacred memories of their young lives. They knelt before it, made the holy sign, and then Pietro said in a voice low with reverence, yet simply as though he had been addressing Father Benedict: "O God, Anselmo and I promise to live and die in Thy service. We ask Thee to let us be brothers in arms, and fight together to win back Thy Holy City from the infidel, and give us now Thy blessing on our brotherhood, through Jesus Christ our Lord."

"Amen," whispered Anselmo softly; and with hands still clasped, the children bent once more in silent prayer for a few seconds, after which they rose, and left the church as noiselessly as they had entered it. The scene was one which dwelt vividly in their recollection, although at the time it had only appeared a simple episode in an unmemorable day. The chief desire of their lives had been expressed before God, with a prayer for its fulfilment and His blessing. That was all, and to minds reared in an atmosphere of devotion, it was the most natural and simple of events. Yet a seal of sanctity seemed set upon the bond between them, and a sense of being "really now brothers in arms," was the last thought that mingled with the dreams of each when slumber closed the eyes that, in a few months, would never more reopen to the scenes of their monastic home.

CHAPTER VI.

THE INFANT CRUSADER.

As time wore on, a morbid restlessness appeared to gain possession of Pietro. He chafed under the mild restraints inseparable from school discipline, and the limited range of his conventual home goaded him into a sense of bondage. The bright, sweet merriment, which had hitherto rendered him the sunbeam of Barcello, was clouded by angry discontent or sullen melancholy. He became the ringleader of those turbulent spirits of whom some are always to be found in an assemblage of boys, and headed so many open rebellions that the monks declared such stormy times had never before been known in their annals. Brother Innocent inclined to severe measures, but these the gentle Abbot refused to sanction. The child seemed to him like a caged bird seeking to burst its bars, and he anxiously pondered whether there were any means of speeding the captive upon its flight. There were signs of physical illness which betokened an absolute need for change of air, and Father Benedict removed Pietro for a while to a lesser house of the order, twelve miles distant, in the fair, luxuriant valley of the Serchio. He returned more than ever listless and depressed, for the routine of life in the two monasteries was almost identical, and the smaller afforded even less variety than that to which he was accustomed. Clearly some more effectual remedy must be devised, but what, it was hard to determine, as the Abbot could not transfer so wayward a charge to any one excepting his natural pro-

tectors. Pietro had been placed under his care several years previously, when suddenly left motherless, and the boy's father, Count Gallicano, did not desire to be burdened with his son until the latter reached an age for sharing his own warlike and adventurous career. At present the Count was beyond seas, else the Abbot would have urged him strongly to place the lad under military training ; but he had himself no right to assume such a responsibility, and could only endeavour to act for the best under very trying and disadvantageous circumstances.

In one point only did Pietro seem unaltered, namely, in the steadfastness of his affection for Anselmo. The latter had partly outgrown the delicacy of his childhood, and developed an amount of intellectual vigour of which formerly none had supposed him capable. The talents consecrated to God's glory were now sedulously cultivated, and the sense of a congenial aim in life had turned the tide of his dreamy enthusiasm into a more practical channel. He had begun to acquire the ascendancy over Pietro instead of being invariably led by his impulsive friend, and there were none whose words had so much weight with the rash boy when he was bent on an unusually daring deed of wilfulness.

About this time extraordinary rumours reached the ear of Father Benedict, at first so vague and contradictory as scarcely to be deemed worthy of credit, but re-echoed from so many sources that their truth was slowly and reluctantly forced upon his conviction.

A strange moral epidemic seemed to have burst out among the children of France, Germany, and the Netherlands, and to be gradually tending onward by the way of Provence and the seaport towns of Northern Italy. An army which already numbered thousands, and was hourly increasing, had sprung up almost spontaneously to snatch Jerusalem from the hands of the infidel, its soldiers being boys and girls ranging from fifteen years almost to infancy. Some said the movement had originated with the little

ones themselves, others that it was the crafty device of abandoned wretches who sought to entice the helpless innocents from hearth and home in order that they might be sold into Moslem captivity. The report, however, which seemed best authenticated was that the first impetus had been given by an old man speaking several languages, who, after the manner of Peter the Hermit, preached throughout Flanders and Picardy that babes and sucklings should restore the Holy Sepulchre to Christendom, and win the victory denied to those whose motives were less single and their lives less pure. The Abbot could not learn the name of this singular personage, nor ascertain whether he were incited to the deed by covetousness, or by fanaticism verging on insanity. The latter seemed the more probable supposition, but in either case the issue would be equally disastrous. God cannot be the author of confusion, and so far as he had heard, lawlessness reigned supreme in the juvenile ranks. All natural ties and duties were set at defiance. It was said that the commands of parents were of no avail, that neither bolts and bars, nor tears, prayers, and entreaties could stem the wild torrent from rushing impetuously to its doom. If it be true, as we are told in Holy Writ, that "Every tree shall be known by his fruit," assuredly this must have sprung from the author of evil, not from the hand of the heavenly Husbandman.

In studying the chronicles of the thirteenth century, one is surprised to find how scanty are the records which relate to the uprising of that band of ninety thousand children, intent on the most fantastic enterprise which the imagination can conceive. That an episode, unparalleled in history, should have made so slight an impression on the age, can only be accounted for by the stirring events which filled the world at the same period, drowning with trumpet-blast the feeble war-cry of those babes of chivalry. It must also be remembered that in mediæval times the young often assumed a more prominent part in

public life than in our own day, and hence that the spectacle may have been less astounding to contemporary eyes than it is possible for us to comprehend.

The chief anxiety of Father Benedict was, lest a whisper of this crusade should be wafted to Pietro, and serve as fuel to the consuming flame of his desire for action. He trusted the movement would soon die a natural death, and that his pupil might remain in ignorance of all which was transpiring until he could be placed under his father's care, and find in manly sports or martial exercise a healthful outlet for his surplus of vitality.

It seemed for a while as though the hope of the Superior were likely to be realised, as a considerable interval elapsed without bringing further intelligence of the little warriors. Barcello was indeed nearly excluded from communication with the outer world, owing to the spring thaw, which caused the Serchio, fed by many a swollen stream, to burst its bounds and inundate all the surrounding country. The low-lying lands were under water, and the very hills became like mammoth sponges, so that for many weeks intercourse was suspended even between the dwellers in adjacent hamlets. If existence seemed monotonous to Benedictine schoolboys, in their large, cheerful community, what must it not have been to the inhabitants of the walled villages far up the heights, which were so nearly inaccessible even in summer? Many of them were buried deep in hanging woods of the sweet chestnut—aptly termed “the bread-fruit tree of Italy”—with which it was then customary to surround such isolated towns, in order that the food which was almost the sole subsistence of their inmates might be close at hand amid all the vicissitudes of human war or elemental strife. A patriarchal group each settlement comprised, sufficient for its own wants, temporal and spiritual, for a wind-swept oratory usually crowned the highest pinnacle, and thence the houses straggled downward to the very shadow of the rampart, which, skirting the edge of giddy precipices,

girdled them around with its friendly protection. Of intellectual needs there were few or none at the period, nor did there then exist the ceaseless craving for excitement which is the bane of our modern society. Pietro, who had visited some of those rocky fastnesses, thought almost with a shudder of their loneliness and quietude, yet probably the lives led there were more complete, and richer in contentment, than could be conceived by one of his exacting and unbridled temperament.

On a bleak afternoon in March, the "Baby Saracen" strayed by himself into the darkening church, allured thither by the very dimness, which inspired him with a pleasurable sense of mystery and awe. His favourite amusement was to pore over the carvings of the old stone pulpit, which was to him a far more attractive book than the most gorgeously illuminated missal in the library. The pillars at the base were supported by uncouth monsters, one of which was a grim lion holding a babe in his paws, the attitude suggesting either fond care or hostility, according to the mood of the interpreter. While Cipriano gazed open-eyed at the group, Pietro, who had been despatched in search of him, entered through a small curtained door and came noiselessly to his side. The child greeted his friend's presence with a peal of ringing laughter, checked by the reminder of the elder boy that they were in God's house, but his delight still overflowed in sparkling smiles, which flashed from the dark eyes like ripples on a sunlit river. "Tell me about the pictures," he whispered persuasively, and Pietro, bending lower, began, as had often been his wont, to preach from the carven stone text a sermon as original as the conceptions of the sculptor.

"Behold, baby brother, you were like yon tender infant, whom the lion, that goeth about seeking souls to devour, held fast in his cruel grip, until he turned and fled with a fierce roar, because you found shelter and peace in the arms of a Christian."

"In your arms," pursued the child, who had from similar discourses gathered an impression that the crowning benefit in his own case, of Christianity, was that it had secured to him such a magnanimous and valiant protector.

"In mine truly," assented the teacher, "and what proof can you now render me of your affection in return?"

"We will go out together to rescue my people from the lion," said the Baby Saracen, caressingly, the while attaching no more meaning to the words spoken by rote than if they had referred to another's existence.

"Yea verily, yet they must be compelled to deliver unto us the Holy Sepulchre. Should they be struck down and sore wounded in their blindness, we will not leave them to die impenitent, but we will show mercy unto them, like the good Samaritan."

The little monk agreed, as readily as he would probably have done to a proposal of general extermination. But his tiny sandalled feet were chilled by the damp marble, and he asked to be carried into the forge, where several of the brethren were manufacturing new bolts for the great portal, as those now in use had grown rusty and worn through age and service.

"We will go there anon," answered Pietro, lifting his charge to a level with the pulpit front, secure that its intricate sculptures would soon win back his wavering attention. The device proved successful, for immediately Cipriano became fascinated by a representation of the Nativity, wherein the manger which contained the Holy Infant was held reverently in the mouths of the ox and the ass. Tracing the groups in high relief, with outstretched finger, he forgot cold and fatigue in the interest they excited, and finally, upheld upon the pulpit-ledge, his grave deportment rendered him more quaint than the antique monuments which surrounded him.

"Speak, Cipriano," said Pietro solemnly; "Anselmo is my brother in arms, and sworn to follow me into the thickest of the battle. What wilt thou be, whom I have

thus loved and cherished ; and held, next to him, my dearest tie on earth ? ”

“ Thy *baby in arms*,” responded the child with simplicity, unconscious how relevant was the answer which won from Pietro an involuntary smile.

“ Remember that thou art a babe of Heaven, consecrated to God’s glory ; dead to worldly honours. Thou art already an infant crusader through thy Baptism. Truly shall the sacred inheritance again be ours, when even infants of thy line rally around the holy standard, and are willing to brave cold and hunger, pain and death, in fighting for their King.”

Those hardships seemed, however, little to the taste of the prospective knight, since the allusion to them called forth such clamorous outcries for food and warmth, as forced Pietro to postpone the rest of his lesson in chivalry until a more convenient season.

The April of that year was very changeable, days of transparent beauty and soft tenderness being followed by piercing winds and driving sleet, which so retarded vegetation, that the landscape still wore a bleak wintry aspect. Suddenly a warm south-west wind sprang up, and under its magical breath nature rushed prematurely into summer, and the peaceful drama of Italian rural life began again, joyous and fresh as ever.

At an elevation of more than four thousand feet above the Lima, still exists a natural flower garden, wherein, owing to some peculiarity of soil, many plants unknown elsewhere in the region flourish in untrained luxuriance. It is approached by craggy defiles of bare rock, amid which winds a mule track, skirting the edge of deep precipices, and commanding a solemn expanse of desolation, relieved here and there by traces of rich culture. Leagues of dark-green chestnut forest, planted in gorge, fissure, or ravine, sweep downward towards the valley in long curving lines, while far above cluster the roofs and campanile of those high-piled castellated towers, which

form such a marked feature of Apennine scenery. Marvels of colour are those hanging copses, in the splendour of a southern autumn, when the huge trees bow beneath their harvest of golden green burrs, from which rain showers of the brown polished fruit, that thousands regard as the very staff of life. Around their mossy roots nestle the cyclamen, the vivid mountain-pink and glistening masses of the splendid silver thistle, with its amber centre, known among the peasantry as the "fior d'argento." Delicately lovely also is the scene in springtide, when long feathery flakes of bloom droop from the chestnut boughs, and even the dry torrent beds and yawning chasms are resplendent as in Palestine, with liliaceous flowers of every hue, and a transparent silver veil is flung over the tender distances. The Prato Fiorito is supposed to be indebted for its floral treasures to the hot mineral springs which flow beneath its surface, and impregnate the soil with their healing virtue. Certain it seems that a temple of Æsculapius stood upon the spot in pagan times, and that medicinal plants were largely cultivated by the priests who served the altar of that deity.

It was the custom at Barcello that an expedition thither should be annually made in quest of many herbs possessing valuable properties, required by Brother Filippo and his assistants in the dispensary, from which the wants of the surrounding sick poor were relieved. All of the brethren who could be spared joined in this undertaking, and the elder schoolboys were permitted to accompany them under the charge of their own teacher. There was no occasion to which Pietro looked forward every year so eagerly, and to him the monks usually owed many a prize which grew beyond the reach of a less agile climber.

It was on a bright serene morning in May that the monastic party neared the Prato Fiorito, curving around the last gigantic buttress of variegated rock which formed a boundary between the stony wilderness and a miniature

tableland where goats and sheep pastured on the abundant herbage. Thence rose in undulations of the greenest sward, up to its crested summit, the gently-swelling mounds of that wonderful garden, basking beneath a south wall of titanic cliffs, in the delicious warmth of the spring sunshine. The sod, gemmed with dew, was like a dazzling mosaic pavement, over which were scattered masses of white marble, veined with lichen of a faint exquisite rose-tint. Far away the stupendous chain of the Modena mountains was distinctly visible, and Brother Innocent, who had been born among them, pointed out to his boys the cloven peak of the Libro Aperto, so named because of its resemblance to an open book.

They were returning home after a prosperous day, when the group came to a sudden halt. Pietro, who was slightly in advance, had stumbled, and rolled for some distance down a slide of red earth several hundred feet in depth, traversed by a narrow track which the late rains had nearly washed away. There was a moment of terrible apprehension, soon relieved by a laughing assurance from Pietro that he was safely lodged in a thicket of acacia, whence he could easily clamber upward. "I believe he enjoys it!" gasped Anselmo, in a tone between dismay and admiration. "Aye, child," muttered Brother Innocent, "he enjoys everything except doing his duty like a Christian."

Just then a startled outcry from their invisible companion thrilled through the hearts of the listeners. Could the intrepid boy have lost his footing, and must he plunge headlong into the torrent bed, clinging in his convulsive agony to treacherous shrub or rolling boulder? No; for there was a ring of frenzied exultation in his voice, and he was heard slowly ascending, till his kindling eyes and blanched face rose upon a level with their feet, and the next instant he had bounded beyond reach of danger. But what was the object which he waved overhead like a tattered banner? It was a drenched soiled

garment of costly material, of the size adapted to a child about the age of Cipriano. The monks clustered with compassionate sadness around it, and the eldest said: "This may furnish a clue to the nameless babe, whose body was found two days ago in the river." Pietro motioned for silence, held the little dress before their eyes, and pointed to a red cross which was rudely stitched upon one shoulder. "He who wore this robe," said the boy slowly and emphatically, "met his death as an infant crusader."

CHAPTER VII.

THE BANNER OF THE LION.

ONLY one week before his mangled corpse was discovered by a poor shepherd lad, and buried by an obscure priest, the nameless babe had been the cherished darling of a noble household. He was the best beloved of all, from the Lord of Lucchio and his lady, down to their meanest retainer, however feudal pride might centre in the elder brother who was doomed to lead him to destruction. There was a difference of seven years between the children, and Marco even at twelve displayed a haughty arrogance of bearing, which he certainly had not inherited from either parent. His impetuous will swept everything before it, and his childish outbursts of passion were so violent that every one around him dreaded to awaken them, thus fostering the vices of a character essentially tyrannical. The chief and least complaining of his victims was the gentle little Luca, who followed his brother like a very shadow, and was only too happy when that young despot deigned to notice his existence otherwise than by rough words and blows.

The Lord of Lucchio kept up a rude semblance of state in his semi-monastic fortress, founded by some pious ancestor for sacred purposes, and wrested by a successor from the handful of starving monks who were alike too meek and too powerless to resist oppression. The principles of good and evil, ever striving for ascendancy over the human race, had often seemed to be visibly embodied in the representatives of that illustrious line. Never had

the distinction been more clearly marked than in the present lord, and the boy destined to succeed him. Sometimes the vassals breathed a wish that Luca had been born their future master ; but, with Italian loyalty and submission to God's decrees, the desire was stifled as it arose, or at most never named above a whisper.

The home which the family inhabited was perched so high above the clouds as often to escape the storms of hail and thunder which raged wildly far beneath. The town which clustered round it was composed of houses some of which seemed hung on the face of the precipice, roof rising behind roof on a series of narrow ledges, or occasionally standing isolated where the bare rocks only offered foothold for a single dwelling. Of streets properly so called, there were none, but through the midst, twisting its way round many an opposing barrier, wound a gigantic spiral staircase so irregular as to appear more like a natural formation of the surface than an actual construction. Numerous landings, so to speak, were planted cornerwise on the right or the left wherever a level space, however small, permitted. Each held a tiny piazza, with its shrine or fountain, or group of tall buildings, and one portion was pierced through a long vaulted tunnel, hewn from out the living rock. Elsewhere a similar arched passage of smaller extent formed a covered way of communication between different quarters of the town, and curious little alleys, each only a few yards in length, diverged from the main staircase to the very brink of the abyss.

The frowning keep which we now behold as a shapeless mass of ruins on the slope above, was not then built, having been added at a somewhat later period by Castruccio Castracani as a further means of defence against the Florentine invaders. The wild little eyrie was however guarded by its mighty ramparts, placed on the extreme verge of the declivity, and standing in their solid strength as if they were meant to endure until the

end of time. The aspect of the place was mournful and pathetic, for it faced the bitter north-east, and the soil was arid, and the pitiless tempests of winter had so blackened and discoloured the rude architecture, that the primitive mountain city had a stamp of far greater antiquity than others founded at the same date in more favoured districts. The inhabitants, from their lord downward, were all poor, each in his several degree, and many would have perished annually from hunger or cold, but for the kindness of the count and countess, whose chief aim was to alleviate the lot of their dependents.

The Lady Isabel was not Italian, although she had learned to love the country of her adoption yet more than that of her birth. She was a daughter of Provence, and her childish memories were bounded by those oriental-like chains of bleached mountains, with aloes and fig-trees rooted in their fissures, and rich lustrous colours robing them with beauty far beyond that of mere vegetation. It was there her husband, for some years a sojourner at the Provençal court, had won her hand, and thence had he borne her away to share the austere life which both found more congenial than the brilliant pastimes of their youth. Still, many ties of friendship and association knit their hearts to the land of the troubadours, and they hailed joyfully all tidings from their old abode, whether addressed to them in a formal communication, or heard indirectly through some passing wayfarer.

Great was the excitement caused one evening by the arrival of a messenger, who sought admittance to the castle about dusk, and delivered a sealed packet to the lord of Lucchio in the presence of his lady. It was from Count Jean de Provence, the best and most faithful of their early friends, and was greeted with the hearty alacrity always accorded to intelligence from him. The bearer, commended to the servants' hospitality, withdrew, and lights having been brought, the husband and wife opened the scroll with eager impatience to scan its con-

tents. At the first glance, however, they were both filled with amazement, which as they read on deepened to consternation. The words seemed like the wild ravings of insanity, and neither could for a time find any clue to their meaning. The missive of the French noble was the first breath from the outer world which had been wafted to their solitude for months, and his allusions to the Children's Crusade, of which they had never heard, were equally strange and incomprehensible.

"What doth it signify, this uprising of babes and striplings, to wrest Palestine from the Moslem?" cried Count Carlo. "Was there ever scheme more visionary? Yet our friend seeketh to further the mad design by all the means within his power, instead of restraining such disorders by the influence of his high position."

"And behold, he devoteth to the cause his namesake son, born the same year as our own Marco," pursued Lady Isabel, seizing the scroll which had dropped from her husband's hand. "The boy is to march to Jerusalem at the head of eleven young companions representing the Holy Apostles, and a vacancy shall be retained until we can send word if Marco would be fain to fill it, which may heaven forefend!" added the reader piously, as the astounding proposition caught her eye.

"Alas!" resumed her husband, bitterly, "there is none in that band save Judas, whom our poor misguided child could personate." The mother's face grew sad, but she could not resent a statement which was obviously too true to be contradicted.

Enclosed was a list of the aspirants to "that lofty honour," as the Count de Provence phrased it. They were all of noble lineage, and among them were several names more or less familiar to the eyes which bent over the parchment, including that of a young son of the Prince de Montfort.

"God alone knoweth," said Count Carlo, "why in His inscrutable decrees He doth confide His fragile little ones

to those incapable of guarding them. I have oft heard of yon fair child Jean de Provence, how his sole desire is to serve God and to revere his earthly father. Must he sally forth at that parent's behest to choose between captivity and death, or a denial of the faith? In sooth, the Count hath less of wisdom than the veriest infant in those ranks."

"Marco must never be told of this offer!" suddenly exclaimed the Lady Isabel. "He would embrace it ardently: not, alas! through devotion, but from motives of vainglory and self-pleasing."

"Nay; he must never learn the tenour of this missive," assented the Count, glancing round distrustfully to ascertain whether an eavesdropper lurked near. The husband and wife were alone, and their stone walls, six feet in thickness, would betray no secrets. Yet their design had been already frustrated by the Provençal messenger: a very obvious contingency, but one which they were too pre-occupied to have foreseen.

Marco and Luca had found their way into the serving-men's hall, where the best cheer which the larder afforded was set before the unwonted guest. Very meagre it seemed to the stranger, though he gave no token that his eye beheld any deficiency, and quaffed the thin, sour wine with as much seeming relish as though it had been the choicest vintage in his master's cellar. Unwittingly, however, his discourse revealed to Marco the existence of a world more dazzling than he could ever have conceived, wherein the central figure seemed a lad of his own age, born to wealth, splendour, and renown, even as he was to comparative obscurity. Envy and hatred of young Jean de Provence filled his heart, and, on learning the tenour of the dispatch, Marco listened with proud contempt to the congratulations of the menials, all of whom believed that their lord would gladly avail himself of so brilliant a future for his eldest son. The more worldly among the hearers dwelt on the advantage it would prove to a poor

high-born youth to enter upon a warlike career under so powerful and rich a patron. The devout were fired with enthusiasm at the thought of the enterprise itself, which, however it might be condemned by sober piety, commended itself to the over-wrought imagination of uneducated peasants. All were equally elated at the prospect of the glory which should be reflected on themselves from their young master, and the latter now beheld himself for the first time not merely the object of loyal reverence, but of affectionate admiration. To him alone was the proposal gall and bitterness, one to which, as he inwardly declared, he should die rather than accede. *He* travel back to Provence with this minion to swell the number of that child-count's humble followers? Never! far rather would he join the enemy and help to drive them routed from the field. Yet who could say whether his father might not enforce his submission? Nay, even were the choice left to himself, what would be the alternative? To die as he had hitherto existed, unknown and unnoticed, leaving no more trace behind him than the eagle which last week folded his royal wings in a cleft of the rock, and never more greeted the rising sun with eyes that did not quail beneath the fullest tide of its effulgence.

Deigning no response to the good wishes of his vassals, and almost provoking even the civil Provençal into an expression of disgust at his ill breeding, Marco sauntered moodily out of the hall into the courtyard. Climbing thence past the highest groups of houses, he reached the top of the hill where later stood the Castle of Castruccio, but which then was still a lonely and uncultivated waste. Twilight already brooded in the valley, but the heavens were suffused with that unearthly splendour which revives in southern latitudes when sunset tints of rosy lilac or pale green have faded into grey. One-third of the horizon blazed with molten gold, and Marco gazed on the celestial glory, well knowing it presaged a coming storm which would detain the messenger awhile at Lucchio. "I will

take further counsel with myself," he muttered, as he sullenly threw himself down upon the ground. "Why need I hasten to any decision? It is meet yon varlet should abide here to await my leisure."

Marco's pride was assuaged by this mental assertion of superiority, and he looked down complacently on his ancestral home, which was not without some claim to magnificence as it stood out, a darkening mass of pinnacles and towers relieved against the golden sky. A small hand stealing timidly into his own suddenly changed the current of his thoughts, and a sweet childish voice whispered entreatingly, "I am your Luca! You will take me with you to the holy war to be your little squire, will you not, dear Marco?"

The boy sprang suddenly to his feet. "Marco and Luca! We are both called after evangelists," he cried excitedly, as the familiar names fell with new meaning on his ear.

The little one stood at his elder's knee, uncomprehending but pleased with the triumph of having approached his brother unperceived, with no more intimation of his coming than if he had dropped out of the sunset clouds. His limbs were weary, and the face which his fond mother often likened to her favourite flower, the white-fringed aromatic pink, was flushed with the fatigue of such a climb as might have proved fatal to any child born in the lowlands. Luca's guardians, however, had no thought of danger when their darling roamed at will among his native hills. They would almost as soon have deemed it necessary to protect the wild goats that were his habitual playfellows.

"Evangelists are greater than apostles, and I am Marco the Lion, and what is more to the point, I shall be Lord of Lucchio," resumed the self-important heir. "Luca, we will away to Provence. I am willing to lend my aid to the Count, but we will first recruit among the neighbouring castles and compel two other youths of noble

blood to style themselves Matthew and John, each bringing his retainers to the field to fight under my banner."

"Will our own retainers follow us, think you?" asked Luca doubtfully.

"Like enough, with their arms and accoutrements," was Marco's bitter and scornful reply. "Nay, child; I will not lead a ragged regiment of churlish peasants, but march at the head of a gallant and glittering retinue. Gold must be furnished by fair means or foul. Should all we four evangelists prove as poor as our namesakes, we must sack and plunder some rich monastery on the road."

Luca saw no particular discrepancy between the policy that his brother intended to pursue, and the character which he represented. It was enough joy to be thus taken into Marco's confidence, and treated for the first time as a friend and equal.

"We set out at midnight," said the elder boy, as the two began their steep descent to the castle. "Recollect, I shall never more speak to you if you breathe to living soul a word of what has passed between us." The child promised, overawed by a threat more alarming than a heart less passionately loyal than his own could have imagined.

On reaching home, Marco bestirred himself with preparations for the journey, secure that his secret would be kept inviolate. Raiment and food were details beneath his consideration; possibly, indeed, such foresight was scarcely compatible with the natural improvidence of boyhood. His first idea was to search for weapons, but none could be found except a rusty lance. His next proceeding was to rob the chapel of a silken banner, daintily embroidered by the Lady Isabel in the early months of her married life. Its mystic symbols were in honour of the Virgin Mother, and included none that were appropriate to the spoiler's purpose. He was about to restore his sacrilegious plunder when, on a closer examination, he

found the reverse side of the standard was almost a blank. A wreath of golden lilies was wrought around the border, but the centre was without any device. Marco was no mean draughtsman, as the walls of his chamber could testify. Eagerly seizing a red pigment, with a few bold strokes he sketched a lion rampant on the faded silk, and then retreating a few steps, surveyed his work with an air of satisfaction. Lastly, he sought from the handmaidens some fragments of red cloth, from which he fashioned two large Latin crosses, attaching them with unskilful fingers each to the right shoulder of the velvet robes which he and Luca wore on state occasions. Marco was prompt and energetic in his movements, and his every scheme was executed almost as soon as devised. Only one task remained undone, namely, to set ajar the narrow postern in the outer courtyard, of which the very existence was well-nigh forgotten by the old warder who made the nightly rounds, so seldom had it been for years used as a means of exit.

When supper was ended, and the family gathered around the fire, the parents remarked that their children soon withdrew into a distant corner, where they whispered confidentially together, Luca's head resting against his brother's knee. The heart of Lady Isabel bounded with thankfulness as she approached the pair, ready to share their interest and cement the tie between them by her loving sympathy. Soon her steps were arrested by her youngest born, who waved her back with the imperiousness of a privileged favourite. "Thou canst not come hither, sweet mother, for we have a secret," he proclaimed with infantile dignity, and with a pleased smile Lady Isabel resumed her seat and her employment. What would have been her dismay, could she have overheard the words with which Marco led his companion from the hall at bedtime. "Child! we now seek a downy pillow, shaded by hangings of tapestry. Anon we shall repose under the starry sky, beneath the Banner of the Lion."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CHILDREN'S BATTLE-CRY.

THE mountain whereon Lucchio stood, though seemingly an isolated peak, was in reality joined by a ledge of rock to a more elevated chain, of which the nearly level summits formed a table-land so lofty as to overlook even the Prato Fiorito, which almost directly faced it. Seen from that standing point, the little town had the effect of nestling in a valley, instead of hanging midway between heaven and earth, as when viewed from the river. Luca clapped his hands with glee as he stood at his brother's side, hundreds of feet above the native home which was never again to shelter him. It was a night of fitful gusty showers, with a blanched moon struggling occasionally through masses of cloud, and no roof was distinguishable except that of the castle, where a mild light, streaming through the windows of the chapel, was set like a jewel amid the surrounding blackness. There the count and Lady Isabel were bowed in prayer before the altar, too disturbed in mind to seek repose, although never dreaming how nearly they were affected by the tidings which inspired them with such anxiety on behalf of other parents. In the fervour of their intercessions they were no more conscious of the damp chill from the marble pavement that benumbed their limbs, than were the fugitives of the cold wind and driving rain, which, even while they lingered gazing, blotted out every familiar object.

The danger of the ascent surmounted, Marco knew there was no need for caution on the smooth firm ground

which extended for several miles through the glades of the chestnut wood. He was not unmindful of his brother's comfort, allowed him to rest when weary, and evinced so much forbearance, that the poor child scarcely knew how to be grateful enough for such condescension. Marco's aim was to descend into the valley after sunrise, cross the Lima by a ford with which he was acquainted, ascend the opposite range of mountains, and explore them in search of the castles which must surely lie in that direction, although he was not cognisant of their actual sites. Maidens might join his ranks if they so listed, provided they were of high degree, for he well knew that children of both sexes flocked around the sacred standard, and united in the battle cry: "Lord Jesus Christ, restore to us Thy Holy Cross!" Marco did not scruple to utter the like summons, although from his lips it could be nothing short of desecration. He was equally indifferent to the creed of Islamite or Christian, but he burned to eclipse all the other youthful leaders who had sprung up in various lands, especially in France. His should be a patrician band, including none whose names and ancestry were not illustrious. Mere gold was not so indispensable; for that, according to Marco's belief, could be obtained at the edge of the sword.

Several days passed in desultory wandering, and the well-laid plan was no further advanced than it had been at the commencement. The brothers had not lacked shelter and food, for many a peasant hut offered them hospitality, its inmates noting in vague wonder the rich garments which proclaimed their rank, yet never seeking to detain or question them. Marco desired no adherents from that class, nor durst he ask his way to any lordly dwelling, lest he should offer some trace by which his father's vassals, who were doubtless even then scattered amid the forests and morasses, should learn whither he had wended with his tender charge.

Luca's bold spirit, inherited from a race of warlike

sires, supported the delicate frame long after it began to languish through privation and exposure. He never complained, though taxed sorely beyond his powers ; but as time went on, Marco felt his feebler companion an encumbrance, and ardently desired the removal of an obstacle so serious, from the path of his ambition.

About four o'clock one afternoon, Luca sank on the hillside, looking so exhausted that his brother saw that any attempt to urge him on would be in vain. "You must go home, child," he said not unkindly, "and wait until you are older. Nay," he added with a touch of real compunction, "do not weep, for you have acted bravely. I will take you to the holy war when I have won high honours, and become a mighty captain. Then you shall no longer follow me on foot, but ride upon a prancing steed, richly caparisoned."

"Dear Marco," said the little one imploringly, "I do not wish to keep you from hastening to Provence, but could you not go back with me part of the way to Lucchio? I know not the road thither, and perchance I shall perish of hunger if lost in these dreary wilds."

"Not know the road?" re-echoed Marco in a tone of incredulity, unwilling to admit how dim was his own recollection. "Hearken, child; you have but to retrace the way by which we journeyed here together, till you reach the stream whose waters lave the base of our own mountain."

The chill of despair stole over Luca, as he leaned against a rock and closed his eyes. "That is right," said Marco encouragingly; "rest and sleep here for awhile, and then you will set out refreshed and strengthened. Farewell! I must hence, but we shall meet anon. You shall yet fight under my banner." Such was the beguiling promise with which the forsaken child was left, the only human creature in that pathless solitude.

At first the craving for repose was so imperative as to completely overmaster even the sense of desertion.

Luca's faint sickness changed into a heavy stupor bordering on unconsciousness, from which he was aroused some hours later by the pattering of rain on the short herbage, and by acute agony which thrilled through every nerve and fibre.

He unclosed his eyelids; all around him was thick darkness, and the howling of the wind through cleft and chasm seemed to the excited listener like the roaring of ravenous beasts. In mocking contrast rose a vision of the fire-lighted castle hall; the gentle face of Lady Isabel bent low over her tapestry; the loving smile with which she had greeted her children; the impatience with which he had repulsed her caresses.

"O mother, mother!" wailed the child in faltering accents; "to think that I might have had your arms around me then, and I would not!"

The pain grew intolerable, and soon Luca could no longer bear his cramped position. Arise from the saturated turf he must, though instinct and experience alike warned him of the peril which attended every step taken in such a region at the dead of night. He staggered blindly onward a few paces, then the solid earth began sliding away beneath his feet, the wild rush downward increased in velocity, and probably life was extinct before the snow-fed waters of the river parted to receive their prey. Does this appear a piteous tale? The same untimely fate befell thousands of cherished little ones, who strewed like withered flowerets every route by which the childish warriors marched onward towards the Promised Land, which none among them were even permitted to view from a distance, like the seer of old.

Marco had more success than might have been anticipated, from the moment in which he was left unfettered to pursue his scheme. Perhaps the imitative child mind of the period was imbued from birth with the spirit of the Crusades. Certain it is that wheresoever the electric spark was struck, it seemed to kindle a smouldering

flame, which soon spread far and wide into a general and resistless conflagration. When Marco sounded the keynote of the battle amid the sequestered gorges of the Apennines, the summons met with a response as prompt as though the combatants had only been awaiting such a signal. There were none who questioned the supremacy of the self-elected chief, far less did any lay claim to a share in his prerogatives. All tacitly assented to his sway, owning in him the royalty of one created to rule over the will of his fellows.

Diverse as in assemblages of mature manhood, were the characters and motives of the motley throng which gathered gradually in Marco's wake. There were the lovers of frolic and fun, who little recked for what cause they might be emancipated from the thralldom of the school. There were high-spirited, adventurous youths, allured by the romance of the wide sea, beyond which lay deserts and cities steeped in the enchanted atmosphere of the unknown. There were imaginative, dreamy children, nurtured on the mystic lore which should in time transform them into pale night-blooming flowers of the cloister. There, too, were embryo knights, whose very cradles had been haunted by visions of chivalric renown. There lastly were the base and grovelling, who, under the cloak of religious zeal, harboured designs for their own selfish greed or pleasure.

In several instances the wily Marco secured the sanction of clergy, and other influential persons, by declaring with unblushing effrontery that he was acting in obedience to his father and mother. So revered for piety were Count Carlo and Lady Isabel, that many parents sought to emulate so saintly an example by refraining from the tears and protestations which might else have withheld their offspring from the service of the Lord.

Thus Marco levied a tribute from every village; the large number of recruits in some degree atoning for that

mingling of classes which became inevitable as the train of his followers increased. His ranks were graced by several names as ancient and honourable as his own, but wealth was little rife among the local nobility, and beyond even fame, the boy desired dainty viands, goodly raiment, cloth of gold, jewels, and mounted horsemen. Without such appointments, how could he meet Jean de Provence on an equal footing? How, upon the other hand, were they to be procured, except by plunder? There was clearly no alternative. Nevertheless he must not shock the prejudices of the more religious in his band, and thereby alienate some whom he felt to be its brightest ornaments. They would be overpowered by numbers when the moment for action arrived—nay more, it might even be possible to gain his end without recourse to violence or sacrilege.

“Not far hence,” he announced one morning, “lies the fair and stately monastery of Barcello, famous for riches and good works throughout the land. Thither, my comrades, let us hie, to seek the blessing of the holy Abbot. He will give out of his abundance to the champions of the faith, and perchance some of his disciples may lend us their aid, winning thereby a portion of the glory that awaits us.”

Marco's accents were drowned in a shout of triumph, and like an exulting pæan piercing the skies, swelled forth with renewed ecstasy, the children's battle-cry: “Lord Jesus Christ, restore to us Thy Holy Cross.”

CHAPTER IX.

THE PIERCED MOUNTAIN.

AFTER that memorable expedition to the Prato Fiorito, and the stirring incident which marked its close, any endeavour to conceal the course of passing events from Pietro and his schoolfellows would have been futile, nor did Father Benedict make the attempt. Far from so doing, he imparted to his pupils all intelligence which he himself received concerning the advance of the Children's Crusade, discussing all its phases with impartial candour, and seeking to transform morbid excitability into lofty enthusiasm. Even the youngest were allowed the freest possible expression of opinion, and their wise Superior refrained from uttering a single word which should appear cold or unsympathetic. This calm, reasonable piety, whose depth and fervour none could question, exercised on the whole a happy influence upon the youthful listeners. A few stood aloof, however, or assented with callous indifference to the Abbot's grave representations of the ills which must arise from the subversion of God's moral law, under the specious pretext of religion : of such was Pietro, whose latent restlessness had revived with the discovery that a holy war had been proclaimed by his equals in age, and that he was only debarred from taking part in it by the assertion of a bigoted tyrannical oppression.

One of the most striking objects visible from the broad terrace in front of the monastery, was a mountain with twin peaks, or rather with a single mighty crest, which had been cleft in twain through some volcanic action, dating

back to prehistoric ages. The space intervening now between the double summits was spanned by a natural bridge, apparently too slender for the tramp of earthly footsteps, although in reality solid enough to bear the weight of the Apennine herdsman with his fleecy train.

As usual, however, in such cases, many a weird legend and superstition clung like mists around the "Cloven" or "Pierced" Mountain, as it was indifferently named in the district. At a period which boasted few triumphs of engineering skill, these wonders of creative power were commonly ascribed to diabolic agency, and it was held unlawful, or at the least inexpedient, for Christians to avail themselves of such a questionable mode of transit.

Thus the Cloven Mountain, while really affording a safe and easy communication between two well-populated valleys that by any other route lay far asunder, was placed by common consent under a ban, and even the rich herbage on its southern slopes might not pasture the flocks of faithful people, lest their owners should in some mysterious way endanger both life and salvation. Father Benedict himself was not in this respect above the superstitious terror of his times. Only an imperative errand of mercy would have tempted him to set foot on that ill-omened hill, which had been marked already by many a strange and evil portent. Was it not the headquarters of the sulphurous thunder cloud and the forked lightning, the destructive hailstorm, and the withering sirocco? Had not two strayed innocents, mere babes in years, died after feasting on some scarlet berries which hung temptingly in waving clusters, from among the thickets at its base? Did not Urbano, the holy hermit, mount the rocky slope bare-footed, having vowed that by prayer, fast, and vigil he would exorcise the demon from his stronghold? Did he not wrestle with him for two days and nights, and then succumb, through the fatal assault of some venomous serpent? Father Benedict was indeed aware that poisonous fruits and noxious reptiles were not

confined to unhallowed soil, but not even his cultured intellect led him to seek an obvious explanation of events that were far from unprecedented in his own experience and that of his followers.

One day Pietro was excused from Latin recitations in the *Scuola*, on the plea of a feverish headache, which for hours had resisted Brother Filippo and all his simples. It was about three o'clock, and the languor of early summer brooded heavily over the land. Coolness still lurked within doors, in the long, dim corridors and vaulted halls, but open-air existence seemed as much a law of nature with Pietro as with any Bedouin of the desert. Just then, however, he was not easily pleased with the choice of a resting-place, especially as his favourite seat beside the Saracenic well lay basking in a heated glare, worthy of Syria. In vain he wandered through the cloisters, olive-yards, vineyards, and gardens; everywhere sunshine seemed alike intolerable, and shadow devoid of freshness. At length, petulant and weary, he paused in an angle of the terrace, flung himself like a lizard on the low stone wall, sheltered his head beneath the canopy of a carved niche enshrining a small statue of St. Benedict, and almost instantaneously sank into a deep slumber.

In due course of time the boy awoke, stiff and cramped from his hard couch and uneasy posture, but with nerves invigorated by the sweet sleep to which he had lately been a stranger. It would soon be supper-time, he thought, not without satisfaction, but he need not disturb himself until summoned either by the bell or by some verbal message. In the meantime, what a welcome sight it was to watch twilight begin to steal over the distant plain. It would not be a gorgeous sunset, for the vaporous masses were too dull and dense to be illumined, but it was grand, solemn, and impressive. A few fantastic trailing cloud-lets, edged with gold, purple, or crimson, flitted over the western chain of Apennines, and rivetted the gaze of the

spectator. What signified yon shadowy procession, silently as the clouds themselves, traversing the aërial bridge of the Pierced Mountain, with a fitful semblance of banners drooping in the breezeless air? These were no human forms; the known character of the spot forbade any such supposition. Could the train be a phantom-mockery, or a yet more awful reality? In either case it was a snare laid by the Evil One, for Pietro could hardly resist the impulse to rush with mad speed across the intervening valleys and confront the enemy with his demoniac hosts. Fearful of battling alone with the temptation, the boy turned his back upon the mountain and sped to the cloister, where the Abbot and most of the brethren were enjoying a few moments of repose after the labours of the day.

During the course of Pietro's narrative, poured forth with breathless volubility, some of the monks crossed themselves in affright, but Father Benedict smiled as he answered soothingly, "Methinks, my son, such vagaries have more to do with a disordered brain than with any invasion of our ghostly adversaries."

"Nay, father," interposed an aged monk, "yon vision was no freak of phantasy, but a direct manifestation of the Prince of Darkness. I also beheld it from the turret cell, whither I had been sent to mark if friend or foe drew nigh our boundaries. I saw, plainly as I now see your face, a horde of demons, small in stature as dwarfs, or perchance as mortal children. Their garments were streaked with flame colour, and I could almost testify that they exhaled a foul odour of sulphur. In their midst were borne strange banners, emblazoned beyond all doubt with infernal devices. No good ever came from yon accursed mountain, and it is my firm belief that evil threatens those who have been eye-witnesses of such ungodly rites. Your blessing, reverend father, and your prayers that harm may be averted from this holy monastery."

"Didst thou not say thy viitantss wore somewhat of

the guise of mortal children?" inquired Fra Clemente, the most practical member of the community. "If so, in my poor judgment we have nought to dread more serious than an inroad of the idle varlets who, while mimicking Crusaders, beg or pilfer everything along their route. I would I were their schoolmaster, for then should those mischievous fingers that now wield the knight's lance tingle with the ferule."

Father Benedict's opinion coincided with that of the speaker. "I remember," he observed, "that the Pierced Mountain lies directly on the line of march chosen by those unhappy little ones, but who could have deemed that even their childish recklessness should lead them to dare foes too mighty for the bravest veterans of the Cross? Yet the weaned child shall play on the cockatrice's den, and it may be, God will protect their innocence. Except they perish, they should pass our gates early to-morrow morn. Make ready for their entertainment, brethren. We will entreat them courteously, offer them hospitality, and seek to persuade the more docile among them to make us the favoured instruments whereby they shall be given back to home and kindred.

The old monk who had seen the procession from the watch-tower shook his head. "Never will the foul fiend grant a safe passage through his territory to those blessed babes!" he sighed despondingly. "He will retain them as his captives, and although their souls may be delivered, yet their bodies shall be holden in the chains of him who hath been given power over the kingdoms of this world."

"In sooth, did it please him to capture the whole rabble of schoolboys, I should hardly be disposed to say him nay," was the unuttered sentiment of Fra Clemente, whose taste for retirement and abstruse study was at variance with the frolicsome levity of youthful spirits. When the inmates of Barcello sought their pallets after Compline, all minds were pre-occupied with wondering

what events should betide them upon the morrow. The dreams of the younger were coloured by pleasurable excitement and romance, but grave apprehensions as to the contagion to which their charges must be exposed disturbed the slumbers of the Abbot and his more thoughtful disciples.

CHAPTER X.

THE BROTHERS IN ARMS.

MARCO had unwittingly made a master-stroke of policy in choosing the route which he had pursued solely from motives of convenience. He had known little and cared less about the reputation of the famous pass, and was far from imagining that every movement of his company was watched with eager eyes from the twin valleys at its foot. The young Crusaders had, however, inspired the popular mind with a thrill of that reverential awe which might have been accorded to some armed Paladin issuing forth to slay a dragon or storm an enchanted castle. When they quietly descended on the side nearest Barcello, they were hailed as public benefactors with praise, lavish gifts, and proffers of assistance. The victory over Satan which they had already won was viewed but as an earnest of the fuller triumph which, through their means, Christianity was destined to achieve in Palestine. Apart from this prospective benefit, a signal one had been conferred upon the neighbourhood by the blow which had weakened, if not shattered, the malignant spell of the demon who had so long lain ambushed in their midst. The simple folks outvied each other in tokens of gratitude to their deliverers, feeling that for such services they owed a debt beyond aught which could be repaid in gold or silver. Very different would have been their sentiments had they been able to foretell the sequel of the chapter. They would then have accredited the enchanter with consummate artifice in suffering the little pilgrims to pass on

unscathed, in order that they might advance his end by serving to decoy many another fluttering and unwary dove into the snare of the fowler.

Marco would not have risked the loss of his newly-won popularity by seeking to molest the inmates of Barcello had they refused him admittance. On the contrary, however, he found the great gates wide open, and the rites of hospitality cheerfully tendered to the errant lambs whom the kind monks regarded with deep compassion. All were thankful for refreshment and repose after their weary march, and when some of the younger children eagerly accepted the proposal of the Abbot to take charge of them, Marco raised no impediment to their remaining at the monastery. The little guests were allowed to range freely where they would, although not unattended, lest they should hold secret intercourse with any of the pupils. Such precautions were, however, almost needless, as Marco had given strict orders to his followers that none should in any degree forfeit the favour and esteem of Father Benedict. The boy's deportment was indeed so unexceptionable, that only an observant few were struck by a craftiness of expression which contrasted with the guileless mien of his little associates.

In a remote nook of the garden, where a silvery rill watered the dewy grass and wild flowers which half hid it in their wild luxuriance, three young heads were grouped in a cluster. Two were bent downward, listening intently, while the third was uplifted in proud triumph, as its owner pointed with his outstretched finger to the sky.

"Ye will not fight for Him, the King of Glory, who hath promised you celestial mansions in exchange for these perishing habitations? Not that I seek a recompense," added Pietro in his rapt enthusiasm; "enough for me to tread the soil which His footsteps have hallowed, and if need be, to water it with my blood."

"If ye love Me, keep My commandments," murmured

the gentle voice of Anselmo, "and our duty is to obey those who are set over us in the Lord."

"Aye! that is the saying of an apostle; hearken now to the words of the Master: 'Whoso loveth father or mother more than Me, cannot be My disciple.'"

Anselmo attempted no reply. His upright nature was devoid of sophistry, but he possessed no power of refuting it by the weapons of argument. Cipriano meantime had forgotten the question at issue in his search for the golden-brown bee-orchis with its delicate wings of lilac gauze, which always charmed him from its perfect mimicry of insect form and colour.

"Should my own Brother in Arms forsake me," said Pietro in reproachful accents, "I turn to my child, who is to me as Timothy was to St. Paul. Speak, Cipriano; shall we hie hence in secret with the brave captain who is pledged to win thy people to the service of the Lord? Anon thou didst tremble when I spake to thee of peril and death; but thou art tender, and I marvel not that thou should'st quail before the first blast of the trumpet."

"Indeed I crave not now peril and death, Pietro," cried the Boy Saracen, as he scattered his flowers, and glanced up in consternation. "I like not your captain; he looks fierce and cruel, and the lion on his banner is even more frightful than the one from which you snatched me at my baptism."

"Deluded child! yon was the wicked one, the enemy of our salvation, while this represents the Lion of the tribe of Judah. But thou art too young to set up thine own judgment against that of thy superior. Cipriano, I *command* thee to accompany me to the field of battle."

Had the marching order been into the lion's den, the baby monk could not have felt more apprehensions. Childhood is, however, as a rule, reticent and submissive under tyranny, rarely if ever seeking redress for its wrongs. A word to Father Benedict, or any one else in authority, would have secured protection, but it is need-

less to state that such an expedient did not even occur to Cipriano.

"Thou," resumed the excited youth, turning to his cherished companion, "may'st win the most glorious crown of all, that of the martyrs in will and in deed; our baby brother can but die, like the infants of Bethlehem, but thine is a more exalted calling. Wilt thou let the armour in which thou wast clad at baptism hang rusting from disuse?"

The little Saracen changed colour visibly on hearing his own name linked with the Babes of Bethlehem, but the stoicism which he had inherited sealed the small lips, that had become tightly compressed, and blanched with terror.

"I have decided," said Anselmo, as he took Pietro's hand into his own with a grave solemn clasp, "that by the sacred tie between us, the first duty which I owe to mortal being is to thee. Yet deem not that my judgment sanctions this mad enterprise. Brother, let us seek counsel of the Abbot, he will not withhold us from the path of Christian heroism."

"Consult him, the craven-hearted!" cried Pietro scornfully.

"Hold thy peace!" said Anselmo, interrupting him by word and gesture. "Believe me, it is no good influence which leads thee thus to malign one who has soared to heights of holiness such as we dare not hope to scale."

Pietro stood for an instant abashed, and profiting by his confusion, Anselmo found courage to add with unwonted severity, "Deceitfulness must ever be sinful, dear brother, and the narrow road to Heaven winds not through the labyrinth of falsehood."

"We are told to be wise as serpents, and their course is devious," muttered Pietro, half ashamed of the sentiment he expressed.

Anselmo sighed, and abandoned the futile controversy. "Let us not discuss motives," he said, fatally true to his

mistaken sense of loyalty ; “ I have promised unreservedly to stand by thee, and I intend to keep my word. What plan dost thou propose, Pietro ? The Crusaders are to march during the night, to avoid dust and heat, and when they leave us the gates will be closed.”

“ We must escape this very moment, before the bell summons us to dinner. I wonder we have not been sooner disturbed ; for when the Abbot gave a holiday, I knew not where to find a spot wherein we might confer at leisure.”

“ The monks are engaged as usual. It is only the pupils who have been released from work, and most of them are in the playground. But, Pietro, consider an instant ; should we set out fasting, without money or a change of raiment, or even provisions for the way ? ”

“ Yea : we must not take purse, scrip, nor two coats,” was the fanatical rejoinder. “ All will be freely provided for us. Is not the labourer worthy of his hire ? ”

“ If only I could be assured that we are not quitting the vineyard, leaving the safe fold, deserting the King’s army,” sadly mused the hapless boy, as he followed his two companions through the sunny mazes of the olives, to a stone wall which in that direction marked the boundary line of the monastic property.”

The little army was to pass through Lucca, and Pietro had intended to go thither in advance, delightedly picturing a few hours among its antique palaces and stately churches, its quaint dim streets rich with sculpture, and its cooling fountains which flung showers of silvery spray on high into the sultry air. His fancy had, however, been oblivious of the twenty-five weary miles which intervened, and which his more practical friend reminded him would prove a two days’ march for their new comrades. Anselmo knew that the latter meant to halt at sunrise near an olden bridge many hours distant by the road, but which could be more quickly reached by following an intricate track which led across the country. Pietro

would listen to no proposal that they should wait in the neighbourhood until overtaken by Marco's band at night-fall; his only desire, amounting to an actual delirium of impatience, was to widen the distance between himself and Barcello.

Those who now wander through the laughing garden valley of the Serchio may behold a bridge which was repaired eight centuries ago, and of which the foundation is so venerable as to be lost in the mists of legend. Its central arch rises above the level of the tall old houses on the river brink, forming a ridge almost precipitous, from which a roughly hewn pathway of stone descends on either hand, steep and abrupt, into the two opposite settlements. Noble and grand are the proportions of the Ponte Maddalena; useless in the present day except for passengers on horseback or on foot, but across which must have swept many a mediæval pageant, from the solemn religious procession to the glittering train of knights and ladies on their way to swell the courtly revels of the small but brilliant capital of Lucca. Perchance no scene of those bygone times was more characteristic than the passage of the Child Crusaders, when they crossed the Serchio in a flood of golden matin glory, and, encamping for a few hours on the further side, welcomed into their midst the three footsore and travel-stained deserters from Barcello.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LEPER PILGRIMAGE.

THE years which had glided in tranquil peace for Cipriano had been stirring and eventful ones in the history of his mother. The life of the convert had not been exacted as the penalty of disobedience to her Moslem husband, for Achmet never returned from the skirmish in which he had engaged against his Christian neighbours. He was slain in a hand-to-hand conflict with a foe whose valour and address equalled his own, and when the turbaned head at length lay low upon the well-contested battle-field, Axia was left the undisputed mistress of her liberty and actions.

Her first independent step was to sell the cottage with its productive garden at Biassa, and with the sum thereby realised to seek a home elsewhere amid her brethren in the Faith. The great and opulent city of Genoa would, she felt, be a fitting residence for one whose whole existence was from thenceforth consecrated to devotion and good works. The heart of Axia warmed towards her fellow Saracens, with a love only secondary to that which she bore the Christian family of her adoption. To serve both to the uttermost was her ambition ; and the mingling of the two races in Italy at that period afforded frequent opportunities for the sweet offices of love, by which she would fain have bridged over the deep gulf of mutual misunderstanding which severed them more completely day by day.

The Arabians, despite the havoc wrought by their in

vasion, had yet introduced some useful arts and sciences along the western shore of the Mediterranean, and enriched the Universities of Southern Europe with the secrets of that profound and accurate lore which had flourished for ages in the oriental centres of civilisation. A sad counterpoise, however, to the benefits that had accrued to Italy from her enforced intercourse with the East, was the terrible scourge of leprosy, which marked the track of the invader no less surely than did the Syrian method of irrigation, which caused many a waste of sand or rock to blossom and bring forth abundantly. It was to the victims of that fell disease, a meet type of the pestilential doctrines spread by those from whom it emanated, that Axia resolved to dedicate the wealth of her womanly tenderness, and almost masculine powers of endurance. A Sister of Mercy in all but the name, she journeyed from one lazar village to another, gradually raising up a band of workers who were stimulated by her courage and example to offer themselves as volunteers for the dangerous post. It was truly one which combined usefulness, honour, and peril, claiming an unconditional surrender of health, and eventually of life, yet furnishing those who embraced it with the opportunity of ministering to the sick and needy of two opposing creeds, united in one common lot of suffering, and forsaken by all those who were not prompted by the purest instincts of Divine compassion.

Numerous were the refuges founded by Christian pity and munificence, to shelter and succour the plague-stricken, who must else have died homeless and unbenefriended. Traces of some linger at the present day, the names by which they were originally known surviving, though for centuries past they have ceased to be appropriate.

It chanced that soon after the first rumours of the Children's Crusade reached the coast of Italy, Axia had drifted in the natural course of her vocation to a leper

hospital in the Carrara Mountains, destined solely for those children of infected parents in whom the hereditary taint had not as yet developed. A monastic leech, whose foresight was in advance of his generation, had conceived a theory—plausible, although, alas, mistaken—that by pure air, a preventive course of treatment, and timely removal from contagious influences, the doom of the hapless little ones might be averted. Axia had been placed at the head of this asylum by the common consent of those most interested in the humane experiment. It was a sphere very congenial to her tastes and sympathies, and there her life would have been one of full contentment, but for the anxiety with which she watched over her flock, dreading to note the too familiar symptoms which should testify that all her care and nurture had been bestowed in vain.

Fair to behold, with their transparent delicacy of complexion, their bright starry eyes, and agile grace of form, were the unfortunate inheritors of the terrific malady which frequently gave no sign of its existence beyond preternatural beauty, till its victim had outlived the stage of childhood. All the patients committed to Axia's charge were alike instructed in the faith of Christ, without regard to the creed of their parents. They were well aware of the sword which hung over them, and which might fall at any instant, banishing them from that loved home to the lazar hospital, lest their continued presence should destroy the last vestige of hope for their companions.

Among all the miracles of the New Testament, none had so keen an interest for Axia's pupils as those which record the healing of the lepers. They were never weary of enlarging on the smallest details, trying to imagine what would have been their own joy and gratitude to the gracious Deliverer, and venting storms of youthful indignation on the thankless nine, who could not delay even for a momentary act of homage.

“They did not deserve to be restored to home and friends,” exclaimed a stripling somewhat older than the rest, whose face wore the harassed expression which is so often apparent in those who are born the heirs of illness or deformity.

“*We* should all have been as grateful as the tenth leper,” cried a chorus of voices, speaking with the full conviction which springs from an enviable ignorance of human nature.

“Then try to be grateful for the cure of spiritual leprosy through the remission of your sins, and for the promise of health for your souls and bodies in the life to come.”

But this suggestion met with no response, as the young listeners were more intent on a release from present suffering than on the prospect of celestial bliss.

“Who knows what miracle of mercy might be even now wrought at the Holy Sepulchre, could we win our way thither?” resumed the first speaker. “Is not Jesus Christ the same, yesterday, to-day, and for ever?”

“Hence to Jerusalem! Hence to Jerusalem!” was the shout which arose almost unanimously from the death-doomed children. “Wherefore should we tarry amid the tombs like those who have been buried, and whose very names have been forgotten among men?”

It was several minutes before Axia could make her voice audible in the tumult.

“In what manner do ye purpose journeying to Jerusalem?” she asked, when the first ferment began to subside. The answer, a faint whisper, quickly swelled into the general and triumphant declaration, “We will join ourselves unto the ranks of the little Crusaders.”

“And thereby spread the very disease for which ye seek healing yourselves,” said Axia, almost severely. “Is such conduct worthy of the sacred name of Christian which ye bear?”

There was a hush of disappointment, for a moment;

then a child, who had been silent hitherto, inquired, with affecting earnestness, " Might we not follow far behind the army, without seeking to hold intercourse with any until after we are cleansed ? "

Such a blending of faith, gentleness, and humility disarmed remonstrance, and arrested the refusal which trembled upon Axia's lips. She was at the best an ignorant woman, with a strong sense of the right, and a heroic power of endurance ; but her reasoning faculties had never been matured, and were besides merged in the torrent of impassioned feeling which swept away all calmer considerations.

" What if I say you nay, and thereby earn the meed of such as give offence unto Christ's little ones, and keep them back from Him ? " she mused aloud. " Who knows if leper-babes might not have been numbered with those whom the Saviour received into His arms ? I will not lift a finger to detain you. Go in peace, and may the sweet words, ' Be ye clean, ' bring blessing to you in body and soul. "

Strange to say, it never occurred to Axia that she was false to the trust which she had accepted, and acting as one possessed of full authority, instead of being, as she really was, a mere instrument employed by others, and responsible to those who had chosen her as their agent. She had indeed been so long used to direct schemes of benevolence, that it seemed almost like a new experience to occupy any position in which her will must be held subordinate to that of a superior.

As regarded the physical requirements of her feeble charges, Axia displayed a larger measure of prudence and foresight than had been exercised by Pietro. Two days were devoted to collecting the supplies of food and clothing necessary for their comfort on the way to Genoa, about a week's march distant, as nearly as could be estimated. Thither she was determined to accompany the pilgrims, and there to resign them to the care of their

new guardians, with a request that the latter should seek a benediction on their arms, by showing pity to these unfortunates.

A large body of Crusaders had gathered at Genoa, awaiting the moment when the waves of the Mediterranean should part as did those of the Red Sea, and furnish them with a dry passage to the shores of Palestine. By what means such a rumour was first spread abroad is now uncertain, but it was one which extended widely, and was believed with implicit trust. Axia no more questioned its truth than did the multitude of expectant children, nor would she have been surprised to hear that the miraculous shower of quails and manna should rain down once more from heaven on the new Israelites, when they began to cross the desert wastes which lay beyond the sea.

On the third morning after the resolve was taken, the troop of infirm and pallid children streamed through the gate of the sheltering hospital into the wide world, which for them contained no kindly home. As yet they needed not any distinctive garb, nor did the warning notes of the "Lazarus rattle" proclaim their uncleanness to the passer-by. Nevertheless, contact with others was to be shunned as a measure of precaution, and Axia determined to avoid the public highways, and to encamp with her charges on the open beach outside the walls of Genoa.

The path which they traversed wound amid mountains whereof many were formed of the purest statuary marble: a precious deposit which had then already served the world for centuries, and which in these days, when its richness and extent are better known, only seems more than ever inexhaustible. Some of the peaks, still covered with exquisite verdure, alone betrayed the presence of their hidden wealth by streaks of dazzling whiteness veining the emerald green; others had been quarried into fantastic pinnacles, from whence the marble tide seemed to descend like cataracts and avalanches of unsullied snow,

arrested in their downward progress. Already the town of Carrara nestled in its sheltered basin, girded with a mighty amphitheatre of protecting trees, amid which towered conspicuously one range whereof the colouring was tender dove grey, shading into the fairness of alabaster. The cathedral, still the glory of the mountain city, was uprising gradually in majestic loveliness, and perchance even then there may have been long lines of studios and traces of the genius, born and matured in an atmosphere of art, which has produced many illustrious sculptors, whom Carrara is proud to enrol among her sons.

As Axia threaded the narrow defiles she met trains of milk-white oxen, ready to expire beneath the brutal blows that urged them to move inch by inch some ponderous block outweighing even their patience and strength. It was a pitiable sight, yet one more heartrending might have been witnessed during the reign of Tiberias, when chained gangs of captives were sent to sicken and die through the unnatural toil, of which we may still read a pathetic record in the marks left by their chisels upon the face of the mountain. Great must have been the sacrifice of human life requisite to detach, within six months, a mass that can be now severed by gunpowder in about half an hour.

As the travellers moved forward, wading through snow wreaths of marble-dust, and half-blinded by the intolerable glare, they often had to start aside in order to escape huge fragments propelled by the joint efforts of a knot of workmen, and rolling with a report like thunder from the giddy heights above into the depths beneath their feet. In quiet nooks clusters of boys and girls mimicked the several occupations of their elders, from the rude toil of the quarry to the delicate last touches of the finished statue. Their implements were disused tools, and the materials which would have been costly elsewhere lay scattered all around with lavish prodigality. One little

master-workman was paying the wages of his hirelings in rock crystals, glittering like diamonds with every prismatic hue. The leper children looked on enviously from afar. Would such innocent joys of healthy childhood ever be their own? Assuredly yes; when they should return cleansed from the Holy Sepulchre.

At length the uplands were left far behind, and the long downward-sweeping purple gorge opened upon the sea-girt plain where now stands Massa, guarded by its ruined citadels, Roman and Mediæval. A sense of discouragement pressed upon Axia's spirits from the moment she began to breathe the enervating air heavy with the fragrance of orange and lemon blossoms. Bitter were the self-upbraidings which forced themselves on her conscience. Had she not rushed blindly into this enterprise, without seeking to learn the will of God either by prayer or by asking advice from those best qualified to give it? Had she not even hurried on with rash precipitation, lest her plans should become known and countermanded by those whom she dared not disobey? What if the sea were *not* dried up in answer to the supplications of the young Crusaders? There was no ship which would furnish means of transport to the offspring of leperous parents, nor would any captain be justified in receiving them. Axia tried to dismiss these doubts as faithless, and to regain her serenity of mind, but the misgivings which would not be lulled only increased as she followed the windings of the rocky shore towards the great maritime city of Genoa.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PARTING OF THE WATERS.

A MELANCHOLY fringe of light hung low on the horizon, seeming rather to harmonise with, than to relieve, the ashy greyness of the heavens. White angry waves tossed on a sea of the same ghastly hue as the sky overhead, moaning and wailing fitfully, as though possessed by some demoniac spirit of unrest. A wind which caused alternate creeping chilliness, and feverish flush, swept down the coast, driving before it irritating particles of sand, while clouds of dust whirled through the air, creating a spectral dimness, though it was yet far from sunset.

On a shelving beach near Genoa, at the very verge of the Mediterranean, were encamped hundreds of children in close serried ranks, some under tents, but more without any protection from the deadly night dews, or the noontide glare. Many of their frail little banners had been torn to shreds by the pitiless blast, and the red crosses which they wore fluttered like butterflies, so insecurely had they been attached by tiny fingers unused to the needle.

One might have fancied the weather and scene dispiriting, but a low sound of exultation swelled through the encampment, and young faces were illumined with the sweet grave brightness of prophetic inspiration, and a reverential hush of awe succeeded to the chanted litanies wherein the God of Israel was implored, through the prevailing name of His dear Son, to stretch forth that right arm of mercy which had brought deliverance to His people of old.

“Two days and nights already have ye loitered, watching for the miracle that shall not come to pass,” sneered a voice, grating harsh as a discordant note in a musical symphony. “Now perchance ye may deem that my good ships will offer you a safer passage to the Land of the Promise than yon heaving billows, which await like hungry monsters, ready to devour you.”

“Wretch,” cried a woman’s voice, raised in indignant protest, as she fixed her penetrating gaze upon the slouching form and sinister countenance of the speaker. “Well know I thy foul errand ; it is to entice to slavery, or worse, these sons and daughters of the King of Kings. But angel-guards commissioned by their Father shall defend them, and bring to nought the devices of thy cruelty and cunning. They shall march triumphantly between ramparts of crystal, and if thou pursue them, the waters which humbly kiss their feet shall overflow thee, as they did the chariots of Pharaoh.”

A mocking laugh was the only reply to this prediction, but Hughues le Fort thought it prudent to elude the vigilance of one who must have seen him engaged in decoying other innocents on board the vessels which he had equipped at Marseilles, that they might be freighted with Christian children, destined to supply the slave markets of Syria and Egypt.

At the doorway of a tent that flapped with every gust like the wings of a sea bird, many shivering little creatures nestled closely to each other as though for common warmth and protection. One of the feeblest, with heroic fortitude, was trying to calm the impatience of an older boy, who vowed, with sceptical derision, that the hours now wasted in expecting a miraculous interposition might be far more sensibly employed in seeking some practical manner of reaching their destination.

“This is the third day we have lingered vainly watching for an answer to idle petitions,” cried the lad, unheeding his small monitor’s entreaty to be silent. “Enough of

these childish dreams ! let us acquit ourselves like men. We are not told that we shall reach either the earthly or the heavenly Jerusalem by sitting still with folded hands, instead of pressing onward to the victory."

"Waiting may sometimes be more acceptable unto God than active service," said the younger child, suppressing a sigh of exhaustion.

The prevailing sentiment, however, was one of sympathy with his elder, for the same conviction which he had thus honestly expressed had gradually forced itself upon the tired and bewildered company.

"Divers recorded miracles were wrought on the third day, and behold even now an answer to our prayers," proclaimed the silvery voice of a very young girl. "Hath not this rushing mighty wind a message for your souls, ye weary and faint-hearted soldiers of the Cross?"

"In sooth it hath ; a message plain of comprehension," fretfully rejoined a listener from within the shadow of the tent. "It telleth of a couch to be presently watered by cold floods, and fanned by the breath of the tempest. Thereon shall we lie fast-bound in the fetters of sickness, or arise with limbs crippled and helpless as those of the old man tottering to his grave."

The maiden's face bespoke mild and compassionate forbearance :

"Who thou art I know not," she said, addressing her unseen companion, "but I fain would believe it is weakness, not wilful sin, which leads thee to do Satan's work by tampering with the faith of others. Hast thou forgotten that it was a strong east wind which God sent to drive back the foaming waves of the Red Sea? Let us watch through the night with prayer and fasting, and assuredly to-morrow's sun shall shine upon the royal high-road which leadeth direct unto the land of our inheritance."

Such was the declaration which had spread with an electric thrill throughout the eager host, causing the very

circumstances most prone to create despondency, to be hailed as manifest tokens of the favour and goodwill of heaven.

In the centre of another group Pietro and his two friends were employed in helping to erect a sand-dyke under which they might recline during the night, and thus partly escape the fury of the whirlwind.

"This is but child's play," observed the boy cheerfully; "a babe would scarcely heed such petty hardships. Wait till we hear the arrows of the infidel whizzing around us. Then shall we have fiercer foes to combat than these raging elements."

"I would we might pillage their cities," pursued Marco covetously, "rare and dainty are the spoils awaiting there as the recompense of our valour. Silks of Damascus; strings of orient-pearl; carved ivory, and spices of Arabia. By my faith though, were I an eastern monarch, it would be a hand of iron which should wrest from me the golden sceptre."

"Hast thou no thought for the treasures of Christendom usurped by those deluded followers of the False Prophet?" asked Pietro, who began to doubt the spirituality of his self-chosen leader.

Before Marco had time to reply, Anselmo had cleared the dyke with a joyous bound. "The mother of our baby Saracen!" he cried delightfully. "Wherefore didst thou come hither, Axia?" And in an instant Cipriano was lifted into the arms of the astonished woman, looking nearly as distrustful as when he had been transferred from them to those of Father Benedict.

Axia, having deposited her nurslings in a place of safety, had wandered alone through the juvenile camp, and slowly pacing it from end to end, had wistfully scanned every face in search of one not too completely self-absorbed to give ear to her history. That of Anselmo, earnest and intelligent, bent on promoting the wellbeing of his comrades, and forgetful of fatigue so long as he

could minister to them, attracted her as realising that ideal of the child-knight which hitherto she had vainly sought amid the throng. There was a gaze of intent inquiry on either side, and then a mutual recognition. Explanations rapidly ensued, while Axia surveyed her offspring with eyes of such yearning tenderness as to arouse the jealous apprehension of Pietro.

"It were mortal sin to take back any offering once made unto the Lord, Axia," he said reprovingly. "Our brother Cipriano hath no temporal parents, for Holy Church is his mother, and I have been as his father since the very day she claimed him as her son."

"It was to different keeping I committed thee, my lamb, my turtle-dove," cried Axia, as she strained the child so closely that he struggled to release himself from her embrace. "Is it thus heaven's servant, the devoted Abbot, hath dealt with the Lord's handmaiden? I gave my babe to be planted as a goodly cedar in the courts of God, and behold he is flung forth like the grass upon the housetops, a withered despised thing, to be burned, or trampled under foot."

Anselmo, unwilling to bear the slightest imputation on his honoured master, here stepped forth explaining how it was without the knowledge, far less the consent, of Father Benedict, that his well-ordered monastery should be represented in this human chaos. Axia had become thoroughly disenchanted as she noted the vagaries of the lawless mob, and viewed the undertaking in its bald reality, divested of the glamour of poetry and romance. What had not been her own unconscious inhumanity in bringing thither a detachment of delicate invalids, to be exposed to every phase of danger, penury, and woe. Truly, were they preserved alive through such a journey, it would be a greater miracle than any yet accorded to palmer or saint.

"He is mine own," said Axia, raising her dark eyes to confront Pietro, with a quiet dignity which the latter

knew not how to contest. "To-morrow's dawn shall see us both on the road to Barcello. There are those who will care for my leper flock till I return to claim them; for I cannot feel that God is with ye, nor that He will show favour to those who transgress His plainest commandments."

"Anselmo! help! the Moslem woman would fain rob me of my child," exclaimed Pietro. But his friend drew back, saying reluctantly, "Nay, brother, I dare not, for Axia is a Christian, and moreover hers is the right of a mother."

"Let the little monk choose for himself," cried several voices, for a ring of keenly interested spectators had gradually formed around the group.

"Heaven's will is uttered through the mouth of innocence; it will be like a solemn appeal to God in a trial by ordeal," proclaimed an impromptu herald; and the idea met with general approbation. Cipriano's fate should be determined by himself.

The little fellow seemed to realise the full importance attached to his reply. The two alternatives were clearly placed before him by Anselmo, who stated the question candidly, without seeking to influence the boy's decision. The name of Barcello brought a smile like an irradiation to the pinched wan features, but the loyal hand fearlessly dashed aside the cup of happiness, without an instant's pause or hesitation.

"I belong to Pietro!" were the only words which prayers and tears could wring from Cipriano.

"Child! child!" protested Axia, "I should be silent were it but thine earthly life which is imperilled, but it is thy precious and immortal soul. What wilt thou answer, should the enemy assail thee with fierce torture and threaten to rend thee limb from limb, except thou dost deny the Lord who bought thee?"

"I will answer whatever Pietro doth," said Cipriano, steadily.

"Dost thou not quail before such an assurance, lad?"

questioned the mother sternly. "What if thine own faith fail, and thou be doubly lost, dragged down to the nethermost depths by the blood of thy brother's soul crying for vengeance throughout the years of eternity?"

"The risk and the responsibility appal me, yet I do not shrink from them," answered Pietro, as he kissed the dusky forehead which nestled upon his bosom.

"Then farewell, my own beloved, we meet in this world no more," was Axia's sorrow-stricken, prophetic rejoinder. "Farewell also unto thee, Pietro, till I ask before the judgment seat, 'Where is my little one?'" The Saracenic mother turned away, her innermost spirit lacerated at the thought that now her first-born must be left as a lamb among wolves, his only shield against apostasy being a love almost idolatrous for the very companion whose example had already led him utterly astray.

Wearily sped the live-long night. Moon and stars were invisible; the wind subsided, but the rolling billows roared as though agitated by a subterranean convulsion. Shortly before morn the distant peals of thunder ceased. A storm had spent its force among the hills, and the atmosphere seemed all at once purified and life-giving. The children, linked together in long chains, stood hand-in-hand upon the margin of the sea, their hearts alternately bounding with ecstasy, or almost ceasing to beat in the agony of suspense. In the adjoining cove, concealed by a projection of the cliff, stood Axia, amid her sad little assemblage. The darkness which precedes dawn deepened; then came a ray of light in the eastern sky, and with dazzling splendour the sun, uprising, dispelled every fond cherished illusion. Blue, rippling, with diamond flashes playing over its magnificent expanse, extended the Mediterranean, a sheet of crystal, but terrible in its beauty when regarded as a barrier between the pilgrims and their goal.

The song of victory, to which young lips in hundreds were attuned, died into a low wail of anguish and rebel-

lion. Without word or look Axia turned her face towards Carrara, and the little lepers, their eyes dim with unshed tears, followed her unresistingly, aware that their sole hope had fled. The Child Crusaders, who at first had neither moved nor spoken, began now to exchange questioning glances. Had the Lord forsaken them? What should they next devise? Their best-laid schemes had come to nought. Whither should they bend their steps? Whom, above all, might they venture to trust, when even God Himself seemed to have failed them?

A leader was near, composedly biding his time to assume full command over the would-be Israelites, only his aim, the opposite to that of Moses, was to lead them from the home of love and freedom literally back to Egypt and the house of bondage.

“Now, perchance, ye will no longer despise my ships,” laughed Hughues le Fort, feigning not to remark the rush of eager feet behind him, as he sauntered whistling carelessly along the shore in the direction of Marseilles.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BANNER OF THE LAMB.

THE crusading spirit which had so long animated the child-mind of Christendom, moulding its divers nationalities into absolute uniformity of will and aim, far from evincing any token of decline, can scarcely be considered as having yet reached its climax. Numbers had indeed withdrawn either by their own consent, or at the instance of parents and friends whose authority had been strengthened by the issue of at least one royal mandate. Numbers more had been sacrificed to the inexorable law of nature which decrees that budding life must droop and die, unless it be in some degree sheltered and fostered. Rank after rank had bowed their heads like flowers beneath the scythe of the Great Reaper, but others pressed on to fill the vacancies, flocking around the symbolical standard of the Lamb bearing His Cross, and taking up the battle-cry as it hung trembling upon lips soon to be mute in death.

The scattered lines which had long straggled across vale and mountain, lake and river, began now converging towards a common focus, pouring through clefts in the barren hills tufted with rosemary and cystus into the land of the troubadours, that chosen home of poesy and legend. Perchance nowhere else could the singular movement have been more in keeping with the character of the inhabitants. Even the fervid Italian nature seems to have lent itself with less readiness to this development of the chivalric instinct of the period, than did those dames and

seigneurs, in whom the imaginative powers had been so cultivated as to make them crave the stirring and emotional, and seek to render life a shifting pageant, in which one refined and intellectual excitement must quickly succeed another. We can fancy, although history is silent on the point, how many little Red Cross champions would be found among the *damoiseaux*, and how fair, high-born ladies would encourage their youthful attendants to pass in an instant from the school of chivalry to its open arena, and exchange the courtly bower for the tent and field.

The antique cities of Provence possess even in our day a stamp of originality peculiarly their own. Their Roman baths, temples, and amphitheatres, mouldering in peaceful obscurity, speak more vividly to the scholar's eye of past imperial domination than do the often defaced and shattered monuments of the world-thronged metropolis itself. Side by side with these storied relics of the empire are the more sacred vestiges of early Christianity, dear most especially to British churchmen as linked with those venerated names of the martyred disciples of St. John of Ephesus, to whom we owe our liturgy, and from whom may be traced our spiritual ancestry and birth.

Reclining indolently on a couch covered with azure silk, which had been drawn into the deep embrasure of a window looking down into the courtyard of a feudal castle, was the youngest daughter of its lord, attended by the foster sister who was just then her only companion. The stronghold was situated on an eminence several miles distant from the nearest town, and its broad battlements commanded an extensive view over the level country, bounded by a range of swelling hills, sunbleached, with dried-up water-courses glaring in their fissures. Diminutive olives, resembling pollard willow-trees, dotted the flats, which were likewise diversified by clumps of tamarisk and almond, pomegranate and fig, all more or less stunted in growth by the bleak winds from Languedoc, which swept

in wintertide across the unprotected plain. The only plants which flourished luxuriantly were the aloes and cacti that clung fast to the white slopes of naked rock whose scanty soil nourished their roots with the tropical warmth on which their life depended. A faint blue mist of concentrated heat hung like a curtain over the landscape on that September afternoon, and Adela had been reluctantly banished within doors by the sultriness of the "veiled sunshine," which the natives of that region deem more prejudicial to health than the fiercest rays that ever poured from an unclouded sky. She was a creature born for the freedom of woods and fields, and doubly irksome to her, therefore, was the close restraint which both the manners and the exigencies of the age imposed on women of her rank in the seclusion of their lordly châteaux.

One compensation for the dull monotony to which Adela was condemned was the unceasing animation below her dainty bower, whence, safely screened from observation, she could watch the movements of her father's numerous retainers, each taking his part in the drama of active life of which she was condemned to be a mere passive spectator. She was not robust, and the lassitude of ill-health caused the few pleasures within her reach to pall quickly upon the jaded nerves and spirits. There was some excuse for the poor child's dissatisfied expression, more especially when, as on the present occasion, the absence at court of the remainder of the family made the stagnation which reigned in the castle hopelessly oppressive to her ardent, enterprising disposition.

"It is a hard fate, to have elder sisters flaunting in gay robes at dance and tournament, while I must pine alone in the flower of my youth," sighed the damsel of thirteen to her sympathising auditor. "Isabeau hath been chosen this year as the Queen of Love and Beauty, yet I am nearly as tall and of a statelier presence. I would they had yielded when she prayed with tears to be excused from

such frivolities and permitted to bury her youth behind the grating of a cloister."

"Wherefore was the Lady Isabeau thus thwarted in her saintly aspiration? I have never rightly understood the matter," inquired Jeannette in a tone of interest.

"Because the priest declared she had no true vocation, and my father wished her to make some brilliant alliance. They bade her sip the cup of worldly enjoyment before she renounced it, and in sooth she drained it to the very dregs; for now her only aim is to contract a marriage with some noble whose position shall compel him to live permanently at the court, where all unite in flattering her vanity."

"If thou wilt, lady, it may be even so with thyself, when two more short summers have past," rejoined the handmaid soothingly.

"Never!" exclaimed the girl with flashing eyes. "Dost thou think I crave pastimes like an infant, Jeannette? or that I should be contented like my sisters with the dalliance of idle revellers? Nay, when I sigh for court it is to spread my cramped wings in free space; and should I link my fate with any other, it would be but to follow the fortunes of some mighty warrior; yet then must my renown be merged in his, and I am fain to leave a memory that shall shine royally bright among the names of women. Oh! for some vent for the energy which consumes me; some employment more worthy to fill the vapid hours than tapestry or lute. Surely, in the wide glorious world there must be work prepared even for maidens."

"Thou dost tire of every exertion, lady, and the leech commandeth rest. Moreover, when the nuns besought thee to join with the Lady Isabeau in learning to dress wounds and nurse the sick, thou didst reject their lessons with a show of petulance."

"Assuredly; I have no taste for charitable offices, nor care I overmuch for what men call religion. Yet,"

she added in a wistful tone, half to herself, "Who knows if, after all, that may not give a more enduring zest to life than even those deeds which shed lustre on the chronicles of ancient families?"

"Dear mistress, by such words thou dost embolden me to speak," cried Jeannette, falling on her knees beside the couch. "Thou hast wealth, beauty, rank; the sweetest freshness of a youth scarce yet unfolding. Lay these choice gifts, like the Magi, at the feet of the Redeemer. Range thyself beside me, thy humble servant, yet sister in Christ, beneath the Banner of the Lamb. Then shall thy name descend to future generations with those of the blessed Maries whose hearts drew them towards the Holy Sepulchre even before the dawn of day."

"Peace, child! How often have I asked a respite from these pleadings of insanity? Thou knowest I will not demean myself by mingling on terms of equality with those of an inferior station. The blood of a lordly race flows through my veins, nor need'st thou deem I shall dishonour it by holding fellowship with villeins, mendicants, and craftsmen."

"Such pride, noble lady, would have withheld thee from joining the company of the holy Apostles, because they were lowly fishermen," pursued the little peasant with gentle reproach.

"Even so; or more likely they would never have come to my notice," replied Adela with levity, half real and half assumed. "In those days I should scarce have heard of Christianity, for it is not my habit to concern myself with what transpires among the lower classes."

"The divine faith had even then its votaries amongst patrician virgins, Lady Adela. Remember St. Cæcilia, fair St. Agnes, and many another of whom Father Ambrose and the nuns have told us. I learned only yesterday that a young daughter of the Comte de Cambrai is now treading in their footsteps by having allied herself with the holy Crusaders. She, whose claim

is to blood ancient as thine, heeds not the titles which belong to a perishing world, but fixes her calm gaze above the stars, where shines the crown of her celestial heritage."

"Fain would I hear from the lips of the Countess what motive prompted the action," remarked Adela, surprised into a momentary seriousness. "But," she resumed impatiently, "why indulge wishes in this dismal castle, where the years glide on bringing no change except winter and spring, summer and autumn?"

As though to disprove the *demoiselle's* sweeping assertion, the air was filled at that very moment with a tumult of shrill voices, while the tramp of many feet resounded on the drawbridge, succeeded by the din of piercing acclamations.

"Can they have returned from court without a word of warning?" exclaimed Jeannette, springing from her seat. But Adela answered with haughtiness, "Methinks my father's menials are better instructed, than thus to receive their lord and lady."

The gates were flung open, and the banner of the Agnus Dei was solemnly borne beneath Adela's window, followed by a swarm of boys and girls, in the centre of whom a stripling was seated on a car of triumph, fully armoured, and with a body-guard of armed children attending him.

The singular personage who had thus suddenly invaded the retirement of the foster sisters, was one of those characters beyond all doubt historical, yet of whom we glean from authentic sources only sufficient to stimulate without satisfying our interest and curiosity. We are told that his Christian name was Hughues, but of his antecedents so little has been recorded that we cannot even ascertain whether he were a noble or a *vilain*. There appears no question that he honestly believed himself to be a messenger from heaven, charged to call those of his own age and under, to rally around the Banner of the

Lamb, while from his lips unceasingly pealed forth the trumpet call, "*O Seigneur Jésus Christ, rendez nous votre Sainte Croix.*" Amid the cities, villages, and *châteaux* of his native France wandered the young enthusiast, everywhere drawing crowds around his standard, and himself an object of such reverential love, that we can scarcely doubt the integrity of his motive. We vainly desire to follow him through every stage of the career which must have been fraught with such varied incidents, and which doubtless closed in an untimely, if not a violent, death. His biography remains, however, as a sealed book to posterity. There is no ray of light to guide us either to his cradle or his grave.

It is not strange that Jeannette at the first sound of the battle-cry rushed into the courtyard, where every child in the castle was already hastening to enlist in the good cause, and tendering vows of obedience to its leader. More extraordinary is the fact that Lady Adela caught the infection, and forgetting arrogance and pride of birth, was suing for admittance to the consecrated band with more humility than the most lowly babe sprung from her father's vassals. No wonder that those highest in confidence, to whom had been committed the charge of her person, should stand back in awe, nor dare to intercept the purposes of Heaven, declared at the outset by a moral miracle more startling than would have been the natural one beside the shore of the Mediterranean. What though they should kindle the wrath of their proud master, and be forced to expiate their sin against him by stripes, torture, or confinement to the darkest dungeon? Were not that better than to arouse the ire of God, and be consumed eternally by the flame of His vengeance?

There was no one to dispute Adela's will as she passed for ever from her ancestral home, asking forgiveness of all whom she might have wronged, and beseeching the prayers of the faithful for herself and her companions. Deep in the ardent young nature slumbered a vein of

devotion mingled indeed with the alloy of baser metals, yet fine gold which might, when tried and purified, reflect the image of the heavenly King. It was no mere fondness for change and adventure that led Adela to overleap the barriers of social distinction to which she attached almost exaggerated importance. It was that for the first time within her experience the reality of things unseen flashed across her mental vision. From the height to which her spirit soared, earthly things were beheld in their actual relation to eternity. Thence sprang an impulse of self-abnegation wearing the semblance of holiness to others besides simple Jeannette, but which was in truth only a fresh proof of the undisciplined will which, even when seeking the service of God, plunged recklessly into the path most pleasing to imagination, without pausing to consider whether it were the one ordained by His Almighty Wisdom.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE VICTORY OF THE TEMPTER.

NOT very distant from the famous seaport of Marseilles, of which the traffic even then extended to the known limits of East and West, was a maritime plain of sand, raised slightly above the level of the water. It was so encompassed by blanched arid mountains which reflected and intensified the glowing sun-rays, as to possess a climate almost identical with that of the unseen African shore directly facing it. The low shrubs which sprinkled its surface were allied to half-tropical species, and camels newly disembarked from Algiers or Morocco had been known to disport themselves on its burning sands as though restored to their native desert. Thither had Hughues le Fort decided to lead the victims of his duplicity: a bold step, for it was the rallying point of a vast concourse which included men and women, some of whom might have striven to baffle his design. Not only did the multitude thus drawn together cover the level expanse, but they were clustered thickly wheresoever a ledge, cavity, or gnarled fig-tree among the rocks could offer even a precarious foot-hold. Guillaume Porc, the confederate of Hughues, was seeking by alternate blandishment and ridicule to drive waverers into the trap which he had baited with success for many of their fellows. He had no wish to hasten the embarkation in the absence of his colleague, who had not as yet returned from Genoa. All he desired, at present, was not to relax his hold on the assemblage of children, that there might be ample choice

among those likely to prove lucrative either from physical strength and beauty, or as heirs of rank and wealth sufficient to ensure a goodly ransom to their captors.

“I would gladly give you all a free passage, noble knights and ladies,” said the ruffian, bent at once upon cajolery and on awakening the spirit of emulation. “Ye perceive, however, that my space is small, nor dare I overfreight the vessels, lest ye should all perish, and the Holy Land be left in bondage to the Infidel.”

The offer which had caused anxious debate while seemingly awaiting their acceptance, became of redoubled value when likely to be withdrawn, and Guillaume Porc could afford to be fastidious as he surveyed the numerous applicants who clung to him with upturned faces and beseeching gestures. His fleet numbered no fewer than seven ships, and he intended to load each one to the uttermost; yet who could tell what prizes might not have fallen into Hughues’s clutches? It would be well to hold a few places in reserve, and meanwhile cull with the nicest judgment from those present such as were most sure to be remunerative. The selection was difficult to a covetous nature, which unwillingly let any prey slip from its grasp except the weaklings, who appeared likely to die upon the voyage. Golden-haired Northern babes of three or four he was particularly eager to obtain, as they were greatly in demand for pets and playthings among Oriental ladies, from sultanas downward.

A small German “housemother,” about thirteen years old, stood near him, hushing an infant to sleep, and keeping her experienced eye on the twin sisters, aged seven, who could hardly be restrained from losing themselves in the motley crowd. Poor Gretchen had not joined the crusade from devotion, but because the only brother would not listen to her mild dissuasions, and the trust confided to her by dead parents could alone be kept by following him across the Alps to Italy or France. The little ones whom she had tended from their birth could not be left

behind, so the whole family set out together, and in some marvellous way had reached Marseilles without even a serious illness. They were all exceptionally strong, healthy, and independent, and everywhere women's hearts had warmed to the motherly little creature, and kind hands had helped her to cherish and feed her flock. The entire group was distinguished by beauty of the blond type peculiar to their nation, from the sturdy Max down to the tiny babe which nestled upon Gretchen's bosom. Guillaume's cold gaze lingered upon the cherub heads, setting a marketable price upon their flaxen tresses. To them he not only granted a free passage, but hurried them all on board one of his ships, where he caused food and water to be liberally served, lest they should lose the freshness and brilliancy of their bloom. Gretchen possessed fewer attractions than the rest, as early care and labour had impaired her childish loveliness, but those strong willing arms would be worth a fortune in Egypt, and until the little ones found purchasers, her presence was essential to their welfare, if not to their actual existence.

In the fond belief that thenceforth the journey would be marked by leisurely ease and freedom from responsibility, Gretchen alighted joyously on the deck of the vessel, where, encircled by her happy nurslings, she and Max speculated how long it might be before the number of passengers was complete, and the *Crusader* ready to proceed on her voyage. They were only detained twenty-four hours, for the selection from among Hughues's followers had been quickly made, and as the wind seemed favourable, the signal to weigh anchor was immediately given. A vapour of pearl grey, faintly tinted with rose-colour, overhung the mountain chains of Provence in the southern twilight, as, amid cheers from the multitude on shore, the guilty fleet vanished amid the evening mists. Not one of the high-souled children whom it thus remorselessly carried away was destined

ever to set foot upon the coast of Palestine. Surely most terrible would be the retribution of those who presumed thus to offend their innocence.

In company with Gretchen were the little Lady Adela and Jeannette, the former of whom had sought to join the young Comtesse de Cambrai, but without success, as their respective ships were bound for different ports. Never did Adela in her keen disappointment dream of the Heavenly Love which, while denying the request, had saved her from sharing the lot reserved for her equal in age and station. Earnestly once more we desire to rend the veil of which authentic history has lifted but a single fold. We know that the child countess was borne to some Oriental slave market, and there with her companions sold into captivity. Her owner was a Moslem potentate of evil reputation, even for that land and period. Beyond these bare facts everything must be left to conjecture. We cannot divine whether the maiden perished in her tender girlhood, or lived to endure a fate even more tragical. How far was she supported in adversity by that "sainte hardiesse," for which a quaint old chronicler singles her out among the "moult bels enfans" of the army, for a tribute of admiring praise? Was she numbered with the apostates or the martyrs, both of whom were so largely represented among those of the children who reached the East? These questions and the like must evermore remain unanswered until the Great Day when all secrets shall be revealed.

A similar, nay, even deeper mystery envelops the band of Apostles. Its leader, young Jean de Provence, when reduced to Mohammedan servitude, loyally sealed in blood the faith which he seems to have ever adorned with the brightest grace of early piety. Did the eleven follow his example? Not a whisper of their fate has issued from the sepulchre of buried ages, and this is the more remarkable from the fact that a princely scion of the house of Montfort was, as we have seen, one of the

company. Did his conduct disgrace the ancient honourable name, or did it shed thereon a lustre such as eclipsed the greatest renown which ever yet had been conferred by knight or baron of that line of chivalry ?

Apart from sea-sickness and its attendant miseries, the little voyagers had no particular cause of complaint. Self-interest prompted their captors to treat them kindly, and as no object could have been gained by undeceiving them, they were allowed to fancy themselves bound for Palestine, and to discuss freely together what would be the best course to adopt on landing. The smooth decks were the fields of many a mimic skirmish, always ending in victory to the Cross : a fact scarcely surprising, as the votaries of the Crescent, whom few could be found to personate, were ever in a small minority. Veteran Chiefs, had any such been present, would scarcely have known whether to smile or sigh over the childish strategies ; the military terms uttered at random ; the doubts as to whether clemency might be lawfully exercised towards a fallen foe by these pigmy antagonists. The entire scene would have been ludicrous, had not its sadness been too deep for mirth.

“ How soon shall we be at the Holy Sepulchre ? ” asked Jeannette anxiously one day of a rough sailor. She was growing seriously uneasy about Adela, who seemed unable to recover from the lassitude occasioned by the march, and subsequent fatigue and sickness.

The man dashed one hand across his eyes, muttering some unintelligible answer. Jeannette felt vaguely alarmed, though no suspicion of the truth occurred to her. In another moment the seaman had steeled his heart, and turned away. What were these children and their fate to him, except as part of the live cargo which must be safely delivered, lest he should forfeit a portion of the wages for the sake of which he had agreed to stain his soul by the ungodly deed ?

Jeannette and Gretchen were strongly attracted to each

other, although their interchange of ideas was limited by the slender vocabulary which the German *Mädchen* had acquired in the course of her French travels. Jeannette did not understand a single word of her friend's barbarous dialect, but she was quick to recognise the simple-hearted love to God and man which rendered Gretchen the most helpful of companions, charming away half of the petty discomforts and annoyances that were inseparable from their situation. Lady Adela was no model of patience, nor did she even strive to endure the ills, now unavoidable, which were the natural result of her own rashness. The noise of an overgrown nursery confined within the limits of a ship distracted her, nor was there any moment, day or night, in which she could enjoy the privacy that live-long habit had made almost indispensable. The absence of the respect and homage which her rank had hitherto ensured were equally distasteful and perplexing to the young aristocrat, and the flame of devotion, which continued to burn steadily in Jeannette's breast, began already to be dim and flickering in her own. Proud shyness and reserve prevented the open avowal of her sentiments, which were however legibly inscribed upon the sullen and averted countenance. Adela had not the slightest intention to proceed upon this arduous pilgrimage; her mind was preoccupied with planning a return to Provence at the earliest opportunity, nor did she doubt that her example would be followed by other maidens of the like degree, who might have been beguiled into joining the expedition.

"Why do not the ships keep together, Max?" inquired one of the blue-eyed twins upon awakening, as looking abroad over the lake-like sea she noticed that only a single vessel seemed pursuing the same track as the *Crusader*.

"Some of them may have loitered behind us, little sister, and others have gone ahead. We are not all to land together nor to travel by the same road. We

and our comrades must be parted on the journey, but anon we shall meet before the gates of Jerusalem."

"Suppose some of us should be drowned," suggested Minna, while a shade of awe flitted across her rosy face.

"That we shall not be," said Max confidently, "for the Lord hath need of us to drive away the infidel from His inheritance. How they will tremble and wax pale with fear, when they behold 'the Banner of the Lamb' lifted against them."

"Dost thou really think they will be so affrighted when they see us?" asked the other twin, speaking with diffidence. "I know," she added, "if they are tall bearded men, with poisoned arrows and sharp swords, I shall be far more fain to flee from them, than they can be to flee from us."

"They may not dread us at the outset," Max conceded after some deliberation. "They may even scoff, as did Goliath, when the stripling David challenged him to mortal combat; yet the giant fell, none the less certainly, and the fierce army of the Philistines was routed."

Lady Adela, who possessed a slight knowledge of German, had overheard the foregoing conversation with languid amusement. Passing one arm softly around the timid child, she whispered a promise that the latter should go to live in a splendid castle as her little bower maiden. *Trüdchen* was amply contented at this prospect, and kissing the hand of her new patroness, she nestled at Adela's feet soothed into dreaming bliss by the cool ripple of the sun-lit waters.

Hitherto there had been a light head-wind succeeding to the first few hours of favourable breeze, and all the mariners agreed that never before had they made such tedious progress. A week had elapsed, and they were only nearing the coast of Sardinia, and now a dead calm held them almost spellbound in sight of those dangerous rocks. The seamen anxiously scanned the horizon. There was no visible sign of wind or rain, yet surely

a tempest must be impending, else how could the stagnant atmosphere be purified? Floating helplessly as driftwood along the familiar track to Malta, they had just reached the island of San Pietro, when night closed around them on that treacherous shore, where no good anchorage could be secured. The captains, after taking every possible precaution, still felt that the risk to life was imminent, and straining their eyes into the impenetrable darkness, could do nothing but "wish for the day," as voyagers in apostolic times had done before them.

Intense stillness reigned on board the two fated vessels. The heavy air pressed with soporific force upon young eyelids, and the very sailors in the rigging scarcely knew how to resist its slumberous influence. Suddenly the four winds of heaven seemed unchained. Forked lightning blazed over the deep, and blinding deluges of rain descended, washing several of the men from the decks of the *Palmer* and *Crusader*. With a shock reverberating like the distant roll of the thunder itself, the doomed ships struck against each other, and both foundered almost at the self-same instant. The impenitent sank down into the angry waves upon their knees, suing for mercy in that direst extremity. The children on whom God had thus outpoured His goodness, passed for the most part unconsciously away, together with those who would have destroyed them in body and soul. Here and there drowsy tones murmured half audibly: "Lord Jesus Christ, restore to us Thy Holy Cross," as though the little sleepers had mistaken the roar of the elements for the din of the battle-field. But even those who were thus partially aroused had no time for alarm, so swift was their transition from the turmoil of earth to the Rest of Paradise.

Brilliantly on the morrow streamed the autumn sun over a sea of emerald flecked with lily-wreaths of foam. The strand of St. Peter's Isle was strewn with tiny corpses, which were reverently buried by the pitying

inhabitants, with many a solemn dirge and chanted psalm. Long afterwards a more enduring tribute was paid to their memory, when, by the order of Pope Gregory the Ninth, a chapel was erected on that very spot in honour of the Child Crusaders, who, though shipwrecked, had there found an entrance into the "Fair Haven" of Everlasting Life.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CHILD APOSTATE.

“THOU art at home here, Baby Saracen!” exclaimed Pietro in a transport of excitement and delight, as he sprang from the boat which had conveyed a troop of little pilgrims from the vessel in the harbour, to the landing-place at Alexandria.

“Not quite at home yet,” corrected Anselmo, whose knowledge of geography was clearer than that of his friend. “Our baby brother is not an Egyptian; his people belong to Asia. Hast thou lost all recollection of the *scuola*, and of Brother Innocent?”

“At least we are among Mohammedans,” pursued Pietro, who seemed to derive unmingled satisfaction from the consciousness. “Yon building, with its many-coloured domes and slender minaret, can only be a mosque, and behold!” he added triumphantly, “the throng of worshippers mounting its steps in turbans of green, yellow, blue, and scarlet. There can be no question that they are all infidels.”

“Methinks thou would’st be ill-pleased could a miracle convert them into Christians,” observed Marco, with a laugh in which Anselmo could scarcely refrain from joining. “By the Great Prophet himself, Pietro, I believe thy pilgrimage will be to Mecca rather than Jerusalem.”

“In sooth I forgot to mourn their errors,” said the boy remorsefully; “all is so new and interesting, and unlike Christian countries, that cathedrals and churches

would scarce appear natural here. How far we have left Italy behind, Anselmo. Is it not more wonderful than a dream, to be really in Egypt?"

While thus conversing they had stood in the shadow of lofty porticos, soothed by the splash of unseen fountains, and themselves comparatively cool, although it was the hottest hour of the Egyptian day. Before them mighty masses of gigantic masonry; solemn expanses of red desert sand; the very sea itself, blazing beneath a copper sun, seemed overspread with one uniform hue of molten brass. Even Italian eyes shrank from the blinding glare, and a faint sickness overpowered all strangers exposed to its influence. Only Cipriano and Pietro appeared unaffected by a climate so much fiercer than their own, and the latter looked strikingly handsome with his clear bright olive cheeks, and the expressive eyes which seemed to speak without the aid of language.

"He will be quickly sold," said Hughues le Fort to a confederate, pointing to the beautiful boy who was just bending to lift Cipriano on his shoulder. No one caught the meaning of the words except Anselmo, who gave a quick start of apprehension; but if harm were intended, what could he do to avert it?

The children, gathered beneath the colonnade of granite pillars, represented the flower and pride of the infantine chivalry. They numbered twenty, and each might have made a study for a mediæval pencil, while collectively their several charms enhanced each other, like the beauty of contrasting blossoms. Hughues le Fort, having rapidly counted heads, formed the young captives into a procession, and commanding them with insolence to follow him, he plunged into an intricate network of lanes, winding between tall houses which presented only a blank surface of wall upon the side facing the street, if such it could be called. The latticed windows opened inwards upon sunken gardens, watered, in scriptural language, "by the foot," and on quiet court-

yards, shaded into delicious dimness, where amid rich masses of tropical foliage gleamed basins of translucent alabaster ready to receive the crystal showers, without which this fair scene of loveliness would have been parched and arid desolation.

Suddenly Hughues le Fort halted at a low doorway, which unclosed as though in answer to some secret incantation, for there was no signal which could be detected by the keenest ear or eye among the watchful prisoners. The portal through which they streamed opened upon a passage of considerable length, narrow, dark, and forbidding as the entrance to a dungeon. Gradually it grew lighter and began to widen, till it finally expanded into a vast vaulted hall, of which the hollow roof, wrought into arabesques, was supported by delicate twisted pillars of aerial grace. Vermilion, azure, gold, and purple, created a splendour dazzling to behold, and in the distance stretched a vista of luxuriant green, where thickets of dense verdure gave a sense of calm repose to the eye wearied with excess of colour.

“Is this the palace of King Pharaoh?” asked a timid voice, and no one seemed disposed to hazard a reply.

The captive children looked around them anxious and bewildered. Everything which they beheld was gorgeous and alluring, but no explanations were vouchsafed as to wherefore they were conducted thither, and they felt oppressed by the mystery of the unknown, always appalling to the human intellect. The altered mien of Hughues also occasioned dire perplexity to the poor little wanderers, who, while robbed of free action, lacked the compensating sense of guidance and protection which most of them would have hailed as a blessed exchange. They felt in the power of some evil enchanter, and began to entertain grave doubts as to whether this city, where all looked so unfamiliar, were not Babylon instead of Alexandria. It was the mystic characters traced on the wall

which gave rise to this latter supposition. How awful and supernatural they seemed. Were they Satanic, or prophetic holy warnings to flee from a doom of which they did not even understand the import, far less the mode of escaping it?

Upon one side of the hall was a horseshoe arch, forming an open doorway concealed by a drapery of violet silk massive with gold embroidery. Its folds were parted as the children gazed, and an old man benignant and majestic stood among them, while the servants who had followed ranged themselves in a half circle behind their master. Hughues le Fort, prostrating himself thrice at the feet of the magnate, kissed the border of his jewelled robe, and waited in servile submission until it should be the pleasure of his patron to address him.

There was silence for the space of a few seconds; then the owner of the palace signed to an interpreter, who, laying his right hand on heart and forehead, stepped forth from the midst of the attendants and stood opposite the children, who were ranged in a straight line across the hall. A gesture of imperious command singled out Marco from the company, and the quick-witted boy fell at the old man's feet, copying the Oriental signs of reverence to a superior, with as much readiness as though he had been born in Egypt. A pleased smile softened the aged face bent over him, and the little Crusaders almost held their breath in wonder as to what should be the next scene of this thrilling drama.

"Child of an unbelieving race," spoke the interpreter in excellent Italian, "I am charged to ask whether thou wilt renounce thine errors, and conform to the true faith of Allah and his Prophet?"

"Not so," replied Marco succinctly; and the listeners drew a deep breath of relief. None of them would have openly, nor even secretly, accused their comrade of unfaithfulness to Christianity, while yet instinctively they all expected to be witnesses of his immediate apostasy.

Marco's black eyes, however, were fixed unflinchingly on the speaker. He might sell his Lord, and his own soul, for gold, but cowardice formed no part of his reckless nature.

"Guard well thy lips, lest they seal thy destruction," resumed the interpreter, continuing to speak with automatic precision. "My master, the princely merchant Achmet, offereth unto thee not the most lowly place among his household slaves, although such graciousness would far exceed thy merits and condition. Such is his favour toward thee, that he would stoop to uplift thee from the dust unto the highest seat of wealth and honour, even as of love. Thou shalt become the son of his old age; the heir of his boundless possessions; and on thy part he asketh nought save that thou shalt forsake the path of falsehood, and open thine ear and heart unto the words of wisdom."

Here Achmet himself interposed, in tones as tender and pathetic as the whisper of the desert wind when it stirs the blue lotus blossoms and bulrushes of the Nile. There was nothing alarming in the accents, yet the children cowered and shrank close together, for the foreign tongue smote them with the same vague foreboding as did the Arabian characters inscribed upon the wall. Had the benevolent and harmless old man been a wicked magician, the little warriors could not have crossed themselves more devoutly, nor uttered more fervent supplications for deliverance from his power.

"This is he who lurketh in secret places to murder the innocent," muttered Pietro, as he drew the head of Cipriano close against his knee, and gazed defiantly at Achmet, whose mild eyes barely took cognisance of his existence.

"My princely master doth condescend to entreaty," pursued the interpreter, when the faltering voice died into stillness. "He *imploreth* thee not to withhold the one desire of his heart. Allah, so bountiful to him in all

beside, hath yet denied him the best gift of children. Never did baby tones lisp the sweet name of father in his ear. Never did the strong arm of a dutiful son steady his tottering footsteps, nor smooth his uneasy pillow in the hour of sickness. Must those grey hairs descend into a grave honoured indeed, but soon to be forgotten? Shall not one alien to his blood, yet his child by adoption, live to keep that memory green, and hand it down a precious legacy to future generations?"

Intense meditation furrowed Marco's brow into deep lines of thought, at variance with the boyish features. Christianity had never been to him more than an abstract idea, but it was one entwined with his earliest recollections, rendered, intellectually at least, vivid by habitual intercourse with those who held it as the only great reality of life. In a more frigid age his carelessness might have degenerated into infidelity, but Marco was no sceptic. His sense of the personality alike of God and Satan was as clear as could have been that of his pious mother. He felt that did he accede to Achmet's proposition it would virtually be signing a compact with the enemy of man's salvation. His brain reeled as though with the shock of contending armies. Were the hosts of good and evil gathered there as on a field of combat? Marco felt almost physically rent asunder by the conflict, yet amid all wondered idly, like a disinterested spectator, which side was eventually destined to achieve the victory.

"I must have leisure to consider," he murmured at length, and Achmet answered, "It is well: ponder the matter until set of sun, for it is weighty, and mark if thine heart doth most incline unto the path of Paradise or the desert of unbelief. Fondly do I yearn over thee, my son. Humbly do I entreat thee not to close thine ears unto the truth."

"Marco! Marco!" exclaimed Pietro and Anselmo, rushing forward simultaneously and flinging themselves upon their comrade's neck. "What hath a Christian to

consider, when the point at issue is allegiance to his King?" Such was the low, gentle remonstrance of Anselmo. "Art thou a traitor worse than Judas?" was the more scornful expostulation of Pietro.

Both alike failed of producing an impression on the mind of him to whom they were addressed. "Peace! I must fight this battle out alone," cried Marco, driven to the verge of desperation. Hughues sprang forward, and dealing a violent blow to the two boys, dragged them back with suppressed oaths, and assurances that they would soon find cause to envy rather than compassionate the lot of their associates.

"Rebuke not the lads; they have acted according to their conscience," Achmet said, with the calm bearing of authority which none dared to dispute. "Yet," he continued, "the choice of him whom I fain would win must be unbiassed. Bear thou hence yon Christian children, and leave the noble youth to my keeping. When the *muezzin's* voice calleth to sunset prayer, then shalt thou receive either himself, or in exchange fourfold the sum for which thou didst agree that I should have the first choice of thy captives. Wherefore dost thou tarry? Is not the word of the merchant Achmet as good as his bond?"

With manifold prostrations which told rather of cringing servility than honest deference, Hughues obediently quitted the presence of his patron. Achmet and his servants also prepared to withdraw after the former had caused Marco to be told that he might wander at his will throughout the palace until nightfall. An Ethiopian slave should be in noiseless attendance, and when the boy's resolve was fixed he had only to clap his hands, in token that he wished to be conducted to the father who would be awaiting him.

Thankful for this brief respite from decision, Marco sought to dismiss serious thought, and abandoned himself to the delights of a voyage of discovery in a realm that

seemed peopled by the genii of Arabian fable. He passed through rich chambers hung with tissues of silver, and Tyrian purple, or resplendent with the gorgeous fabrics woven in the looms of India. Gold, jewels, costly raiment, lay scattered around like overflowing drops from this fountain of grandeur. The walls incrustated with porphyry, jasper, Persian-flame, and other marbles equally precious and rare, heightened by their dark brilliancy the gay fantastic painting of the ceilings. Groups of slaves guarded these enchanted precincts, and as Marco passed, each one made a lowly obeisance, contrasting singularly with the hearty, yet somewhat familiar, homage of his father's vassals. The boy shivered at the bare remembrance of Lucchio, with its grim, poverty-stricken castle. Must he turn away from pomp and luxury exceeding all that fancy ever pictured of the splendours of Pharaoh upon his throne?

Amid these vacillations he had wholly forgotten the Ethiopian, who, according to command, kept sedulously in his rear, when, happening to turn, he marked the sable form flitting behind him like the very incarnation of the demon tempter. He recoiled with a gesture of loathing, and his inward ear seemed deafened by a clarion-blast proclaiming, "The world and all that is therein passeth away"; while the resisted grace of God demanded, with one last appeal, "What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" For a moment he bowed like a reed beneath the whirlwind, in the next he upraised himself to his full height. The throbbings of his breast were stilled, but not in peace; the apathy of spiritual death had hushed its beatings.

Making the appointed signal, he was led forthwith to the expectant Achmet, who, with every demonstration of affection, strained the child of his adoption closely in his arms. The European dress of Marco was discarded, and replaced by flowing Oriental robes of honour, inlaid sandals, gold chains, and a jewelled ring. The history

of the Prodigal appeared enacted in satanic mockery, but its awfulness failed to arouse the seared and blasted conscience of the young apostate.

“At least I have gained more than the thirty pieces of silver,” was the cold, deliberate conviction with which the unhappy Marco turned away from the faith of his fathers.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CHILD MARTYRS.

WHILE the degenerate heir of Lucchio was set upon a pinnacle as lofty as the Prince of this world had it in his power to bestow on one ready to "fall down and worship him," the faithful three from Barcello were abased to the humblest condition which can be the portion of free-born humanity. Daily had they and others been exposed for sale in the slave mart of Alexandria. Nightly had they been reconducted to their "dungeon," as Pietro styled it, though the term was really a misnomer. The place of duration which Hughues had selected for his captives was a spacious chamber, subterranean indeed, as best accorded with the sultriness of the climate, but well ventilated, and no more obscure than were the halls inhabited from choice by the native nobility. It was a dwelling which afforded every requisite of health and comfort; nor were its inmates condemned to prisoners' fare, for boiled rice or stewed millet, water-melons, dates, and other fruits were served in rations so abundant as to satisfy the vigorous appetite of youth. Sheep-skin rugs were provided to shield tender limbs from contact with the damp stone floor, and in one corner stood a vase of porous earthenware, which by evaporation kept the water of the Nile cool as snow from the heights of Hermon. Already had Anselmo learned to invest this retreat with the endearing name of home, and with somewhat of its sacred associations. Its quiet mentally enfolded him during the many hours in which he was exposed to the contemptuous gaze of idle loiterers or

hurried passers-by, who viewed the stranger children with as much indifference as though they had been articles of inanimate merchandise. Such an ordeal of publicity occasioned suffering, exceeding that of rigorous confinement, to the sensitive boy who had always lived in cloistral seclusion. Anselmo knew no happier moment than when he and his friends were left under lock and key after the sunset meal, secure from interruption until a fresh epoch in their history should be unrolled with the morrow's dawn.

Callous neglect, however chilling and abnormal must be any such experience to confiding childhood, was by no means the worst ill to which these little soldiers of the Cross were subject. Mingled with the more peaceful citizens was a sprinkling of fanatics, whose hatred for the Christian religion induced them not only to heap every mark of scorn and contumely on its feeble votaries, but also to wage a war of extermination against those whom they were wont to designate as "the brood of the serpent." Intent on this object, several of them leagued together and purchased a number of very young girls and boys, expressly that they might be sacrificed did they decline conformity to the creed of the Koran. When offered the choice between immediate death or apostasy, the brave little confessors, without one exception, embraced the former alternative, and were accordingly slaughtered upon the spot in the most barbarous and inhuman manner. A tiny brother and sister, clinging close in their convulsive agony, were literally hewn in pieces almost at the feet of Cipriano.

"I do not like being at home," whispered the Baby Saracen, as he turned shuddering away, and hid his face in the folds of Pietro's raiment.

"But thou wilt be true to thy Redeemer, in life or in death, wilt thou not, baby brother?" asked the elder lad, stroking the cold hands which alone betokened the poor child's extremity of terror.

“So long as thou dost continue true to Him,” replied the little monk; and the first pang of self-distrust which he had ever known shot through the conscience of Pietro.

It was exclusively those children to whom a low price had been affixed who were assaulted by this outburst of bloodthirsty violence. The band which included the Apennine fugitives counted no member who was not intrinsically far too valuable to become the prey of middle class *hadj*, whose enthusiasm, fired by recent pilgrimage, aimed only at wholesale destruction. Purchasers of a more exalted rank were less apt to concern themselves with the dogmas held by bond-servants who were scarcely of greater account than household goods and chattels. An unbelieving slave might, if he willed, ensure salvation by timely conversion to the faith of Islam, but he was equally free to adhere to his ancient tenets, undisturbed and for the most part disregarded. Nothing was required of him except to serve his master diligently in the present world, his fate in the next being of small consequence to any but himself.

A little maid, whose sunny curls and roseate bloom marked her trans-Alpine origin, had gazed unshrinkingly on the massacre in the market place, thinking, and truly, that its victims had but gone to swell the company of white-robed holy innocents above. “Martyr in will,” was written on her earnest brow, uplifted to the radiant sky, and the slight fingers were clasped tightly, and the attitude was that of one ready to bound forth in reply to some expected summons. Her beauty was rather that of colouring and expression, than the faultless chiselling dear to classic sculptors, but more rare than such material perfection was the spiritual refinement and unearthliness which emanated from the soul within.

Standing erect in her virginal fearlessness, the hapless child attracted the notice of a court dignitary, who had often listlessly surveyed her without dreaming of the charms that now flashed upon his perception as though

by a sudden revelation. Laying his hand resolutely on her arm, he said with curt imperiousness to Hughues le Fort, "Name thou thine own price for the damsel; she is mine."

The girl waited with patience till a pile of golden coins had been transferred from the embroidered belt of her new owner to the leathern pouch of her former possessor. Then making a courteous sign of farewell to Hughues, she said with quiet dignity, "Explain thou to the great noble that I am ready to die."

"And thus pilfer him of as round a sum as ever yet rewarded me for meddling with you graceless crusaders?" laughed the ruffian, in high glee over the bargain which he had concluded. "Methinks such tidings would evince churlish ingratitude for patronage of princely generosity. Go thy ways, *Alpenrose*, convert thy master an' it pleaseth thee. Little reckes he what thou dost or dost not believe, nor is it his design to speed thy flight to either Jerusalem of the twain, so long as thou continuest young and fair."

"Then must I strive to follow the example of the captive maid of Israel," observed the little girl, as she departed hand in hand with the dissolute courtier. Surely angels, and ONE mightier than they, would be her shield and watchtower amid the corrupting influences of a Moslem household!

At length there dawned one fatal day on which Anselmo went as usual forth with his companions, but returned not with them when the evening shades fell over the proud city. Such a contingency as separation never had occurred to any of the friends, nor had their keeper appeared to contemplate it, for he had always placed them distinct from the others in a corner of the mart, like triple figures in a group of statuary. It was a natural arrangement, and accepted as such by sellers and buyers, so obvious was the fact that each of these, united closely as flowers springing from a single stem, was lacking in completeness apart from his fellows.

During some time past the number of Hughues's unsold prisoners had steadily diminished, and already he was planning a fresh voyage to Europe to enlist recruits, so soon as he should have disposed of the remaining few, among whom were the three in themselves most desirable, yet for whom he had never received a really advantageous offer. There could only be one explanation of the failure. Their collective cost exceeded the fortune of the majority, and they had not chanced to captivate those favoured few who could afford to gratify every caprice, however futile or unreasonable.

This plan proved only too entirely and speedily successful. Before one week had elapsed Anselmo had become the property of a rich Jew living at Cairo, and intending to set out that very evening on his homeward journey. The transaction was so hastily accomplished, that the Brothers in Arms scarcely realised the blow which was impending, till it actually fell, and even then, so paralysing was its force, that the keenness of pain was deadened, as is said to be the case in moments of extreme physical torture. Far from any interchange of spiritual consolations according to their old childish compact, there was scarcely time for a look of farewell, not one instant allowed for a parting embrace, before those two, bound by a love as passionate as ever linked David and Jonathan, were severed more relentlessly than by the hand of death.

That night was the most miserable which ever yet had been imagined by the Baby Saracen. He and Pietro were now the sole occupants of the once crowded chamber, Hughues having disposed of all his other captives to greater or less advantage. He addressed the pair in terms coarsely abusive, for their perversity in continuing unsold, and threatened them with a real dungeon, fetters, and starvation, unless they would arouse themselves to appear sprightly and mirthful in the eyes of those who were repulsed by their sadness and gloom.

“Cheerful attendants would ye be at a feast, ye Egyptian mummies!” was the end of Hughues’s oration, as he paused to lock the door on his troublesome charges. “Mummies shall ye become in verity, no less than seeming, except ye repent and show me gratitude for bringing you to Egypt. Is it my fault that this accursed land displeaseth you when ye came hither of your own accord, at my expense, and now detain me long after my business with you should have been despatched? Take heed unto your ways, lest I have you thrown to the crocodiles or hyenas, and when ye have been devoured ye shall be embalmed, and placed in niches of yon painted tombs among the scorpions and serpents.”

Incongruous as were these threats, nay, partly dictated by a grim sense of humour, they haunted the mind of Cipriano, as though each had been a separate part of some dire sentence pronounced over him by a pitiless judge. He crept close to Pietro in the darkness, expecting to be as usual fondled and reassured, but an unkind rebuff answered his soft caresses, and low moans, weirdly re-echoed by the vaulted roof, alone responded to his mild entreaties for a word of comfort. Pietro’s heart was too sore to brook any companionship, even that of his darling; and for the first time in his cherished existence, the little Saracen was left to weep unheeded, with no loving friend ready to wipe away his tears, and win in recompense one of those smiles which the monks deemed among the sweetest that gladdened their cloister. Under such circumstances the serenity on which their fate depended was not easy of attainment; nevertheless, Cipriano was resolved not to relinquish life without a struggle, and like a small Stoic philosopher, began to reason himself into contentment, as, kneeling upon the woollen rug, he fixed his eyes upon a strip of ebon sky, dazzling with starry radiance unknown in colder latitudes, which was visible through a long narrow loophole pierced in the thick wall.

“ I do not see *how* to be happy, nor to make Pietro so ; and yet, if not, we shall be put to death,” mused the poor child aloud in his perplexity. Pietro heard, but would not arouse himself from his stupor of wretchedness ; and thus the affectionate little creature, who for his sake had abandoned home and safety, was left to sob himself into the deep sleep of exhaustion, when dreams of Barcello lightened for a time the load which else must have completely crushed its feeble bearer.

Early on the ensuing morning the two were again escorted to the market place, where Hughues, determined at all costs to be rid of the burden of their maintenance, offered them for sale at a rate greatly reduced from his previous demands, indeed so low that he was half provoked when taken at his word. A vendor of iced drinks first tried to secure Cipriano, whose bronzed skin proclaimed his descent from a race able to bear the exposure to the sun, but Hughues had declined this proposal from a dread lest the more valuable prisoner should be seized with melancholy madness, if bereft of his only remaining tie. A silversmith in the bazaar, who had before proved a good customer, eventually gained possession of both children for a very moderate sum, and Hughues, dissembling his own discomfiture, jocosely asked Pietro if he had any commands for Italy, or whether he knew any more Crusaders as desirous as himself to cultivate a closer acquaintance with the Infidel.

Disdaining to reply, the boy linked Cipriano's arm within his own, and followed the artisan as he wound his way through piles of glittering merchandise, till they reached an alley of the bazaar lined with the open booths of jewellers, where gems unset, or wrought into ornaments of barbaric shape, attracted the gaze of the little foreigners, to whom workmanship in the precious metals was exclusively associated with church decorations. Turquoises, pearls, emeralds and opals, relieved against a background of frosted silver, made the richness of their owner seem

fabulous to the young Italians. The whole scene was fairy-like, in fit harmony with the moving Eastern pageantry of which it formed a part. Even Pietro began to feel interested, and in the rebound of youthful spirits to form crude, impracticable plans of earning sufficient by extra labour to ransom both himself and his brethren, pay their passages to Joppa, and achieve the rescue of Jerusalem, so long retarded by obstacles beyond the foresight or control of her little defenders. In the meantime the probation period of waiting and working might pass pleasantly enough in that centre of busy traffic, and he should apply himself to gain some knowledge of the oriental languages, of which the now accustomed sound had long ceased to convey any startling impression of the supernatural.

But alas ! Pietro was not destined to cross the threshold of his new master, whose sweet-tempered smile and kindly gestures inspired both of the desolate children with a sense of confidence. Their owner was accosted at the entrance of his shop, or rather booth, by a man in dark vestments, with a lowering brow, who asked the jeweller abruptly how he could allow himself the luxury of buying slaves whose exorbitant price was a proverb in Alexandria. The questioner made this demand with a certain assumption of authority, and such indeed he claimed in virtue of his near relationship. The silversmith, with the respect due to an elder, tried to exonerate himself from the charge of extravagance by explaining for what a modicum he had been able to make this addition to his household staff. Upon learning the facts of the case, a gleam lurid and sinister as lightning played over the hard face of the intruder, whose green turban marked him out as a descendant of the Prophet. A few words in tones menacing on the one side, deprecating on the other, passed between the two Egyptians, and Pietro noticed a shimmer of gold in the palm of the jeweller, who turned away, as though unable to meet his inquiring

glance. Before he could recover from his consternation, the stranger had dragged both Cipriano and himself from the crowded bazaar, plunged with them down a tortuous lane leading to a poor quarter of the city, unlocked the iron door of a vault, and then thrusting them inside, departed, leaving them almost stifled by the foetid atmosphere, with a sense of being buried alive some fathoms deep under the earth.

A cry which might have pierced the very heavens went up from the long-suffering Baby Saracen, whose nerves and strength, taxed far beyond the possible endurance of his age, were now spent so completely that he lacked the courage to bear any fresh phase of adversity. Pietro was equally overcome, but his distress for once was utterly unselfish. Only compassion for the shorn lamb which he had allured from its green pastures to this howling wilderness, had any place in his penitent bosom.

“Forgive me, innocent baby brother: I have led thee hither to be torn by ravening wolves,” he faltered amid choking sobs; and Cipriano, over whom the loved voice retained all its power, thought only how best to console his self-accusing guardian. The latter, as his mind became clear enough for connected thought, remembered plainly that their present gaoler was among those who had aided in the massacre of his little associates, and from that instant resigned every hope of any exit from that dungeon save by death, or a denial of the Crucified.

How long the children were kept in suspense neither of them could tell, for a “darkness which might be felt” shrouded the place of their incarceration, and they had no means of reckoning the flight of time. Both began to be sadly conscious of the pangs of hunger, and to wonder whether they were to be left there to die of starvation. Now and then slumber lulled them for a while, but it was haunted by dreams even worse than the reality. At last they fell into really refreshing sleep, soon to be interrupted by a rude awakening. Two muffled figures stood beside

them, and a hoarse voice asked in ungrammatical Italian, "Whether they would live as servants of the Prophet, or die obstinately in their unbelief?"

"Die as good Christians," said Pietro, rising to confront his visitants, and Cipriano, though he trembled, did not negative the answer. Each of the men bore a torch which diffused a ruddy glare, revealing a postern door communicating with the main part of the building: a fact which explained the noiseless entrance of the nocturnal invaders.

"Your master is merciful," resumed the one who had acted as interpreter. "Never would he willingly drive sinners headlong to perdition, yet the enemies of Allah must not be left to cumber the ground. Even as the rising sun disperseth midnight shadows and impurity, so shall your breath exhale like noxious vapour from the marshes, except ye become transformed, from scoffers and deriders of the truth, into its reverent upholders. Due space is given you to repent and be saved. It lacketh several hours unto the moment when the faithful city shall hymn her devotions, and adoring multitudes fall prostrate at the footstool of their Creator. When the first ray of celestial gold strikes the tall summit of the highest minaret, then shall we return, either to lead you forth rejoicing with the blessed, or to smite you with that sword of anger wherewith Allah destroyeth all them that hate Him."

The torch flashed for an instant in the gloom, then vanished, and all was dead silence, save where an occasional rustle warned the pair that reptiles, with envenomed sting, were lurking near, ready at any moment to assail them.

"Baby brother," said Pietro tenderly, "the hosts of Satan are in league against us, and methinks will be permitted to wreak their vengeance upon our mortal bodies. Shall we now commit our souls to the keeping of Him who hath redeemed us?"

The younger child signified his assent, responding by a low Amen to the short earnest supplications of his brother. Then the two arose, and, folded in each other's arms, waited the signal of deliverance from their manifold tribulations. Untold was the tension on their nerves caused by that awful vigil. Sometimes it seemed as though the murderers had just quitted their presence; then again as though the term of reprieve must have already reached its limit. In the impossibility of estimating which impression was correct, lay the acme of suffering. Bold indeed must have been the spirit which in such an ordeal did not quail in its resolve.

"Let us repeat the Psalter," suggested Pietro, and forthwith they began the recitation of that inspired Hebrew Prayer Book, chanting the alternate verses as they had done in old happy days in the church at Barcello. Long usage had rendered the glorious poems so familiar, that there was no pause of hesitation to recall a missing phrase. Thus they proceeded till they came to the first mention of "the land of Egypt," each allusion to which in the sacred writings had caused such a thrill of pleasure to Pietro, at the outset, as almost to solace him for his own personal share in that "bondage" of which it has been for ages the accepted type.

"This land wherein we sojourn is unhallowed!" he cried with a shudder. "Oh! that we had been privileged to tread yon favoured country where the Son of Man was born, and lived, and died for us."

"He hath been also here," said Cipriano soothingly. "His parents took the young Child and fled into Egypt."

Pietro found comfort in the reminder. A train of gentle and sweet associations chased away the images of horror, and kissing the little preacher, he exclaimed, "The very Paschal Lamb; the first-born among many brethren hath in truth been sacrificed for us. Would we might even now arise and follow Him, though it should be through the Red Sea of blood!"

But the poor boy had yet to learn one lesson more of his own insufficiency. As he yet spoke, the fiery torch-glare heralded the approach of the persecutors, and the children were forced to their knees, while in the blackness scintillated the blue glitter of Damascus steel.

“Ye have had long space to confer together; are ye Christian dogs, or honest Moslems?” asked the voice which had before addressed them, speaking the same faulty and yet comprehensible Italian.

“Moslems!” exclaimed Pietro, surprised into a frenzy of terror as the cruel scimitar circled above him ready to swoop down like a bird of prey. And the child at his side echoed the recantation, saying, “Yea; in good sooth we be honest Moslems.”

But more fearful than the naked blade was that reiteration of his own words to Pietro. “Hold! hold! Baby brother; speak not thus, an’ thou hast ever loved me,” he implored. “Lord Jesus, give us grace here to confess Thee before men. Suffer us not for any pains of death to fall away from Thee.”

“If ye be Moslems, ye are free,” said the interpreter, but the boy interposed in calm deliberate tones,

“Not so; I spake as a coward and renegade when I denied my Lord. I am His servant, and so also is my brother. Cipriano, dost thou, like myself, belong to Christ?”

“We both belong to Him,” answered the little one, clasping his fingers for support around Pietro’s wrist. No word was spoken, no sound heard, except a whizzing in the air, as after a wide curve the scimitar descended, and the two young heads were severed at a single stroke.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE OPEN BOOK.

IT was midwinter in the higher Apennines, and icy blasts swept round the lonely chapel of Our Lady of the Snow, hidden amid the most desolate wilds of the Pizzorne mountains. Attached to the sanctuary was a hermit's cell, and in connection with it a rude guest-chamber, of the most humble type, afforded the bare requisites of life to travellers detained upon their way by stress of weather. This ancient foundation yet survives the wreck of centuries, and still, according to the terms of the original endowment, those who stand in need thereof may claim free hospitality for the space of three days and nights. No vestige of antiquity remains, however, save the mediæval Oratory. The cell has expanded into a commonplace peasant's house surrounded by a modern garden, and tenanted by a thriving couple who minister to the comfort of the anchorite during his sojourn in those lofty solitudes. Society and human wants change so materially with the lapse of ages, that the efforts of beneficence, which are adapted to one generation, are too apt, if unwisely perpetuated, to sink into that barren formality which can be only the prelude to gradual but sure extinction.

In the thirteenth century, however, many a wayfarer had cause to bless the love which filled the breast of Father Placido, urging him forth early and late, intent upon his offices of mercy, with a tireless energy more noble than that which inspires the monks of St. Bernard,

for he laboured single-handed, and with none of the appliances possessed by that famous community. It was Christmas eve, and, at an early hour of the afternoon, the recluse, having set his house in order for the festival, began to reckon over his store of provisions. Nuts and roots, which he had himself amassed with thrifeful industry, rivalling that of the ant or the squirrel, formed its staple and almost sufficed for his modest necessities. There were however, in addition, maize flour, olive oil, chestnut cakes, and dried fruit, the voluntary tribute-offerings of those who had in sundry manners benefited by the presence of this meek apostle in their midst. The choicer viands were in general reserved for the use of strangers, and it sometimes happened that the supply scarcely equalled the demand, so numerous were the pensioners who shared the good man's bounty; Father Placido was therefore well pleased when a herdsman visited his cell just at this juncture, and deposited therein a goat's-milk cheese, always a welcome contribution to his larder.

"May Heaven bless and reward thee, my son," he said, laying his hands upon the bowed head of the rugged peasant. "Who knoweth what guest shall sue for admittance to our lowly hostelry, on this the holiest night of all the year? Yet of one thing may we rest well assured. Wear he the guise of angel or of mortal flesh, it will be the Dear Lord Himself who standeth without in the person of His creature, knocking until He win an entrance to the heart and home of His unworthy servant."

"Nay, father," rejoined the goat-herd with a gruffness assumed to veil deeper feeling, "thou must thyself taste of Christmas cheer, for it were heresy to fast tomorrow upon bitter herbs. Moreover, except thou dost entertain angelic visitants, there will scarce be intruders upon the sanctity of thy vigil. Who could be lost while our hills, flooded with moonlight, are paved with a marble smooth and solid as the aisles and choir of Lucca Cathedral? There is no need to spread thy board while

merry King Frost thus holdeth the sceptre. It is in the treacherous thaw, or when the driving hailstorm whirleth downward from the Mountain of the Winds, that pilgrims seek the blessed refuge of Our Lady of the Snow."

This statement was true, and corroborated by the hearer's personal experience through many winters. Nevertheless, that unsettled feeling to which we are all subject, on the eve of an arrival, disturbed the mild equanimity of Father Placido. When his voluble friend had departed, he could no longer concentrate his thoughts upon the theme which he had chosen for a sacred meditation. His mind would not be attuned to that rapt converse with the unseen which to him was the highest ideal of Christianity. He was conscious of missing the kindly speech and uncouth form which had, for a moment, relieved the tedium of his hours and the emptiness of his habitation. Irrepressible cravings for intercourse with humankind clamoured within his bosom, and refused to be subdued. It must be a temptation, for was not God all-sufficient? Clearly did He evince mercy and wisdom in thus shielding jealously from outward distractions the soul which had shown itself only too prone to find satisfaction in objects distinct from the eternal bliss for which it was created.

But the vacancy within grew unendurable, so at length, leaning on the knotted staff which had so often proved his ally when fording the icy stream, or treading the perilous quagmire, Father Placido emerged from the shrine of the Virgin into the keen brilliancy of the December day. It was a dazzling world of white and blue through which he moved, the only animated figure in the landscape, although many a fair town set on the distant heights seemed almost startlingly near when beheld through the purity of that crystalline ether.

Crossing the strip of level pasture in front of his dwelling, Father Placido mounted a neighbouring eminence, whence he surveyed a chaos of wild gorges sweeping

down to the bed of the Serchio, of which the picturesque and endless windings formed the most characteristic feature of the scene. On the edge of the fruitful plain, encircled upon every side by softly swelling yet majestic peaks, uprose the towers and many-storied campanile of the beautiful city of Lucca, long the residence of Julius Cæsar, and hemmed in by the embattled walls which then, as now, when viewed from the same standing-point, defined its shape with mathematical precision. Beyond, more intensely azure than the sky itself, was the glorious expanse of the Mediterranean, with the promontory on which Leghorn is now built, conspicuous amid the curvings of the coast, and the isle of Gorgona resting like a purple cloud upon the tranquil waters. Windy and bleak it might be on the hill tops, but a summer calm appeared to reign below. A sigh of envy escaped from the lips of the anchorite as he contrasted his own lot with that of others born to social and domestic happiness, but the next instant, chiding himself for disloyalty to his vocation, he turned in an opposite direction, and resolved to test the virtue of brisk exercise in bringing back the vital glow to limbs and heart which seemed alike benumbed and palsied.

Pursuing his walk along the brow of the ridges, Father Placido soon found himself near the extraordinary church of St. Bartholomew, which even then held rank among the antiquities of the region, and which now is one of the most curious landmarks engraven upon the traveller's memory. There is nothing ecclesiastic in its appearance when viewed from a distance. It seems rather like a long low cabin built of stone, and pierced on one side only, with windows as narrow as those of an old fortified castle. Hence proportionately great is the surprise when, on approaching the front of the edifice, a bold archway is disclosed, framing a porch some twenty feet in depth, and, in its grand dimensions, not unworthy of a Gothic minster. The stone seats which line this spacious

ante-chapel lend an air of comfort to the spiritual home of the rough congregation, and no place of worship could well be adapted more completely to the exigences of their pastoral existence.

The closing services of the year were regularly held within its walls on All Saints' day; and after early mass, people and priest departed with their goats and sheep to the snug towns which nestled beneath and beyond the Mountain of the Winds, hastening to keep the morrow's sad solemnity at the graves of their dead. The church, which had sheltered them from the pelting storms of spring and autumn, was then left silent till the ensuing April, long before which period it must have been uptorn by the pitiless avalanche but for the substantial massiveness of its construction.

During the winter months there was no neighbour within several miles of Father Placido, except the inhabitants of a single hamlet, to whom, being in priest's orders, he was allowed to minister in his oratory, as they were beyond access to any parish church. Such visitors, however, were infrequent, and seldom came at the greater festivals, when most of the peasants preferred making a strenuous effort to join in the gorgeous ceremonial of Lucca Cathedral. On this Christmas Eve, when the hard frozen paths were practicable in every direction, there could be no hope that any would unite with him in the midnight mass. The lonely man braced his spirit to prolonged endurance of solitude and monotony. A little while, and he should mingle with the glorified assemblage of the saints above. Until then, why murmur at the discipline which was but fitting him to take part in that blessed fellowship?

As Father Placido was about to enter the ample porch of St. Bartholomew, intending to rest there for a short space, screened from the freezing breath of the *tramontana*, a lad with wan features and attenuated form came gliding from the dusky shadows into the full sunlight, nearly

falling on the threshold from exhaustion as he faintly gasped: "Kind stranger, lead me to the hermit of Our Lady of the Snow!"

"My son, I am he whom thou seekest, and right welcome art thou to share my poor hospitality. It was the Lord Himself who sent me hither to receive and greet thee. Tell me thy name, my Christmas guest, and whence thou camest to gladden my solitude?"

"My name is Anselmo; and I am but just escaped from the bondage of Egypt," faltered the young wayfarer, who seemed spent with fatigue and hunger.

There was nothing in this statement to occasion surprise, nor did the listener betray any such emotion. He merely threw a fold of his sheepskin cloak around the shivering youth, and lent a stout arm to steady his tottering footsteps.

"Thou dost surely crave warmth, food, and repose, my fair son, and with them can I supply thee, thanks to the abundant mercy of God and Our Lady. Canst thou walk yet a short distance? But stay, there is no need to attempt it; I can bear thee on my shoulder with as much ease as the shepherd carrieth a new-born lamb through the March snowdrifts."

Anselmo, however, declined this proposal, and by the aid of his host succeeded in gaining the Refuge just as the sun dipped behind the mountains, and the twilight chill, so deadly to one in his weak condition, began to settle upon their summits. Father Placido kindled a fire of pine logs, and having administered a hot decoction of dried herbs to his tired charge, left him to sleep in peace until he should awaken with the power and inclination to partake of solid nourishment. Having tried to anticipate Anselmo's every want, the hermit resumed his suspended exercises of devotion with a sense that his soul had found wings to soar above the stars, and once more hold sweet intercourse with heaven. He was after all content with the veriest crumbs that ever fell from the

table of social feasting. The deep stillness was profound as ever, save for the gentle sound of a slumberer's breathing; but a human presence warmed and filled the rock-hewn walls, and Father Placido, kneeling alone before the altar, felt more grateful for his own measure of Christian joy than are thousands to whom the holytide brings a continuous round of pleasure and festivity.

Anselmo awoke strengthened and invigorated upon Christmas morning, and when the offices of religion were concluded, he outpoured the history of his brief but eventful life to Father Placido, who listened with rapt interest and attention, though without the wonder which a narrative so strange would have inspired at the present day. The hermit had already heard of the iniquities which had been perpetrated by a gang of ruffians headed by Hughues le Fort and Guillaume Porc, and a rumour had also reached him that one of the leaders had been recently hanged at Cologne, though for some crime distinct from his deceitful cruelty towards the little Crusaders. The "Holy Warfare" in which Christian childhood had sought to measure its force against the giant foe of Islamism was just ready to expire, like a slender rushlight in the darkness of a mine. Diminutive knights-errant who had erst set out with high hopes of victory, their souls inflamed with ardour, chivalrous and noble, however mistaken, began now to straggle back by twos and threes to the homes scattered over many lands, wherein their names were reverently whispered, and their memories cherished amid those of the dead. Well-nigh obliterated are the "prints" left by those infant feet upon the "sands of time." It is with difficulty that we trace the source whence rose that foaming and impetuous river, of which the headlong yet devious course is often hidden from the most earnest and thoughtful student of the period, and which disappears in the waters of oblivion before eye of mortal can follow it to its bourne. So far as we can gather, or rather infer in the absence of any

testimony on the subject, there was no especial cause to which could be ascribed the termination of this singular campaign. It would seem rather to have collapsed through its inherent weakness. What alternative save defeat to those fighting on such unequal terms, could indeed have been possible, excepting by Divine interposition? The ranks of the army were thinned by the loss of the multitude who perished owing to the causes which have been detailed throughout this narrative, and no longer were any found ready to fill the places of the slain. Comparatively few among the children seem to have been brought into personal contact with the infidel; and of those actually transported to the East, small indeed was the number who succeeded in effecting a return to Europe. Father Placido, being cognisant of that fact, demanded wherefore his young guest was among the exceptions, and learned that, after a full year of captivity, the boy had so far won the favour of his Jewish mistress that she was led to connive at his escape from Cairo. He had gone direct to Alexandria, eager to ascertain the fate of his companions, but the guarded inquiries which alone he dared to make had proved so fruitless that he was constrained to relinquish the search. Weary and heart-sick, he had then accepted the offer of a passage to Genoa in the ship of a merchant captain from that city, whose indignant pity at the outrages of Hughues le Fort found some relief in aiding, at least, this one victim of his inhumanity. When landed on his native shore, Anselmo hastened with all the speed of which he was capable to Lucca, near which was the Benedictine monastery that had once sheltered Pietro for a few weeks of his wayward boyhood. Sad tidings there awaited the youthful wanderer respecting his beloved home at Barcello. Brother Innocent was dead, and Fra Clemente lay beside him in the cloistered burial ground, safe evermore from the tumultuous riot of the merry elves who had so often grated upon his taciturn mood and irritable nerves.

Was Father Benedict alive, Anselmo forced himself to ask with quivering lips. Yes; he had been upraised by a miracle from grievous sickness, but with health so shattered that he could no longer rule over the vast community which he had hitherto directed with consummate wisdom. His desire had been to live and die a simple monk amid his brethren, but by the direct command of the Superior General, he had been transferred to the smaller house at Abetone, where his faculties of administration might still find scope, even though in a less extended sphere.

When placed in possession of these facts, Anselmo could not be induced to spend more than a single night at Lucca, but he had miscalculated his own power of bearing fatigue and cold, forgetting that his strength, slight at the best, was sensibly diminished by a twelve-month's sojourn in the enervating valley of the Nile.

It was not until several days after Christmas, that the delicate youth seemed sufficiently recruited for the hermit to feel it would be advisable to sanction his departure. When he did take leave of his kind entertainer, it was with sincere regret, and warm impulsive promises of revisiting Our Lady of the Snow whenever the occasion should present itself. None better knew than Father Placido the need of speeding the lad onward before the road should become impassable, and he went back contentedly to his own solitary routine, cheered by a conviction that the outpost which he held in the King's Army was the one in which, after all, effectual and honourable service could be rendered to the Master who claimed his allegiance.

Armed with a flask of cordial which the hermit had bestowed upon him as a sovereign remedy against numbness and chill, Anselmo traversed the Mountain of the Winds, and next descended past the ancient town of Lugliano into the rich valley of the Lima, where now smile the three picturesque villages composing the Bagni di Lucca. Thence onward through the riven chasm

which the stream had tunnelled for its passage beneath the hills, and then up high above the clouds through the stupendous gorge leading to Abetone, where the air grew hourly more rarefied, and where stout wooden posts, planted at intervals, guided the traveller when all other way-marks were effaced by snow more than twelve feet in depth. The uniform whiteness which covered the earth levelled every distinction between the successive zones of vegetation which in summer so clearly define the several elevations. Beginning with vines and maize, the chain ascends in regular gradations to belts of olive and chestnut, larch and beech, until at Abetone little foliage is seen excepting the black fir or *abete*, to which the place owes its striking and poetic appellation. As has been truly said, "One seems transported within a few hours from Italy to Norway;" and the very architecture of church and domestic dwellings in the hamlets testifies to a rigour of climate almost Scandinavian during the principal portion of the year.

Anselmo, who had slept three nights upon the road in comfortable farmsteads, arrived at this point fresh enough to be full of excited interest as he recognised the summits which had often been described to him by Brother Innocent, when he sought to amuse the boys by reminiscences of his early childhood. Yonder, proudly dominating the entire sweep of that mighty gorge, arose the crest of the Libro Aperto, so appropriately named as to be unmistakable to the most careless spectator. Like a gigantic outspread volume, with the edge of one leaf slightly folded over, it rested against the crimsoning sky, and thickly clustering memories thronged through Anselmo's spirit while he stood still for a closer scrutiny. As the Book of Nature, bound in velvet of the softest emerald, starred with golden moss, had it been painted in the glowing words of the schoolmaster at Barcello. Years before he became an austere monk, had Brother Innocent and his favourite sister tended their flocks on its

precipitous declivity; slaked their thirst in the infant wavelets of the Lima, as it trickled forth, a pale green thread, from its majestic birthplace; or stood hand in hand to catch the sunlight flashing on the distant spires of Florence and Pistoia, cities which in their rustic imagination dwelt ethereal, pure and untainted as the very summer cloudlets which floated above their heads. Most of all, however, had both delighted in climbing the wind-blown ledge upon whose rocky natural lectern reposed in its awe and mystery the Open Book. Often had the two laughing faces peered over the green sward of the "binding," embossed with spring flowers, pretending to read that which was hidden beneath the fold of the leaf, or to chant from its pages as from an archangel's missal.

Anselmo's eyes were riveted upon the mountain until its outline became dim and blurred through a mist of tears. More awful was the aspect which it now presented than any with which those sportive fantasies of childhood had invested it. Bound in unsullied snow, fairer than earthly vellum, fitfully illuminated by the dead gold of the wintry sunset, the emblazoned volume, set upon a "great white throne" of high-piled Apennines, seemed a meet emblem of the Book of Life which shall one day be opened before the assembled universe. Was every name he loved inscribed therein, especially the erring one of his Brother in Arms? Inscrutable to human eyes were the solemn secrets of that Celestial Record, as were those concealed beneath the folded leaf of Nature's mystic writings.

The flute-like cadences of the wintry wind in the long-drawn aisles of the forest had been gradually rising into a diapason of richest harmony, amid which, in an occasional lull sounded the distant silvery treble of the evening Angelus. Just as Anselmo turned into the warmer shelter of the wood, a child advanced to meet him, with a bundle of faggots, on which feathery snowflakes had congealed in masses, poised upon her head.

She was coarsely clad in blue homespun from the wool of her own sheep, but her face was pure as a dew-drop, and earnest as that of some frescoed Madonna, shining forth in its grave sweetness from the mouldering walls of an obscure Apennine sanctuary.

“What is thy name, maiden?” inquired Anselmo, “and dost thou know where abideth Father Benedict, lately the Abbot of Barcello?”

“I am Candida the Shepherdess,” answered the little girl, “and the music of yonder bells will lead thee to the monastery. Hasten! hasten! ere the Angelus cease ringing, for I dare not guide thee. When the darkness gathereth, every thicket will resound with the howling of famished wolves.”

“Candida, didst thou ever hear how there be Child Crusaders who roam like defenceless lambs, amid wolves fiercer than the prowling beasts which haunt thy forests?”

The little shepherdess scanned him with her truthful eyes, and he felt that she more than half divined his history, as she replied,

“In verity it hath been said that Father Benedict was brought down to the gates of death through sorrow over three crusader-children who deserted him to fight against the infidel. Often tell I my beads for them at the shrine of our Lady, near the Holy Lake. Morning and night ascend the prayers of the community that those misguided ones may be forgiven. Speak: art thou of the number,—but where are thy brethren?”

Anselmo remained silent, and the child, with a delicate perception that her presence was intrusive, glided down the shadowy vista before her companion had recovered from his conscience-stricken pangs. The bells sounded nearer as he reached a clearing in the firs, whence he once more beheld the Open Book, immaculate, without line or erasure, a blank sheet of parchment which might yet be filled with “all things lovely and of good report,” should his life be extended for a longer span.

“God hath Himself turned over for me this fair stainless page; may the handwriting of the past be blotted out!” whispered Anselmo reverently, as he uncovered his head, and bent his knee. Then rising, summoned by the closing notes of the angelic salutation, he sped forth on the wings of love and contrition toward the safe ark of his Benedictine home.

THE END.

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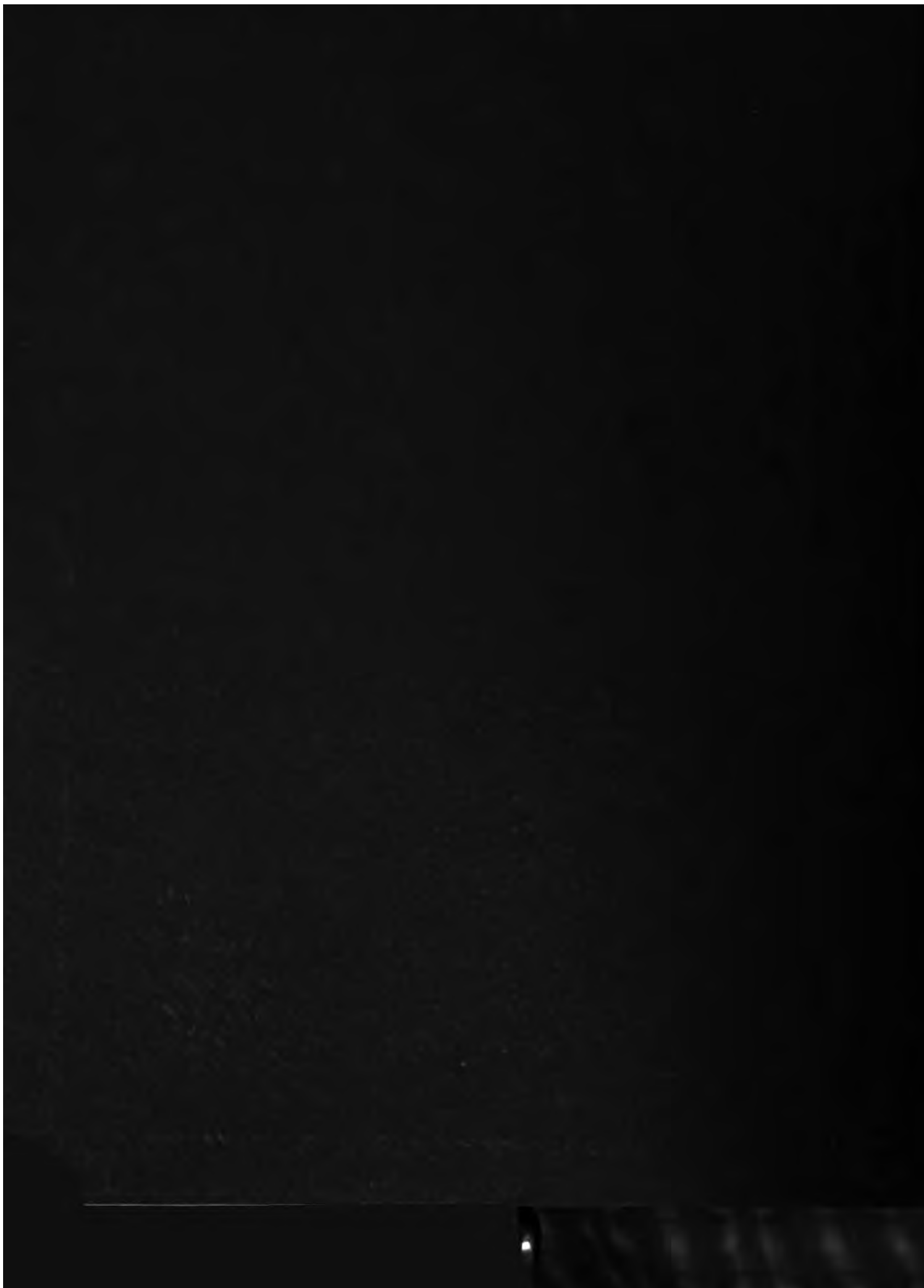
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