

Woolson Constance Fenimore

The Front Yard, and Other Italian Stories



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THE FRONT YARD

"WELL, now, with Gooster at work in the per-dairy, and Bepper settled at last as help in a good family, and Parlo and Squawly gone to Perugia, and Soonter taken by the nuns, and Jo Vanny learning the carpenter's trade, and only Nounce left for me to see to (let alone Granmar, of course, and Pipper and old Patro), it doos seem, it really doos, as if I might get it done *sometime*; say next Fourth of July, now; that's only ten months off. 'Twould be something to celebrate the day with, that would; something like!"

The woman through whose mind these thoughts were passing was sitting on a low stone-wall, a bundle of herbs, a fagot of twigs, and a sickle laid carefully beside her. On her back was strapped a large deep basket, almost as long as herself; she had loosened the straps so that she could sit down. This basket was heavy; one could tell that from the relaxed droop of her shoulders relieved from its weight for the moment, as its end rested on a fallen block on the other side of the wall. Her feet were bare, her dress a narrow cotton gown, covered in front to the hem by a dark cotton apron; on her head was a straw bonnet, which had behind a little cape of brown ribbon three inches deep, and in front broad strings of the same brown, carefully tied in a bow, with the loops pulled out to their full width and pinned on each side of her chin. This bonnet, very clean and decent (the ribbons had evidently been washed more than once), was of old-fashioned shape, projecting beyond the wearer's forehead and cheeks. Within its tube her face could be seen, with its deeply browned skin, its large irregular features, smooth, thin white hair, and blue eyes, still bright, set amid a bed of wrinkles. She was sixty years old, tall and broad-shouldered. She had once been remarkably erect and strong. This strength had been consumed more by constant toil than by the approach of old age; it was not all gone yet; the great basket showed that. In addition, her eyes spoke a language which told of energy that would last as long as her breath.

These eyes were fixed now upon a low building that stood at a little distance directly across the path. It was small and ancient, built of stone, with a sloping roof and black door. There were no windows; through this door entered the only light and air. Outside were two large heaps of refuse, one of which had been there so long that thick matted herbage was growing vigorously over its top. Bars guarded the entrance; it was impossible to see what was within. But the woman knew without seeing; she always knew. It had been a cow; it had been goats; it had been pigs, and then goats again; for the past two years it had been pigs steadily – always pigs. Her eyes were fixed upon this door as if held there by a magnet; her mouth fell open a little as she gazed; her hands lay loose in her lap. There was nothing new in the picture, certainly. But the intensity of her feeling made it in one way always new. If love wakes freshly every morning, so does hate, and Prudence Wilkin had hated that cow-shed for years.

The bells down in the town began to ring the Angelus. She woke from her reverie, rebuckled the straps of the basket, and adjusting it by a jerk of her shoulders in its place on her back, she took the fagot in one hand, the bundle of herbs in the other, and carrying the sickle under her arm, toiled slowly up the ascent, going round the cow-shed, as the interrupted path too went round it, in an unpaved, provisional sort of way (which had, however, lasted fifty years), and giving a wave of her herbs towards the offending black door as she passed – a gesture that was almost triumphant. "Jest you wait till next Fourth of July, you indecent old Antiquity, you!" This is what she was thinking.

Prudence Wilkin's idea of Antiquity was everything that was old and dirty; indecent Antiquity meant the same qualities increased to a degree that was monstrous, a degree that the most profligate

imagination of Ledham (New Hampshire) would never have been able to conceive. There was naturally a good deal of this sort of Antiquity in Assisi, her present abode; it was all she saw when she descended to that picturesque town; the great triple church of St. Francis she never entered; the magnificent view of the valley, the serene vast Umbrian plain, she never noticed; but the steep, narrow streets, with garbage here and there, the crowding stone houses, centuries old, from whose court-yard doors issued odors indescribable – these she knew well, and detested with all her soul. Her deepest degree of loathing, however, was reserved for the especial Antiquity that blocked her own front path, that elbowed her own front door, this noisome stable or sty – for it was now one, now the other – which she had hated and abhorred for sixteen long years.

For it was just sixteen years ago this month since she had first entered the hill town of St. Francis. She had not entered it alone, but in the company of a handsome bridegroom, Antonio Guadagni by name, and so happy was she that everything had seemed to her enchanting – these same steep streets with their ancient dwellings, the same dirt, the same yellowness, the same continuous leisure and causeless beatitude. And when her Tonio took her through the town and up this second ascent to the squalid little house, where, staring and laughing and crowding nearer to look at her, she found his family assembled, innumerable children (they seemed innumerable then), a bedridden grandam, a disreputable old uncle (who began to compliment her), even this did not appear a burden, though of course it was a surprise. For Tonio had told her, sadly, that he was "all alone in the world." It had been one of the reasons why she had wished to marry him – that she might make a home for so desolate a man.

The home was already made, and it was somewhat full. Desolate Tonio explained, with shouts of laughter, in which all the assemblage joined, that seven of the children were his, the eighth being an orphan nephew left to his care; his wife had died eight months before, and this was her grandmother – on the bed there; this her good old uncle, a very accomplished man, who had written sonnets. Mrs. Guadagni number two had excellent powers of vision, but she was never able to discover the goodness of this accomplished uncle; it was a quality which, like the beneficence of angels, one is obliged to take on trust.

She was forty-five, a New England woman, with some small savings, who had come to Italy as companion and attendant to a distant cousin, an invalid with money. The cousin had died suddenly at Perugia, and Prudence had allowed the chance of returning to Ledham with her effects to pass by unnoticed – a remarkable lapse of the quality of which her first name was the exponent, regarding which her whole life hitherto had been one sharply outlined example. This lapse was due to her having already become the captive of this handsome, this irresistible, this wholly unexpected Tonio, who was serving as waiter in the Perugian inn. Divining her savings, and seeing with his own eyes her wonderful strength and energy, this good-natured reprobate had made love to her a little in the facile Italian way, and the poor plain simple-hearted spinster, to whom no one had ever spoken a word of gallantry in all her life before, had been completely swept off her balance by the novelty of it, and by the thronging new sensations which his few English words, his speaking dark eyes, and ardent entreaties roused in her maiden breast. It was her one moment of madness (who has not had one?). She married him, marvelling a little inwardly when he required her to walk to Assisi, but content to walk to China if that should be his pleasure. When she reached the squalid house on the height and saw its crowd of occupants, when her own money was demanded to send down to Assisi to purchase the wedding dinner, then she understood – why they had walked.

But she never understood anything else. She never permitted herself to understand. Tonio, plump and idle, enjoyed a year of paradisiacal opulence under her ministrations (and in spite of some of them); he was eighteen years younger than she was; it was natural that he should wish to enjoy on a larger scale than hers – so he told her. At the end of twelve months a fever carried him off, and his widow, who mourned for him with all her heart, was left to face the world with the eight children, the grandmother, the good old uncle, and whatever courage she was able to muster

after counting over and over the eighty-five dollars that alone remained to her of the six hundred she had brought him.

Of course she could have gone back to her own country. But that idea never once occurred to her; she had married Tonio for better or worse; she could not in honor desert the worst now that it had come. It had come in force; on the very day of the funeral she had been obliged to work eight hours; on every day that had followed through all these years, the hours had been on an average fourteen; sometimes more.

Bent under her basket, the widow now arrived at the back door of her home. It was a small narrow house, built of rough stones plastered over and painted bright yellow. But though thus gay without, it was dark within; the few windows were very small, and their four little panes of thick glass were covered with an iron grating; there was no elevation above the ground, the brick floor inside being of the same level as the flagging of the path without, so that there was always a sense of groping when one entered the low door. There were but four rooms, the kitchen, with a bedroom opening from it, and two chambers above under the sloping roof.

Prudence unstrapped her basket and placed it in a wood-shed which she had constructed with her own hands. For she could not comprehend a house without a wood-shed; she called it a wood-shed, though there was very little wood to put in it: in Assisi no one made a fire for warmth; for cooking they burned twigs. She hung up the fagot (it was a fagot of twigs), the herbs, and the sickle; then, after giving her narrow skirts a shake, she entered the kitchen.

There was a bed in this room. Granmar would not allow it to be moved elsewhere; her bed had always been in the kitchen, and in the kitchen it should remain; no one but Denza, indeed, would wish to shove her off; Annunziata had liked to have her dear old granmar there, where she could see for herself that she was having everything she needed; but Annunziata had been an angel of goodness, as well as of the dearest beauty; whereas Denza – but any one could see what Denza was! As Granmar's tongue was decidedly a thing to be reckoned with, her bed remained where it always had been; from its comfortable cleanliness the old creature could overlook and criticise to her heart's content the entire household economy of Annunziata's successor. Not only the kitchen, but the whole house and garden, had been vigorously purified by this successor; single-handed she had attacked and carried away accumulations which had been there since Columbus discovered America. Even Granmar was rescued from her squalor and coaxed to wear a clean cap and neat little shawl, her withered brown hands reposing meanwhile upon a sheet which, though coarse, was spotless.

Granmar was a very terrible old woman; she had a beak-like nose, round glittering black eyes set in broad circles of yellow wrinkles, no mouth to speak of, and a receding chin; her voice was now a gruff bass, now a shrill yell.

"How late you are! you do it on purpose," she said as Prudence entered. "And me – as haven't had a thing I've wanted since you went away hours upon hours ago. Nunziata there has been as stupid as a stone – behold her!"

She spoke in peasant Italian, a tongue which Mrs. Guadagni the second (called Denza by the family, from Prudenza, the Italian form of her first name) now spoke readily enough, though after a fashion of her own. She remained always convinced that Italian was simply lunatic English, English spoiled. One of the children, named Pasquale, she called Squawly, and she always believed that the title came from the strength of his infant lungs; many other words impressed her in the same way.

She now made no reply to Granmar's complaints save to give one business-like look towards the bed to see whether the pillows were properly adjusted for the old creature's comfort; then she crossed the room towards the stove, a large ancient construction of bricks, with two or three small depressions over which an iron pot could be set.

"Well, Nounce," she said to a girl who was sitting there on a little bench. The tone of her voice was kindly; she looked to see if a fire had been made. A few coals smouldered in one of the holes. "Good girl," said Prudence, commendingly.

"Oh, very good!" cried Granmar from the bed – "very good, when I told her forty times, and fifty, to make me an omelet, a wee fat one with a drop of fig in it, and I so faint, and she wouldn't, the snake! she wouldn't, the toad! – toadest of toads!"

The dark eyes of the girl turned slowly towards Prudence. Prudence, as she busied herself with the coals, gave her a little nod of approbation, which Granmar could not see. The girl looked pleased for a moment; then her face sank into immobility again. She was not an idiot, but wanting, as it was called; a delicate, pretty young creature, who, with her cousin Pippo, had been only a year old when the second wife came to Assisi. It was impossible for any one to be fond of Pippo, who even at that age had been selfish and gluttonous to an abnormal degree; but Prudence had learned to love the helpless little girl committed to her care, as she had also learned to love very dearly the child's brother Giovanni, who was but a year older; they had been but babies, both of them. The girl was now seventeen. Her name was Annunziata, but Prudence called her Nounce. "If it means 'Announce,' Nounce is near enough, I guess," she said to herself, aggressively. The truth was that she hated the name; it had belonged to Tonio's first wife, and of the memory of that comely young mother, poor Prudence, with her sixty years, her white hair, and wrinkled skin, was burningly jealous even now. Giovanni's name she pronounced as though it were two words – Jo Vanny; she really thought there were two. Jo she knew well, of course; it was a good New England name; Vanny was probably some senseless Italian addition. The name of the eldest son, Augusto, became on her lips Gooster; Paolo was Parlo, Assunta was Soonter.

The nuns had finally taken Soonter. The step-mother had been unable to conceal from herself her own profound relief. True, the girl had gone to a "papish" convent; but she had always been a mystery in the house, and the constant presence of a mystery is particularly trying to the New England mind. Soonter spent hours in meditation; she was very quiet; she believed that she saw angels; her face wore often a far-away smile.

On this September evening she prepared a heavily abundant supper for Granmar, and a simple one for Nounce, who ate at any time hardly more than a bird; Granmar, on the contrary, was gifted with an appetite of extraordinary capacities, the amount of food which was necessary to keep her, not in good-humor (she was never in good-humor), but in passable bodily tranquillity, through the twenty-four hours being equal to that which would have been required (so Prudence often thought) for three hearty New England harvesters at home. Not that Granmar would touch New England food; none of the family would eat the home dishes which Prudence in the earlier years had hopefully tried to prepare from such materials as seemed to her the least "onreasonable"; Granmar, indeed, had declared each and all fit only for the hogs. Prudence never tried them now, and she had learned the art of Italian cooking; for she felt that she could not afford to make anything that was to be for herself alone; the handful of precious twigs must serve for the family as a whole. But every now and then, in spite of her natural abstemiousness, she would be haunted by a vision of a "boiled dinner," the boiled corned-beef, the boiled cabbage, turnips, and potatoes, and the boiled Indian pudding of her youth. She should never taste these dainties on earth again. More than once she caught herself hoping that at least the aroma of them would be given to her some time in heaven.

When Granmar was gorged she became temporarily more tranquil. Prudence took this time to speak of a plan which she had had in her mind for several days. "Now that Gooster and the other boys are doing for themselves, Granmar, and Bepper too at last, and Jo Vanny only needing a trifle of help now and then (he's so young yet, you know), I feel as though I might be earning more money," she began.

"Money's a very good thing; we've never had half enough since my sainted Annunziata joined the angels," responded Granmar, with a pious air.

"Well, it seems a good time to try and earn some more. Sooner's gone to the convent; and as it's a long while since Pipp's been here, I really begin to think he has gone off to get work somewhere, as he always said he was going to."

"Don't you be too sure of Pippo," said Granmar, shaking her owl-like head ominously.

"Tany rate he hasn't been here, and I always try to hope the best about him – "

"And *that's* what you call the best?" interrupted Granmar, with one of her sudden flank movements, "to have him gone away off no one knows where – Annunziata's own precious little nephew – taken by the pirates – yam! Sold as a slave – yam! Killed in the war! Oh, Pippo! poor Pippo! poor little Pipp, Pipp, Pipp!"

"And so I thought I'd try to go to the shop by the day," Prudence went on, when this yell had ceased; "they want me to come and cut out. I shouldn't go until after your breakfast, of course; and I could leave cold things out, and Nounce would cook you something hot at noon; then I should be home myself every night in time to get your supper."

"And so that's the plan – I'm to be left alone here with an idiot while you go flouncing your heels round Assisi! Flounce, cat! It's a wonder the dead don't rise in their graves to hear it. But we buried my Annunziata too deep for that – yam! – otherwise she'd 'a been here to tear your eyes out. An old woman left to starve alone, her own precious grandmother, growing weaker and weaker, and pining and pining. Blessed stomach, do you hear – do you hear, my holy, blessed stomach, always asking for so little, and now not even to get that? It's turned all a mumble of cold just thinking of it – yam! I, poor sufferer, who have had to stand your ugly face so long – I *so* fond of beauty! You haven't got but twenty-four hairs now; you know you haven't – yam! I've got more than you twenty times over – hey! *that* I have." And Granmar, tearing off her cap, pulled loose her coarse white hair, and grasping the ends of the long locks with her crooked fingers, threw them aloft with a series of shrill halloos.

"I won't go to the shop," said Prudence. "Mercy on us, what a noise! I say I won't go to the shop. There! do you hear?"

"Will you be here every day of your life at twelve o'clock to cook me something that won't poison me?" demanded Granmar, still hallooing.

"Yes, yes, I promise you."

Even Granmar believed Prudence's yes; her yea was yea and her nay nay to all the family. "You cook me something this very minute," she said, sullenly, putting on her cap askew.

"Why, you've only just got through your supper!" exclaimed Prudence, astonished, used though she was to Granmar's abdominal capacities, by this sudden demand.

"You won't? Then I'll yell again," said Granmar. And yell she did.

"Hold up – do; I believe you now," said Prudence. She fanned the dying coals with a straw fan, made up the fire, and prepared some griddle-cakes. Granmar demanded fig syrup to eat with them; and devoured six. Filled to repletion, she then suffered Prudence to change her day cap for a nightcap, falling asleep almost before her head touched the pillow.

During this scene Nounce had sat quietly in her corner. Prudence now went to her to see if she was frightened, for the girl was sometimes much terrified by Granmar's outcries; she stroked her soft hair. She was always looking for signs of intelligence in Nounce, and fancying that she discovered them. Taking the girl's hand, she went with her to the next room, where were their two narrow pallet beds. "You were very smart to save the eggs for me to-day when Granmar wanted that omerlet," she whispered, as she helped her to undress.

Memory came back to Nounce; she smiled comprehendingly.

Prudence waited until she was in bed; then she kissed her good-night, and put out the candle.

Her two charges asleep, Mrs. Guadagni the second opened the back door softly and went out. It was not yet nine o'clock, a warm dark night; though still September, the odors of autumn were

already in the air, coming from the September flowers, which have a pungency mingled with their perfume, from the rank ripeness of the vegetables, from the aroma of the ground after the first rains.

"I could have made thirty cents a week more at the shop," she said to herself, regretfully (she always translated the Italian money into American or French). "In a month that would have been a dollar and twenty cents! Well, there's no use thinking about it sence I can't go." She bent over her vegetables, feeling of their leaves, and estimating anew how many she could afford to sell, now that the family was so much reduced in size. Then she paid a visit to her fig-trees. She had planted these trees herself, and watched over their infancy with anxious care; at the present moment they were loaded with fruit, and it seemed as if she knew the position of each fig, so many times had she stood under the boughs looking up at the slowly swelling bulbs. She had never before been able to sell the fruit. But now she should be able, and the sale would add a good many cents to the store of savings kept in her work-box. This work-box, a possession of her youth, was lined with vivid green paper, and had a colored lithograph of the Honorable Mrs. Norton (taken as a Muse) on the inside of the cover; it held already three francs and a half, that is seventy cents – an excellent sum when one considered that only three weeks had passed since the happy day when she had at last beheld the way open to saving regularly, laying by regularly; many times had she begun to save, but she had never been able to continue it. Now, with this small household, she should be able to continue. The sale of the figs would probably double the savings already in the work-box; she might even get eighty cents for them; and that would make a dollar and fifty cents in all! A fig fell to the ground. "They're ripe," she thought; "they must be picked to-morrow." She felt for the fallen fig in the darkness, and carrying it to the garden wall, placed it in a dry niche where it would keep its freshness until she could send it to town with the rest. Then she went to the hen-house. "Smart of Nounce to save the eggs for me," she thought, laughing delightedly to herself over this proof of the girl's intelligence. "Granmar didn't need that omerlet one bit; I left out two tremenjous lunches for her." She peered in; but could not see the hens in the darkness. "If Granmar'd only eat the things we do!" her thoughts went on. "But she's always possessed after everything that takes eggs. And then she wants the very best coffee, and white sugar, and the best wine, and fine flour and meal and oil – my! how much oil! But I wonder if *I* couldn't stop eating something or other, steader pestering myself about her? Let's see. I don't take wine nor coffee, so I can't stop them; but I could stop soup meat, just for myself; and I will." Thus meditating, she went slowly round to the open space before the house.

To call it a space was a misnomer. The house stood at the apex of the hill, and its garden by right extended as far down the descent in front as it extended down the opposite descent behind, where Prudence had planted her long rows of vegetables. But in this front space, not ten feet distant from the house door, planted directly across the paved path which came up from below, was the cow-shed, the intruding offensive neighbor whose odors, gruntings (for it was now a pig-sty), and refuse were constantly making themselves perceptible to one sense and another through the open windows of the dwelling behind. For the house had no back windows; the small apertures which passed for windows were all in front; in that climate it was impossible that they should be always closed. How those odors choked Prudence Wilkin! It seemed as if she could not respect herself while obliged to breathe them, as if she had not respected herself (in the true Ledham way) since the pig-sty became her neighbor.

For fifty francs the owners would take it away; for another twenty or thirty she could have "a front yard." But though she had made many beginnings, she had never been able to save a tenth of the sum. None of the family shared her feelings in the least; to spend precious money for such a whim as that – only an American could be capable of it; but then, as everybody knew, most Americans were mad. And why should Denza object to pigs?

Prudence therefore had been obliged to keep her longings to herself. But this had only intensified them. And now when at last, after thinking of it for sixteen years, she was free to begin

to save daily and regularly, she saw as in a vision her front yard completed as she would like to have it: the cow-shed gone; "a nice straight path going down to the front gate, set in a new paling fence; along the sides currant bushes; and in the open spaces to the right and left a big flowerin' shrub – snowballs, or Missouri currant; near the house a clump of matrimony, perhaps; and in the flower beds on each side of the path bachelor's-buttons, Chiny-asters, lady's-slippers, and pinks; the edges bordered with box." She heaved a sigh of deep satisfaction as she finished her mental review. But it was hardly mental after all; she saw the gate, she saw the straight path, she saw the currant bushes and the box-bordered flower beds as distinctly as though they had really been there.

Cheered, almost joyous, she went within, locking the door behind her; then, after softly placing the usual store of provisions beside Granmar's bed (for Granmar had a habit of waking in the night to eat), she sought her own couch. It was hard, but she stretched herself upon it luxuriously. "The figs'll double the money," she thought, "and by this time to-morrow I shall have a dollar and forty cents; mebbby a dollar fifty!" She fell asleep happily.

Her contentment made her sleep soundly. Still it was not long after dawn when she hurried down the hill to the town to get her supply of work from the shop. Hastening back with it, she found Granmar clamoring for her coffee, and Nounce, neatly dressed and clean (for so much Prudence had succeeded in teaching her), sitting patiently in her corner. Prudence's mind was full of a sale she had made; but she prepared the coffee and Nounce's broth with her usual care; she washed her dishes, and made Granmar tidy for the day; finally she arranged all her sewing implements on the table by the window beside her pile of work. Now she could give herself the luxury of one last look, one last estimate; for she had made a miracle of a bargain for her figs. By ten o'clock the men would be up to gather them.

It was a hazy morning; butterflies danced before her as she hastened towards the loaded trees. Reaching them, she looked up. The boughs were bare. All the figs had been gathered in the night, or at earliest dawn.

"Pipper!" she murmured to herself.

The ground under the trees was trampled.

Seven weeks later, on the 16th of November, this same Prudence was adding to her secreted store the fifteen cents needed to make the sum ten francs exactly – that is, two dollars. "Ten francs, a fifth of the whole! It seems 'most too lucky that I've got on so well, spite of Pipper's taking the figs. If I can keep along this way, it'll *all* be done by the Fourth of July; not just the cow-shed taken away, but the front yard done too. My!" She sat down on a fagot to think it over. The thought was rapture; she laughed to herself and at herself for being so happy.

Some one called, "Mamma." She came out, and found Jo Vanny looking for her. Nounce and Jo Vanny were the only ones among the children who had ever called her mother.

"Oh, you're up there in the shed, are you?" said Jo Vanny. "Somehow, mamma, you look very gay."

"Yes, I'm gay," answered Prudence. "Perhaps some of these days I'll tell you why." In her heart she thought: "Jo Vanny, now, *he'd* understand; he'd feel as I do if I should explain it to him. A nice front yard he has never seen in all his life, for they don't have 'em *here*. But once he knew what it was, he'd care about it as much as I do; I know he would. He's sort of American, anyhow." It was the highest praise she could give. The boy had his cap off; she smoothed his hair. "'Pears to me you must have lost your comb," she said.

"I'm going to have it all cut off as short as can be," announced Jo Vanny, with a resolute air.

"Oh no."

"Yes, I am. Some of the other fellows have had theirs cut that way, and I'm going to, too," pursued the young stoic.

He was eighteen, rather undersized and slender, handsome as to his face, with large dark long-lashed eyes, well-cut features, white teeth, and the curly hair which Prudence had smoothed.

Though he had vowed them to destruction, these love-locks were for the present arranged in the style most approved in Assisi, one thick glossy flake being brought down low over the forehead, so that it showed under his cap in a sentimental wave. He did not look much like a hard-working carpenter as he stood there dressed in dark clothes made in that singular exaggeration of the fashions which one sees only in Italy. His trousers, small at the knee, were large and wing-like at the ankle, half covering the tight shabby shoes run down at the heel and absurdly short, which, however, as they were made of patent-leather and sharply pointed at the toes, Jo Vanny considered shoes of gala aspect. His low flaring collar was surrounded by a red-satin cravat ornamented by a gilt horseshoe. He wore a ring on the little finger of each hand. In his own eyes his attire was splendid.

In the eyes of some one else also. To Prudence, as he stood there, he looked absolutely beautiful; she felt all a mother's pride rise in her heart as she surveyed him. But she must not let him see it, and she must scold him for wearing his best clothes every day.

"I didn't know it was a festa," she began.

"'Tain't. But one of the fellows has had a sister married, and they've invited us all to a big supper to-night."

"To-night isn't to-day, that I know of."

"Do you wish me to go all covered with sawdust?" said the little dandy, with a disdainful air. "Besides, I wanted to come up here."

"It is a good while sence we've seen you," Prudence admitted. In her heart she was delighted that he had wished to come. "Have you had your dinner, Jo Vanny?"

"All I want. I'll take a bit of bread and some wine by-and-by. But you needn't go to cooking for me, mamma. I say, tell me what it was that made you look so glad?" said the boy, curiously.

"Never you mind *now*," said Prudence, the gleam of content coming again into her eyes, and lighting up her brown, wrinkled face. She was glad that she had the ten francs; she was glad to see the boy; she was touched by his unselfishness in declining her offer of a second dinner. No other member of the family would have declined or waited to decline; the others would have demanded some freshly cooked dish immediately upon entering; Uncle Patro would have demanded three or four.

"I've brought my mandolin," Jo Vanny went on. "I've got to take it to the supper, of course, because they always want me to sing – I never can get rid of 'em! And so you can hear me, if you like. I know the new songs, and one of them I composed myself. Well, it's rather heavenly."

All Tonio's children sang like birds. Poor Prudence, who had no ear for music, had never been able to comprehend either the pleasure or the profit of the hours they gave to their carollings. But when, in his turn, her little Jo Vanny began his pipings, then she listened, or tried to listen. "Real purty, Jo Vanny," she would say, when the silence of a moment or two had assured her that his song was ended; it was her only way of knowing – the silence.

So now she brought her work out to the garden, and sewed busily while Jo Vanny sang and thrummed. Nounce, too, came out, and sat on the wall near by, listening.

At length the little singer took himself off – took himself off with his red-satin cravat, his horseshoe pin, and his mandolin under his arm. Nounce went back to the house, but Prudence sat awhile longer, using, as she always did, the very last rays of the sunset light for her sewing.

After a while she heard a step, and looked up. "Why, Gooster! – anything the matter?" she said, in surprise.

Unlike the slender little Jo Vanny, Gooster was a large, stoutly built young man, as slow in his motions as Jo Vanny was quick. He was a lethargic fellow with sombre eyes, eyes which sometimes had a gleam in them.

"There's nothing especial the matter," he answered, dully. "I think I'll go for a soldier, Denza."

"Go for a soldier? And the per-dairy?"

"I can't never go back to the podere. *She's* there, and she has taken up with Matteo. I've had my heart trampled upon, and so I've got a big hankering either to kill somebody or get killed myself; and I'll either do it here, or I'll go for a soldier and get knifed in the war."

"Mercy on us! there isn't any war now," said Prudence, dazed by these sanguinary suggestions.

"There's always a war. What else are there soldiers for? And there's lots of soldiers. But I could get knifed here easy enough; Matteo and I – already we've had one tussle; I gave him a pretty big cut, you may depend."

Seventeen years earlier Prudence Wilkin would have laughed at the idea of being frightened by such words as these. But Mrs. Tonio Guadagni had heard of wild deeds in Assisi, and wilder ones still among the peasants of the hill country roundabout; these singing, indolent Umbrians dealt sometimes in revenges that were very direct and primitive.

"You let Matteo alone, Gooster," she said, putting her hand on his arm; "you go straight over to Perugia and stay there. Perhaps you can get work where Parlo and Squawly are."

"I shall have it out with Matteo here, or else go for a soldier to-morrow," answered Gooster, in his lethargic tone.

"Well, go for a soldier, then."

"It don't make much difference to me which I do," Gooster went on, as if only half awake. "If I go for a soldier, I shall have to get to Florence somehow, I suppose; I shall have to have ten francs for the railroad."

"Is it ten exactly?" said Prudence. Her mind flew to her work-box, which held just that sum.

"It's ten."

"Haven't you got any money at all, Gooster?" She meant to help him on his way; but she thought that she should like to keep, if possible, a nest-egg to begin with again – say twenty cents, or ten.

Gooster felt in his pockets. "Three soldi," he replied, producing some copper coins and counting them over.

"And there's nothing due you at the per-dairy?"

There was no necessity for answering such a foolish question as this, and Gooster did not answer it.

"Well, I will give you the money," said Prudence. "But to-morrow'll do, won't it? Stay here a day or two, and we'll talk it over."

While she was speaking, Gooster had turned and walked towards the garden wall. The sight of his back going from her – as though she should never see it again – threw her into a sudden panic; she ran after him and seized his arm. "I'll give you the money, Gooster; I told you I would; I've got it all ready, and it won't take a minute; promise me that you won't leave this garden till I come back."

Gooster had had no thought of leaving the garden; he had espied a last bunch of grapes still hanging on the vine, and was going to get it; that was all. "All right," he said.

Prudence disappeared. He gathered the grapes and began to eat them, turning over the bunch to see which were best. Before he had finished, Prudence came back, breathless with the haste she had made. "Here," she said; "and now you'll go straight to Florence, won't you? There's a train to-night, very soon now; you must hurry down and take that."

He let her put the money in his coat-pocket while he finished the grapes. Then he threw the stem carefully over the garden wall.

"And no doubt you'll be a brave soldier," Prudence went on, trying to speak hopefully. "Brave soldiers are thought a heap of everywhere."

"I don't know as I care what's thought," answered Gooster, indifferently. He took up his cap and put it on. "Well, good-bye, Denza. Best wishes to you. Every happiness." He shook hands with her.

Prudence stood waiting where she was for five minutes; then she followed him. It was already dark; she went down the hill rapidly, and turned into the narrow main street. A few lamps were lighted. She hastened onward, hoping every minute to distinguish somewhere in front a tall figure with slouching gait. At last, where the road turns to begin the long descent to the plain, she did distinguish it. Yes, that was certainly Gooster; he was going down the hill towards the railway station. All was well, then; she could dismiss her anxiety. She returned through the town. Stopping for a moment at an open space, she gazed down upon the vast valley, now darkening into night; here suddenly a fear came over her – he might have turned round and come back! She hurried through the town a second time, and not meeting him, started down the hill. The road went down in long zigzags. As she turned each angle she expected to see him; but she did not see him, and finally she reached the plain: there were the lights of the station facing her. She drew near cautiously, nearer and nearer, until, herself unseen in the darkness, she could peer through the window into the lighted waiting-room. If he was there, she could see him; but if he was on the platform on the other side – No; he was there. She drew a long breath of relief, and stole away.

A short distance up the hill a wheelbarrow loaded with stones had been left by the side of the road; she sat down on the stones to rest, for the first time realizing how tired she was. The train came rushing along; stopped; went on again. She watched it as long as she could see its lights. Then she rose and turned slowly up the hill, beginning her long walk home. "My," she thought, "won't Granmar be in a tantrum, though!"

When she reached the house she made a circuit, and came through the garden behind towards the back door. "I don't want to see the front yard *to-night*!" she thought.

But she was rather ashamed of this egotism.

"And they say they'll put me in prison – oh – ow! – an old man, a good old man, a suffering son of humanity like me!" moaned Uncle Pietro.

"An old man, a good old man, a suffering son of humanity like *him*," repeated Granmar, shrilly, proud of this fine language.

Suddenly she brandished her lean arms. "You Denza there, with your stored-up money made from *my* starvation – yam! – mine, how dare you be so silent, figure of a mule? Starvation! yes, indeed. Wait and I'll show you my arms, Pietro; wait and I'll show you my ribs – yam!"

"You keep yourself covered up, Granmar," said Prudence, tucking her in; "you'll do yourself a mischief in this cold weather."

"Ahi!" said Granmar, "and do I care? If I could live to see you drowned, I'd freeze and be glad. Stored-up money! stored-up money!"

"What do you know of my money?" said Prudence. Her voice trembled a little.

"She confesses it!" announced Granmar, triumphantly.

"An old ma – an," said Pietro, crouching over Nounce's scaldino. "A good old ma – an. But – accommodate yourself."

Prudence sat down and took up her sewing. "I don't believe they'll put you in jail at all, Patro," she said; "'twon't do 'em any good, and what they want is their money. You just go to 'em and say that you'll do day's work for 'em till it's made up, and they'll let you off, I'll bet. Nine francs, is it? Well, at half a franc a day you can make it up full in eighteen days; or call it twenty-four with the festas."

"The Americans are all mercenary," remarked old Pietro, waving his hand in scorn. "Being themselves always influenced by gain, they cannot understand lofty motives nor the cold, glittering anger of the nobility. The Leoncinis are noble; they are of the old Count's blood. They do not want their money; they want revenge – they want to rack my bones."

Granmar gave a long howl.

"Favor me, my niece, with no more of your mistakes," concluded Pietro, with dignity.

"I don't believe they'd refuse," said Prudence, unmoved. "I'll go and ask 'em myself, if you like; that'll be the best way. I'll go right away now." She began to fold up her work.

At this Pietro, after putting the scaldino safely on the stove, fell down in a round heap on the floor. Never were limbs so suddenly contorted and tangled; he clawed the bricks so fiercely with his fingers that Nounce, frightened, left her bench and ran into the next room.

"What's the matter with you? I never saw such a man," said Prudence, trying to raise him.

"Let be! let be!" called out Granmar; "it's a stroke; and you've brought it on, talking to him about working, working all day long like a horse – a good old man like that."

"I don't believe it's a stroke," said Prudence, still trying to get him up.

"My opinion is," said Granmar, sinking into sudden calm, "that he will die in ten minutes – exactly ten."

His face had indeed turned very red.

"Dear me! I suppose I shall have to run down for the doctor," said Prudence, desisting. "Perhaps he'd ought to be bled."

"You leave the doctor alone, and ease his mind," directed Granmar; "that's what he needs, sensitive as he is, and poetical too, poor fellow. You just shout in his ear that you'll pay that money, and you'll be surprised to see how it'll loosen his joints."

Mrs. Guadagni surveyed the good old uncle for a moment. Then she bent over him and shouted in his ear, "I'll make you a hot fig-tart right away now, Patro, if you'll set up."

As she finished these words Granmar threw her scaldino suddenly into the centre of the kitchen, where it broke with a crash upon the bricks.

"He's going to get up," announced Prudence, triumphantly.

"He isn't any such thing; 'twas the scaldino shook him," responded Granmar, in a loud, admonitory tone. "He'll never get up again in *this* world unless you shout in his ear that you'll pay that money."

And in truth Pietro was now more knotted than ever.

At this moment the door opened and Jo Vanny came in. "Why, what's the matter with uncle?" he said, seeing the figure on the floor. He bent over him and tried to ease his position.

"It's a stroke," said Granmar, in a soft voice. "It'll soon be over. Hush! leave him in peace. He's dying; Denza there, she did it."

"They want me to pay the nine francs he has – lost," said Prudence. "Perhaps you have heard, Jo Vanny, that he has – lost nine francs that belonged to the Leoncinis? Nine whole francs." She looked at the lad, and he understood the look; for only the day before she had confided to him at last her long-cherished dream, and (as she had been sure he would) he had sympathized with it warmly.

"I declare I wish I had even a franc!" he said, searching his pockets desperately; "but I've only got a cigarette. Will you try a cigarette, uncle?" he shouted in the heap's ear.

"Don't you mock him," ordered Granmar (but Jo Vanny had been entirely in earnest). "He'll die soon, and Denza will be rid of him; that's what she wants. 'Twill be murder, of course; and he'll haunt us – he's always said he'd haunt somebody. But *I* ain't long for this world, so I ain't disturbed. Heaven's waiting wide open for *me*."

Jo Vanny looked a little frightened. He hesitated a moment, surveying the motionless Pietro; then he drew Prudence aside. "He's an awful wicked old man, and might really do it," he whispered; "specially as you ain't a Catholic, mamma. I think you'd better give him the money if it'll stop him off; *I* don't mind, but it would be bad for you if he should come rapping on your windows and showing corpse-lights in the garden by-and-by."

Prudence brought her hands together sharply – a gesture of exasperation. "He ain't going to die any more than I am," she said. But she knew what life would be in that house with such a threat hanging over it, even though the execution were deferred to some vague future time. Angrily she left the room.

Jo Vanny followed her. "Come along, if you want to," she said, half impatient, half glad. She felt a sudden desire that some one besides herself should see the sacrifice, see the actual despoiling of the little box she had labored to fill. She went to the wood-shed. It was a gloomy December day, and the vegetables hanging on the walls had a dreary, stone-like look; she climbed up on a barrel, and removed the hay which filled a rough shelf; in a niche behind was her work-box; with it in her hand she climbed down again.

She gave him the box to hold while she counted out the money – nine francs. "There are twelve in all," she said.

"Then you'll have three left," said Jo Vanny.

"Yes, three." She could not help a sigh of retrospect, the outgoing nine represented so many long hours of toil.

"Let me put the box back," said the boy. It was quickly and deftly done. "Never mind about it, mamma," he said, as he jumped down. "I'll help you to make it up again. I want that front yard as much as you do, now you've told me about it; I think it will be beautiful."

"Well," said Prudence, "when the flower-beds are all fixed up, and the new front path and swing gate, it *will* be kind of nice, I reckon."

"Nice?" said Jo Vanny. "That's not the word. 'Twill be an ecstasy! a smile! a dream!"

"Bless the boy, what nonsense he talks!" said the step-mother. But she loved to hear his romantic phrases all the same.

They went back to the kitchen. The sacrifice had now become a cheerful one. She bent over the heap. "Here's your nine francs, Patro," she shouted. "Come, now, come!"

Pietro felt the money in his hand. He rose quietly. "I'm nearly killed with all your yelling," he said. Then he took his hat and left the house.

"We did yell," said Prudence, picking up the fragments of the broken scaldino. "I don't quite know why we did."

"Never mind why-ing, but get supper," said Granmar. "Then go down on your knees and thank the Virgin for giving us such a merciful, mild old man as Pietro. You brought on his stroke; but what did he do? He just took what you gave him, and went away so forgivingly – the soul of a dove, the spice-cake soul!"

In January, the short, sharp winter of Italy had possession of Assisi.

One day towards the last of the month a bitter wind was driving through the bleak, stony little street, sending clouds of gritty, frozen dust before it. The dark, fireless dwellings were colder than the outside air, and the people, swathed in heavy layers of clothing, to which all sorts of old cloaks and shawls and mufflers had been added, were standing about near the open doors of their shops and dwellings, various prominences under apron or coat betraying the hidden scaldino, the earthen dish which Italians tightly hug in winter with the hope that the few coals it contains will keep their benumbed fingers warm. All faces were reddened and frost-bitten. The hands of the children who were too young to hold a scaldino were purple-black.

Prudence Guadagni, with her great basket strapped on her back, came along, receiving but two or three greetings as she passed. Few knew her; fewer still liked her, for was she not a foreigner and a pagan? Besides, what could you do with a woman who drank water, simple water, like a toad, and never touched wine – a woman who did not like oil, good, sweet, wholesome oil! Tonio's children were much commiserated for having fallen into such hands.

Prudence was dressed as she had been in September, save that she now wore woollen stockings and coarse shoes, and tightly pinned round her spare person a large shawl. This shawl (she called it "my Highland shawl") had come with her from America; it was green in hue, plaided; she thought it still very handsome. Her step was not as light as it had been; rheumatism had crippled her sorely.

As she left the town and turned up the hill towards home, some one who had been waiting there joined her. "Is that you, Bepper? Were you coming up to the house?" she said.

"Yes," answered Beppa, showing her white teeth in a smile. "I'm bringing you some news, Denza."

"Well, what is it? I hope you're not going to leave your place?"

"I'm going to leave it, and that's my news: I'm going to be married."

"My! it's sudden, isn't it?" said Prudence, stopping.

"Giuseppe doesn't think it's sudden," said Beppa, laughing and tossing her head; "he thinks I've been ages making up my mind. Come on, Denza, do; it's so cold!"

"I don't know Giuseppe, do I?" said Prudence, trudging on again; "I don't remember the name."

"No; I've never brought him up to the house. But the boys know him – Paolo and Pasquale; Augusto, too. He's well off, Giuseppe is; he's got beautiful furniture. He's a first-rate mason, and gets good wages, so I sha'n't have to work any more – I mean go out to work as I do now."

"Bepper, do you *like* him?" said Prudence, stopping again. She took hold of the girl's wrist and held it tightly.

"Of course I like him," said Beppa, freeing herself. "How cold your hands are, Denza – ugh!"

"You ain't marrying him for his furniture? You love him for himself – and better than any one else in the whole world?" Prudence went on, solemnly.

"Oh, how comical you do look, standing there talking about love, with your white hair and your great big basket!" said Beppa, breaking into irrepressible laughter. The cold had not made her hideous, as it makes so many Italians hideous; her face was not empurpled, her fine features were not swollen. She looked handsome. What was even more attractive on such a day, she looked warm. As her merriment ceased, a sudden change came over her. "Sainted Maria! she doubts whether I love him! Love him? Why, you poor old woman, I'd die for him to-morrow. I'd cut myself in pieces for him this minute." Her great black eyes gleamed; the color flamed in her oval cheeks; she gave a rich, angry laugh.

It was impossible to doubt her, and Prudence did not doubt. "Well, I'm right down glad, Bepper," she said, in a softened tone – "right down glad, my dear." She was thinking of her own love for the girl's father.

"I was coming up," continued Beppa, "because I thought I'd better talk it over with you."

"Of course," said Prudence, cordially. "A girl can't get married all alone; nobody ever heard of that."

"I sha'n't be much alone, for Giuseppe's family's a very big one; too big, I tell him – ten brothers and sisters. But they're all well off, that's one comfort. Of course I don't want to shame 'em."

"Of course not," said Prudence, assenting again. Then, with the awakened memories still stirring in her heart: "It's a pity your father isn't here now," she said, in a moved tone; "he'd have graced a wedding, Bepper, he was so handsome." She seldom spoke of Tonio; the subject was too sacred; but it seemed to her as if she might venture a few words to this his daughter on the eve of her own marriage.

"Yes, it's a pity, I suppose," answered Beppa. "Still, he would have been an old man now. And 'tain't likely he would have had a good coat either – that is, not such a one as I should call good."

"Yes, he would; I'd have made him one," responded Prudence, with a spark of anger. "This whole basket's full of coats now."

"I know you're wonderful clever with your needle," said the girl, glancing carelessly at the basket that weighed down her step-mother's shoulders. "I can't think how you can sew so steadily, year in, year out; I never could."

"Well, I've had to get stronger spectacles," Prudence confessed. "And they wouldn't take my old ones in exchange, neither, though they were perfectly good."

"They're robbers, all of them, at that shop," commented Beppa, agreeingly.

"Now, about your clothes, Bepper – when are you going to begin? I suppose you'll come home for a while, so as to have time to do 'em; I can help you some, and Nounce too; Nounce can sew a little."

"No, I don't think I'll come home; 'twouldn't pay me. About the clothes – I'm going to buy 'em."

"They won't be half so good," Prudence began. Then she stopped. "I'm very glad you've got the money laid up, my dear," she said, commendingly.

"Oh, but I haven't," answered Beppa, laughing. "I want to borrow it of you; that is what I came up for to-day – to tell you about it."

Prudence, her heart still softened, looked at the handsome girl with gentle eyes. "Why, of course I'll lend it to you, Bepper," she said. "How much do you want?"

"All you've got won't be any too much, I reckon," answered Beppa, with pride. "I shall have to have things nice, you know; I don't want to shame 'em."

"I've got twenty-five francs," said Prudence; "I mean I've got that amount saved and put away; 'twas for – for a purpose – something I was going to do; but 'tain't important; you can have it and welcome." Her old face, as she said this, looked almost young again. "You see, I'm so glad to have you happy," she went on. "And I can't help thinking – if your father had only lived – the first wedding in his family! However, *I'll* come – just as though I was your real mother, dear; you sha'n't miss that. I've got my Sunday gown, and five francs will buy me a pair of new shoes; I can earn 'em before the day comes, I guess."

"I'm afraid you can't," said Beppa, laughing.

"Why, when's the wedding? Not for two or three weeks, I suppose?"

"It's day after to-morrow," answered Beppa. "Everything's bought, and all I want is the money to pay for 'em; I knew I could get it of you."

"Dear me! how quick! And these shoes are really too bad; they're clear wore out, and all the cleaning in the world won't make 'em decent."

"Well, Denza, why do you want to come? You don't know any of Giuseppe's family. To tell the truth, I never supposed you'd care about coming, and the table's all planned out for (at Giuseppe's sister's), and there ain't no place for you."

"And you didn't have one saved?"

"I never thought you'd care to come. You see they're different, they're all well off, and you don't like people who are well off – who wear nice clothes. You never wanted us to have nice clothes, and you like to go barefoot."

"No, I don't!" said Prudence.

"Tany rate, one would think you did; you always go so in summer. But even if you had new shoes, none of your clothes would be good enough; that bonnet, now –"

"My bonnet? Surely my *bonnet's* good?" said the New England woman; her voice faltered, she was struck on a tender point.

"Well, people laugh at it," answered Beppa, composedly.

They had now reached the house. "You go in," said Prudence; "I'll come presently."

She went round to the wood-shed, unstrapped her basket, and set it down; then she climbed up on the barrel, removed the hay, and took out her work-box. Emptying its contents into her handkerchief, she descended, and, standing there, counted the sum – twenty-seven francs, thirty centimes. "'Twon't be any too much; she don't want to shame 'em." She made a package of the money with a piece of brown paper, and, entering the kitchen, she slipped it unobserved into Beppa's hand.

"Seems to me," announced Granmar from the bed, "that when a girl comes to tell her own precious Granmar of her *wedding*, she ought in decency to be offered a bite of something to eat. Any one but Denza would think so. Not that it's anything to me."

"Very well, what will you have?" asked Prudence, wearily. Freed from her bonnet and shawl, it could be seen that her once strong figure was much bent; her fingers had grown knotted, enlarged at the joints, and clumsy; years of toil had not aged her so much as these recent nights – such long nights! – of cruel rheumatic pain.

Granmar, in a loud voice, immediately named a succulent dish; Prudence began to prepare it. Before it was ready, Jo Vanny came in.

"You knew I was up here, and you've come mousing up for an invitation," said Beppa, in high good-humor. "I was going to stop and invite you on my way back, Giovanni; there's a nice place saved for you at the supper."

"Yes, I knew you were up here, and I've brought you a wedding-present," answered the boy. "I've brought one for mamma, too." And he produced two silk handkerchiefs, one of bright colors, the other of darker hue.

"Is the widow going to be married, too?" said Beppa. "Who under heaven's the man?"

In spite of the jesting, Prudence's face showed that she was pleased; she passed her toil-worn hand over the handkerchief softly, almost as though its silk were the cheek of a little child. The improvised feast was turned into a festival now, and of her own accord she added a second dish; the party, Granmar at the head, devoured unknown quantities. When at last there was nothing left, Beppa, carrying her money, departed.

"You know, Jo Vanny, you hadn't ought to leave your work so often," said Prudence, following the boy into the garden when he took leave; she spoke in an expostulating tone.

"Oh, I've got money," said Jo Vanny, loftily; "I needn't crawl." And carelessly he showed her a gold piece.

But this sudden opulence only alarmed the step-mother. "Why, where did you get that?" she said, anxiously.

"How frightened you look! Your doubts offend me," pursued Jo Vanny, still with his grand air. "Haven't I capacities? – hasn't Heaven sent me a swarming genius? Wasn't I the acclaimed, even to laurel crowns, of my entire class?"

This was true: Jo Vanny was the only one of Tonio's children who had profited by the new public schools.

"And now what shall I get for you, mamma?" the boy went on, his tone changing to coaxing; "I want to get you something real nice; what will you have? A new dress to go to Beppa's wedding in?"

For an instant Prudence's eyes were suffused. "I ain't going, Jo Vanny; they don't want me."

"They *shall* want you!" declared Jo Vanny, fiercely.

"I didn't mean that; I don't want to go anyhow; I've got too much rheumatism. You don't know," she went on, drawn out of herself for a moment by the need of sympathy – "you don't know how it does grip me at night sometimes, Jo Vanny! No; you go to the supper, and tell me all about it afterwards; I like to hear you tell about things just as well as to go myself."

Jo Vanny passed his hand through his curly locks with an air of desperation. "There it is again – my gift of relating, of narrative; it follows me wherever I go. What will become of me with such talents? I shall never die in my bed; nor have my old age in peace."

"You go 'long!" said Prudence (or its Italian equivalent). She gave him a push, laughing.

Jo Vanny drew down his cap, put his hands deep in his pockets, and thus close-reefed scudded down the hill in the freezing wind to the shelter of the streets below.

By seven o'clock Nounce and Granmar were both asleep; it was the most comfortable condition in such weather. Prudence adjusted her lamp, put on her strong spectacles, and sat down

to sew. The great brick stove gave out no warmth; it was not intended to heat the room; its three yards of length and one yard of breadth had apparently been constructed for the purpose of holding and heating one iron pot. The scaldino at her feet did not keep her warm; she put on her Highland shawl. After a while, as her head (scantly covered with thin white hair) felt the cold also, she went to get her bonnet. As she took it from the box she remembered Beppa's speech, and the pang came back; in her own mind that bonnet had been the one link that still united her with her old Ledham respectability, the one possession that distinguished her from all these "papish" peasants, with their bare heads and frowzy hair. It was not new, of course, as it had come with her from home. But what signified an old-fashioned shape in a community where there were no shapes of any kind, new or old? At least it was always a bonnet. She put it on, even now from habit pulling out the strings carefully, and pinning the loops on each side of her chin. Then she went back and sat down to her work again.

At eleven o'clock Granmar woke. "Yam! how cold my legs are! Denza, are you there? You give me that green shawl of yours directly; precisely, I am dying."

Prudence came out from behind her screen, lamp in hand. "I've got it on, Granmar; it's so cold setting up sewing. I'll get you the blanket from my bed."

"I don't want it; it's as hard as a brick. You give me that shawl; if you've got it on, it'll be so much the warmer."

"I'll give you my other flannel petticoat," suggested Prudence.

"And I'll tear it into a thousand pieces," responded Granmar, viciously. "You give me that shawl, or the next time you leave Nounce alone here, *she* shall pay for it."

Granmar was capable of frightening poor little Nounce into spasms. Prudence took off the shawl and spread it over the bed, while Granmar grinned silently.

Carrying the lamp, Prudence went into the bedroom to see what else she could find to put on. She first tried the blanket from her bed; but as it was a very poor one, partly cotton, it was stiff (as Granmar had said), and would not stay pinned; the motion of her arms in sewing would constantly loosen it. In the way of wraps, except her shawl, she possessed almost nothing; so she put on another gown over the one she wore, pinned her second flannel petticoat round her shoulders, and over that a little cloak that belonged to Nounce; then she tied a woollen stocking round her throat, and crowned with her bonnet, and carrying the blanket to put over her knees, she returned to her work.

"I declare I'm clean tired out," she said to herself; "my feet are like ice. I wouldn't sew any longer such a bitter night if it warn't that that work-box 'ain't got a thing in it. I can't bear to think of it empty. But as soon as I've got a franc or two to begin with again, I'll stop these extry hours."

But they lasted on this occasion until two o'clock.

"It don't seem as if I'd ever known it *quite* so baking as it is to-night." It was Prudence who spoke; she spoke to Nounce; she must speak to some one.

Nounce answered with one of her patient smiles. She often smiled patiently, as though it were something which she was expected to do.

Prudence was sitting in the wood-shed resting; she had been down to town to carry home some work. Now the narrow streets there, thrown into shade by the high buildings on each side, were a refuge from the heat; now the dark houses, like burrows, gave relief to eyes blinded by the yellow glare. It was the 30th of August. From the first day of April the broad valley and this brown hill had simmered in the hot light, which filled the heavens and lay over the earth day after day, without a change, without a cloud, relentless, splendid; each month the ground had grown warmer and drier, the roads more white, more deep in dust; insect life, myriad legged and winged, had been everywhere; under the stones lurked the scorpions.

In former summers here this never-ending light, the long days of burning sunshine, the nights with the persistent moon, the importunate nightingales, and the magnificent procession of the stars had sometimes driven the New England woman almost mad; she had felt as if she must bury her

head in the earth somewhere to find the blessed darkness again, to feel its cool pressure against her tired eyes. But this year these things had not troubled her; the possibility of realizing her long-cherished hope at last had made the time seem short, had made the heat nothing, the light forgotten; each day, after fifteen hours of toil, she had been sorry that she could not accomplish more.

But she had accomplished much; the hope was now almost a reality. "Nounce," she said, "do you know I'm 'most too happy to live. I shall have to tell you: I've got *all* the money saved up at last, and the men are coming to-morrow to take away the cow-shed. Think of that!"

Nounce thought of it; she nodded appreciatively.

Prudence took the girl's slender hand in hers and went on: "Yes, to-morrow. And it'll cost forty-eight francs. But with the two francs for wine-money it will come to fifty in all. By this time to-morrow night it will be gone!" She drew in her breath with a satisfied sound. "I've got seventy-five francs in all, Nounce. When Bepper married, of course I knew I couldn't get it done for Fourth of July. And so I thought I'd try for Thanksgiving – that is, Thanksgiving *time*; I never know the exact day now. Well, here it's only the last day of August, and the cow-shed will be gone to-morrow. Then will come the new fence; and then the fun, the real fun, Nounce, of laying out our front yard! It'll have a nice straight path down to the gate, currant bushes in neat rows along the sides, two big flowerin' shrubs, and little flower beds bordered with box. I tell you you won't know your own house when you come in a decent gate and up a nice path to the front door; all these years we've been slinking in and out of a back door, just as though we didn't have no front one. I don't believe myself in tramping in and out of a front door *every* day; but on Sundays, now, when we have on our best clothes, we shall come in and out respectably. You'll feel like another person, Nounce; and I'm sure *I* shall – I shall feel like Ledham again – my!" And Prudence actually laughed.

Still holding Nounce's hand, she went round to the front of the house.

The cow-shed was shedding forth its usual odors; Prudence took a stone and struck a great resounding blow on its side. She struck with so much force that she hurt her hand. "Never mind – it done me good!" she said, laughing again.

She took little Nounce by the arm and led her down the descent. "I shall have to make the front walk all over," she explained. "And here'll be the gate, down here – a swing one. And the path will go from here straight up to the door. Then the fence will go along here – palings, you know, painted white; a good clean American white, with none of these yellows in it, you may depend. And over there – and there – along the sides, the fence will be just plain boards, notched at the top; the currant bushes will run along there. In the middle, here – and here – will be the big flowerin' shrubs. And then the little flower-beds bordered with box. Oh, Nounce, I can't hardly believe it – it will be so beautiful! I really can't!"

Nounce waited a moment. Then she came closer to her step-mother, and after looking quickly all about her, whispered, "You needn't if you don't want to; there's here yet to believe."

"It's just as good as here," answered Prudence, almost indignantly. "I've got the money, and the bargain's all made; nothing could be surer than that."

The next morning Nounce was awakened by the touch of a hand on her shoulder. It was her step-mother. "I've got to go down to town," she said, in a low tone. "You must try to get Granmar's breakfast yourself, Nounce; do it as well as you can. And – and I've changed my mind about the front yard; it'll be done some time, but not now. And we won't talk any more about it for the present, Nounce; that'll please me most; and you're a good girl, and always want to please me, I know."

She kissed her, and went out softly.

In October three Americans came to Assisi. Two came to sketch the Giotto frescos in the church of St. Francis; the third came for her own entertainment; she read Symonds, and wandered about exploring the ancient town.

One day her wanderings led her to the little Guadagni house on the height. The back gate was open, and through it she saw an old woman staggering, then falling, under the weight of a sack of potatoes which she was trying to carry on her back.

The American rushed in to help her. "It's much too heavy for you," she said, indignantly, after she had given her assistance. "Oh dear – I mean, *è troppo grave*," she added, elevating her voice.

"Are you English?" said the old woman. "I'm an American myself; but I ain't deaf. The sack warn't too heavy; it's only that I ain't so strong as I used to be – it's perfectly rededulous!"

"You're not strong at all," responded the stranger, still indignantly, looking at the wasted old face and trembling hands.

A week later Prudence was in bed, and an American nurse was in charge.

This nurse, whose name was Baily, was a calm woman with long strong arms, monotonous voice, and distinct New England pronunciation; her Italian (which was grammatically correct) was delivered in the vowels of Vermont.

One day, soon after her arrival, she remarked to Granmar, "That yell of yours, now – that yam – is a very unusual thing."

"My sufferings draw it from me," answered Granmar, flattered by the adjective used. "I'm a very pious woman; I don't want to swear."

"I think I have never heard it equalled, except possibly in lunatic asylums," Marilla Baily went on. "I have had a great deal to do with lunatic asylums; I am what is called an expert; that is, I find out people who are troublesome, and send them there; I never say much about it, but just make my observations; then, when I've got the papers out, whiff! – off they go."

Granmar put her hand over her mouth apprehensively, and surveyed her in silence. From that time the atmosphere of the kitchen was remarkably quiet.

Marilla Baily had come from Florence at the bidding of the American who had helped to carry the potatoes. This American was staying at the Albergo del Subasio with her friends who were sketching Giotto; but she spent most of her time with Prudence Wilkin.

"You see, I minded it because it was *him*," Prudence explained to her one day, at the close of a long conversation. "For I'd always been so fond of the boy; I had him first when he warn't but two years old – just a baby – and *so* purty and cunning! He always called me mamma – the only one of the children, 'cept poor Nounce there, that really seemed to care for me. And I cared everything for him. I went straight down to town and hunted all over. But he warn't to be found. I tried it the next day, and the next, not saying what I wanted, of course; but nobody knew where he was, and at last I made up my mind that he'd gone away. For three weeks I waited; I was almost dead; I couldn't do nothing; I felt as if I was broke in two, and only the skin held me together. Every morning I'd say to myself, 'There'll certainly come a letter to-day, and he'll tell me all about it.' But the letter didn't come, and didn't come. From the beginning, of course, I knew it was him – I couldn't help but know; Jo Vanny was the only person in the whole world that knew where it was. For I'd showed it to him one day – the work-box, I mean – and let him put it back in the hole behind the hay – 'twas the time I took the money out for Patro. At last I did get a letter, and he said as how he'd meant to put it back the very next morning, sure. But something had happened, so he couldn't, and so he'd gone away. And now he was working just as hard as he could, he said, so as to be able to pay it back soon; he hardly played on his mandolin at all now, he said, he was working so hard. You see, he wasn't bad himself, poor little fellow, but he was led away by bad men; gambling's an awful thing, once you get started in it, and he was sort of *drove* to take that money, meaning all the while to pay it back. Well, of course I felt ever so much better just as soon as I got that letter. And I began to work again. But I didn't get on as well as I'd oughter; I can't understand why. That day, now, when I first saw you – when you ran in to help me – I hadn't been feeling sick at all; there warn't no sense in my tumbling down that way all of a sudden."

One lovely afternoon in November Prudence's bed was carried out to the front of the dark little house.

The cow-shed was gone. A straight path, freshly paved, led down to a swing gate set in a new paling fence, flower beds bordered the path, and in the centre of the open spaces on each side there was a large rose bush. The fence was painted a glittering white; there had been an attempt at grass; currant bushes in straight rows bordered the two sides.

Prudence lay looking at it all in peaceful silence. "It's mighty purty," she said at last, with grateful emphasis. "It's everything I planned to have, and a great deal nicer than I could have done it myself, though I thought about it goodness knows how many years!"

"I'm not surprised that you thought about it," the American answered. "It was the view you were longing for – fancy its having been cut off so long by that miserable stable! But now you have it in perfection."

"You mean the view of the garden," said Prudence. "There wasn't much to look at before; but now it's real sweet."

"No; I mean the great landscape all about us here," responded the American, surprised. She paused. Then seeing that Prudence did not lift her eyes, she began to enumerate its features, to point them out with her folded parasol. "That broad Umbrian plain, Prudence, with those tall slender trees; the other towns shining on their hills, like Perugia over there; the gleam of the river; the velvety blue of the mountains; the color of it all – I do believe it is the very loveliest view in the whole world!"

"I don't know as I've ever noticed it much – the view," Prudence answered. She turned her eyes towards the horizon for a moment. "You see I was always thinking about my front yard."

"The front yard is very nice now," said the American. "I am so glad you are pleased; we couldn't get snowballs or Missouri currant, so we had to take roses." She paused; but she could not give up the subject without one more attempt. "You have probably noticed the view without being aware of it," she went on; "it is so beautiful that you must have noticed it. If you should leave it you would find yourself missing it very much, I dare say."

"Mebbe," responded Prudence. "Still, I ain't so sure. The truth is, I don't care much for these Eyetalian views; it seems to me a poor sort of country, and always did." Then, wishing to be more responsive to the tastes of this new friend, if she could be so honestly, she added, "But I like views, as a general thing; there was a very purty view from Sage's Hill, I remember."

"Sage's Hill?"

"Yes; the hill near Ledham. You told me you knew Ledham. You could see all the fields and medders of Josiah Strong's farm, and Deacon Mayberry's too; perfectly level, and not a stone in 'em. And the turnpike for miles and miles, with three toll-gates in sight. Then, on the other side, there were the factories to make it lively. It was a sweet view."

A few days afterwards she said: "People tell us that we never get what we want in this world, don't they? But I'm fortunate. I think I've always been purty fortunate. I got my front yard, after all."

A week later, when they told her that death was near, "My! I'd no idea I was so sick as that," she whispered. Then, looking at them anxiously, "What'll become of Nounce?"

They assured her that Nounce should be provided for. "You know you have to be sorter patient with her," she explained; "but she's growing quicker-witted every day."

Later, "I should like so much to see Jo Vanny," she murmured, longingly; "but of course I can't. You must get Bepper to send him my love, my dearest, dearest love."

Last of all, as her dulled eyes turned from the little window and rested upon her friend: "It seems a pity – But perhaps I shall find –"

NEPTUNE'S SHORE

I

OLD Mrs. Preston had not been able to endure the hotel at Salerno. She had therefore taken, for two months, this house on the shore.

"I might as well be here as anywhere, saddled as I am with the Abercrombies," she remarked to her cousin, Isabella Holland. "Arthur may really do something: I have hopes of Arthur. But as to Rose, Hildegarde, and Dorothea, I shall plainly have to drag them about with me, and drag them about with me, year after year, in the hope that the constant seeing of so many straight statues, to say nothing of pictures, may at last teach them to have spines. Here they are now; did you ever see such shoulders, or rather such a lack of them? Hildegarde, child, come here a moment," she added, as the three girls drew near. "I have an idea. Don't you think you could *hold* your shoulders up a little? Try it now; put them up high, as though you were shrugging them; and expand your chest too; you mustn't cramp that. There! – that is what I mean; don't you think, my dear, that you could keep yourself so?"

Hildegarde, with her shoulders elevated and her long chin run out, began to blush painfully, until her milk-white face was dyed red. "I am afraid I could not keep myself so *long*, aunt," she answered, in a low voice.

"Never mind; let them down, then: it's of no use," commented Mrs. Preston, despairingly. "Go and dance for twenty-five minutes in the upper hall, all of you. And dance as hard as you can."

The three girls, moving lifelessly, went down the echoing vaulted corridor. They were sisters, the eldest not quite sixteen, all three having the same lank figures with sloping shoulders and long thin throats, and the same curiously white, milk-white skin. Orphans, they had been sent with their brother Arthur to their aunt, Mrs. Octavia Preston, five years before, having come to her from one of the West India Islands, their former home.

"Those girls have done nothing but eat raw meat, take sea baths, and practise calisthenics and dancing ever since I first took charge of them," Mrs. Preston was accustomed to remark to intimate friends; "yet look at them now! Of course I could not send them to school – they would only grow lanker. So I take them about with me patiently, governess and all."

But Mrs. Preston was not very patient.

The three girls having disappeared, Isabella thought the occasion favorable for a few words upon another subject. "Do you like to have Paulie riding so often with Mr. Ash, Cousin Octavia? I can't help being distressed about it."

"Don't be Misting John Ash, I beg; no one in the world but you, Isabella, would dream of doing it – a great swooping creature like that – the horseman in 'Heliodorus.'"

"You mean Raphael's fresco? Oh, Cousin Octavia, how can you think so? Raphael – such a religious painter, and John Ash, who looks so dissipated!"

"Did I say he didn't look dissipated? I said he could ride. John Ash is one of the most dissipated-looking youths I have ever met," pursued Mrs. Preston, comfortably. "The clever sort, not the brutal."

"And you don't mind Paulie's being with him?"

"Pauline Euphemia Graham has been married, Pauline Euphemia Graham is a widow; it ill becomes those who have not had a tithe of her experience (though they may be *much* older) to set themselves up as judges of her conduct."

Mrs. Preston had a deep rich voice, and slow enunciation; her simplest sentences, therefore, often took on the tone of declamation, and when she held forth at any length, it was like a Gregorian chant.

"Oh, I didn't mean to judge, I'm sure," said Isabella; "I only meant that it would be such a pity – such a bad match for dear Paulie in case she should be thinking of marrying again. Even if one were sure of John Ash – and certainly the reverse is the case – look at his mother! I am interested, naturally, as Paulie is my first cousin, you know."

"Do you mean that your first cousin's becoming Mrs. John Ash might endanger your own matrimonial prospects?"

"Oh dear no," said poor little Isabella, shrinking back to her embroidery. She was fifty, small, plain, extremely good. In her heart she wished that people would take the tone that Isabella had "never cared to marry."

"Here is Pauline now, I think," said Mrs. Preston, as a figure appeared at the end of the hall.

Isabella was afraid to add, "And going out to ride again!" But it was evident that Mrs. Graham intended to ride: she wore her habit.

"I wish you were going, too," she said to Mrs. Preston, pausing in the doorway with her skirt uplifted. Her graceful figure in the closely fitting habit was a pleasant sight to see.

"Thanks, my dear; I should enjoy going very much if I were a little more slender."

"You are magnificent as you are," responded Pauline, admiringly.

And in truth the old lady was very handsome, with her thick silver hair, fine eyes with heavy black eyebrows, and well-cut aquiline profile. Her straight back, noble shoulders, and beautiful hands took from her massive form the idea of unwieldiness.

"Isabella – you who are always posing for enthusiasm – when will you learn to say anything so genuine as that?" chanted Cousin Octavia's deep voice. "I mention it merely on your account, as a question of styles conversational. Here is Isabella, who thinks John Ash so dissipated, Pauline; she fears that it may injure the family connection if you marry him. I have told her that no one here was thinking of marrying or of giving in marriage; if she has such ideas, she must have brought them with her from Florence. There are a great many old maids in Florence."

"I can only answer for myself: I certainly am not thinking of marriage," said Pauline, laughing, as she went down the stairs.

"Oh, Cousin Octavia, you have set Pauline against me!" exclaimed Isabella, in distress.

"Don't be an idiot; Pauline isn't against any one: she doesn't care enough about it. She is a good deal for herself, I acknowledge; but she's not against any one. Pauline bears no malice; she is delightfully uncertain; she hasn't a theory in the world to live up to; in addition, to have her in the house is like going to the play all the time – she *is* such a stupendous liar!"

Isabella, who was punching round holes in a linen band with an implement of ivory, stopped punching. "I am sure poor Paulie –"

"Am I to sit through a defence of Pauline Euphemia Graham, born Preston, at your hands, Isabella? Pray spare me that. I am much more Pauline's friend than you ever can be. Did I say that she lied? Nature has given her a face that speaks one language and a mind that speaks another; she, of course, follows the language of her mind; but others follow that of her face, and this makes the play. Eh! – what noise is that?"

"We have come to pay you a visit, Aunt Octavia," called a boyish voice; its owner was evidently mounting the stairs three at a time: now he was in the room. "They're all down at the door – Freemantle and Gates and Beckett. And what do you think – we've got Griff!"

"Griff himself?" said Aunt Octavia, benevolently, as the lad, with a very pretty gallantry, bent to kiss her hand.

"Yes, Griff himself; you may be sure we're drawing like mad. Griff has come down from Paris for only three weeks, and he says he will go with us to Pæstum, and all about here – to Amalfi, Ravello, and everywhere. But of course Pæstum's the stunner."

"Yes, of course Pæstum's the stunner," repeated Aunt Octavia, as if trying it in Shakespearian tones.

"I say, may they come up?" Arthur went on.

They came up – three boys of seventeen and eighteen, and Griffith Carew, who was ten years older. These three youths, with Arthur Abercrombie, were studying architecture at the Beaux-Arts, Paris; this spring they had given to a tour in Italy for the purpose of making architectural drawings. Griffith Carew was also an architect, but a full-fledged one. His indomitable perseverance and painstaking accuracy caused all the younger men to respect him; the American students went further; they were sure that Griff had only to "let himself go," and the United States would bloom from end to end with City Halls of beauty unparalleled. In the mean time Griff, while waiting for the City Halls perhaps, was so kind-hearted and jovial and unselfish that they all adored him for that too. It was a master-treat, therefore, to Arthur and his companions, to have their paragon to themselves for a while on this temple-haunted shore.

Griff sat down placidly, and began to talk to Aunt Octavia. He was of medium height, his figure heavy and strong; he had a dark complexion and thick features, lighted by pleasant brown eyes, and white teeth that gleamed when he smiled.

Aunt Octavia was gracious to Griff; she had always distinguished him from "Arthur's horde." This was not in the least because the horde considered him the architect of the future. Aunt Octavia did not care much about the future; her tests were those of the past. She had known Griff's mother, and the persons whose mothers Aunt Octavia had known – ah, that was a certificate!

II

In the meanwhile Pauline Graham had left Salerno behind her, and was flying over the plain with John Ash.

Pauline all her life had had a passion for riding at breakneck speed; one of the explanations of her fancy for Ash lay in the fact that, having the same passion himself, he enabled her to gratify her own. Whenever she had felt in the mood during the past five weeks there had always been a horse and a mounted escort at her door. Upon this occasion, after what they called an inspiring ride (to any one else a series of mad gallops), they had dismounted at a farm-house, and leaving their horses, had strolled down to the shore. It was a lovely day, towards the last of March; the sea, of the soft misty blue of the southern Mediterranean, stretched out before them without a sail; at their feet the same clear water laved the shore in long smooth wavelets, hardly a foot high, whose gentle roll upon the sands had an indescribably caressing sound. There was no one in sight. It is a lonely coast. Pauline stood, gazing absently over the blue.

"Sit down for a moment," suggested Ash.

"Not now."

"Not now? When do you expect to be here again?"

She came back to the present, laughing. "True; but I did not mean that; I meant that you were not the ideal companion for sea-side musing; you never meditate. I venture to say you have never quoted poetry in your life."

"No; I live my poetry," John Ash responded.

"But for a ride you are perfect; for a rush over the plain, in the teeth of the wind, I have never had any one approaching you. You are a cavalier of the gods."

"Have you had many?"

"Cavaliers? – plenty. Of the gods? – no."

"Plenty! I reckon you have," said Ash, half to himself.

"Would you wish me to have had few? You must remember that I have been in many countries and have seen many peoples. I shouldn't have appreciated *you* otherwise; I should have thought you dangerous – horrible! There is Isabella, who has not been in many countries; Isabella is sure that you are 'so dissipated.'"

"Dissipated! – mild term!"

"Then you acknowledge it?"

"Freely."

Pauline looked about for a rock of the right height, and finding one, seated herself, and began to draw off her gloves. "Some time – in some other existence – will you come and tell me how it has paid you, please? You are so preternaturally intelligent, and you have such a will of your own, that you cannot have fallen into it from stupidity, as so many do." Her gloves off, she began to tighten the braids of her hair, loosened by the gallop.

"It pays as it goes; it makes one forget for a moment the hideous tiresomeness of existence. But you put your question off to some other life; you have no intention, then, of redeeming me in this?"

"I shouldn't succeed. In the first place, I have no influence – "

"You know I am your slave," said Ash; his voice suddenly deepened.

"And how much of a slave shall you be to the next pretty peasant girl you meet?" Mrs. Graham demanded, turning towards him, both hands still occupied with her hair.

"I don't deny that. But it has nothing to do with the subject."

"In one way I know it has not," she answered, after she had fastened the last braid in its place with a long gold pin.

"How right I was to like you! You understand of yourself the thing that so few women can ever be brought to comprehend. Well, if you acknowledge that it makes no difference – I mean about the peasant girls – we're just where we were; I am your slave, yet you have no desire to reclaim me. I believe you like me better as I am," he added, abruptly.

"Do you want me to tell you that you are impertinent?" demanded Pauline, with her lovely smile, that always contradicted in its sweetness any apparent rebuke expressed by her words. "Do I know what you are in reality, or care to know? I know what you seem, and what you seem is admirable, perfect, for these rides of ours, the most enchanting rides I have ever had."

"And the rides are to be the end of it? You wouldn't care for me elsewhere?"

"Ah!" said Pauline, rising and drawing on her gloves, "you wouldn't care for *me*. In Paris I am altogether another person; I am not at all as you see me here. In Paris you would call me a doll. Come, don't dissect the happy present; enjoy it as I do. 'He only is rich who owns the day,' and we own this – for our ride."

"I hear the hoofs upon the hill;
I hear them fainter, fainter still,"

she sang in her clear voice. "The idea of that old Virginia song coming to me here!"

"This talk about reclaiming and reforming is all bosh," remarked Ash, leaning back against a high fragment of rock, with his hands in his pockets. "I am what I am because I choose to be, that's all. The usual successes of American life, what are they? I no longer care a rap about them, because I've had them, or at least have seen them within my reach. I came up from nothing; I got an education – no matter now how I got it; I studied law. In ten years I had won such a position in my profession (my branch of it – I was never an office lawyer) that everything lay open before me. It was only a question of a certain number of years. Not only was this generally prophesied, but I knew it myself. But by that time I had found out the unutterable stupidity of people and their pursuits; I couldn't help despising them. I had made enough to make my mother comfortable, and there came over me a horror of a plodding life. I said to myself, 'What is the use of it?' Of pleasure there was no question. But I could go back to that plodding life to-morrow if I chose. Don't you believe it, Pauline?"

"Yes."

"Yet you don't say – try?"

"Try, by all means."

"At a safe distance from you!"

"Yes, at a safe distance from me," Pauline answered. "I should do you no good; I am not enough in earnest. I am never in earnest long about anything. I am changeable, too – you have no idea how changeable. There has been no opportunity to show you."

"Is that a threat? You know that I am deeply in love with you." He did not move as he said this, but his eyes were fixed passionately upon her face.

"I neither know it nor believe it; it is with you simply as it is with me – there is no one else here." She stood there watching the wavelets break at her feet. Nothing in her countenance corresponded in the least with the description she had just given of herself.

"How you say that! What am I to think of you? You have a face to worship: does it lie?" said Ash.

"Oh, my face!" She turned, and began to cross the field towards the farm.

"It shouldn't have that expression, then," he said, joining her, and walking by her side. "I don't believe you know what it is yourself, Pauline – that expression. It seems to say as you talk, coming straight from those divine lips, those sweet eyes: 'I could love you. Be good and I will.'"

Why, you have almost made *me* determine to be 'good' again, almost made *me* begin to dream of going back to that plodding life that I loathe. And you don't know what I am."

Mrs. Graham did not answer; she did not look up, though she knew that his head was bent beseechingly towards her.

John Ash was obliged to bend; he was very tall. His figure was rather thin, and he had a slouching gait; his broad shoulders and well-knit muscles showed that he had plenty of force, and his slouching step seemed to come from laziness, as though he found it too much trouble to plant his feet firmly, to carry his long length erect. He was holding his hat in his hand, and the light from the sea showed his face clearly, its good points and its bad. His head was well shaped, covered with thick brown hair, closely cut; but, in spite of the shortness, many silver threads could be seen on the brown – a premature silver, as he was not yet thirty-five. His face was beardless, thin, with a bold eagle-like outline, and strong, warm blue eyes, the blue eyes that go with a great deal of color. Ordinarily, Ash had now but little color; that is, there was but little red; his complexion had a dark brown hue; there were many deep lines. The mouth, the worst feature, had a cynical droop; the jaw conveyed suggestions that were not agreeable. The expression of the whole countenance was that of recklessness and cleverness, both of no common order. Of late the recklessness had often changed into a more happy merriment when he was with Pauline, the careless merriment of a boy; one could see then plainly how handsome he must have been before the lines, and the heaviness, and, alas! the evil, had come to darken his youth, and to sadden (for so it must have been) his silent, frightened-looking mother.

They reached the farm; he led out the horses, and mounted her. She gathered up the reins; but he still held the bridle. "How tired you look!" he said.

Her face was flushed slightly, high on the cheeks close under the eyes; between the fair eyebrows a perpendicular line was visible; for the moment, she showed to the full her thirty years.

"Yes, I am tired; and it's dangerous to tire me," she answered, smiling. She had recovered her light-hearted carelessness.

Ash still looked at her. A sudden conviction seemed to seize him. "Don't throw me over, Pauline," he pleaded. And as he spoke, on his brown, deeply lined face there was an expression which was boyishly young and trusting.

"As I told you, so long as there is no one else," Pauline answered.

The next moment they were flying over the plain.

III

The *table d'hôte* of the Star of Italy, the Salerno inn from whose mysteries (of eels and chestnuts) Mrs. Preston had fled – this unctuous *table d'hôte* had been unusually brilliant during this month of March; upon several occasions there had been no less than fifteen travellers present, and the operatic young landlord himself, with his affectionate smile, had come in to hand the peas.

The most unnoticed person was always a tall woman of fifty-five, who, entering with noiseless step, slipped into her chair so quickly and furtively that it seemed as if she were afraid of being seen standing upon her feet. Once in her place, she ate sparingly, looking neither to the right nor the left, holding her knife and fork with care, and laying them down cautiously, as though she were trying not to waken some one who was asleep. But the *table d'hôte* of the Star of Italy was never asleep; the travellers, English and American, could not help feeling that they were far from home on this shore where so recently brigands had prowled. It is well known that this feeling promotes conversation.

One evening a pink-cheeked woman, who wore a little round lace cap perched on the top of her smooth gray hair, addressed the silent stranger at her left hand. "You have been to Pæstum, I dare say?" she said, in her pleasant English voice.

"No."

"But you are going, probably? Directly we came, yesterday morning, we engaged horses and started at once."

"I don't know as I care about going."

"Not to see the temples?"

"I didn't know as there were temples," murmured the other, shyly.

"Fancy! But you really ought to go, you know," the pleasant voice resumed, doing a little missionary work (which can never come amiss). "The temples are well worth seeing; they are Greek."

"I've been ter see a good many buildings already: in Paris there were a good many; my son took me," the tall woman answered, her tone becoming more assured as she mentioned "my son."

"But these temples are – are rather different. I was saying to our neighbor here that she really ought on no account to miss going down to Pæstum," the fresh-faced Englishwoman continued, addressing her husband, who sat next to her on the right, for the moment very busy with his peas (which were good, but a little oily). "The drive is not difficult. And we found it most interesting."

"Interesting? It may well be interesting; finest Greek remains outside of Athens," answered the husband, a portly Warwickshire vicar. He bent forward a little to glance past his wife at this ignorer of temples at her other hand. "American," he said to himself, and returned to his peas.

The friendly vicaress offered a few words more the next day. Coming in from her walk, in her stout shoes, and broad straw hat garnished with white muslin, she was entering the inn by the back door, when she espied her neighbor of the dinner-table sitting near by on a bench. There was nothing to see but a paling fence; she was unoccupied, unless a basket with *Souvenir de Lucerne* on one side, and a flat bouquet of artificial flowers on the other, represented occupation.

"Do you prefer this to the garden in front?" the English woman asked, in some surprise.

"Yes, I think I do."

"I must differ from you, then, because there we have the sea, you know; 'tis such a pretty view."

"I don't know as I care about the sea; it's all water – nothing to look at."

"Ah! I dare say it makes you ill. We had a very nasty day when we crossed from Folkestone."

"No; it ain't that exactly. I sit here because I like ter see the things grow," hazarded the American, timidly, as if she felt that some explanation was expected.

"The things?"

"Yes, in there." (She pointed to the paling fence.) "There's peas, and asparagus, and beans, and some sorts I don't know; you wouldn't believe how they do push up, day after day."

"Ah, indeed! I dare say they do," the Englishwoman answered, a little bewildered, looking at the lines of green behind the palings.

"Her name is Ash, Azubah Ash – fancy!" she said to her husband, later. "I saw it written on a Swiss basket in which she keeps her crewel-work. She is extremely odd. She has no maid, yet she wears those very good diamonds; and she always appears in that Paris gown of rich black silk – the very richest quality, I assure you, Augustas: she wears it and the diamonds at breakfast. She has spoken of a son, but apparently he never turns up. And she spends all her time on a bench behind the house watching the beans grow."

"I should think she would bore herself to extinction," said the easy-going vicar.

"I dare say she *is* having rather a hard time of it, she is so *bornée*. I would offer her a book, but I don't think she ever reads. And when I told her that I should be very pleased to show her some of the pretty walks about here, she said that she never walked. She must be sadly lonely, poor thing!"

But Mrs. Ash was not lonely; or, if she was, she did not know the name of her malady. The comings and goings of her son were without doubt very uncertain; but the mother had been born among people who believe that the "men-folks" of a family have an existence apart from that of mothers and sisters, and that it is right that they should have it. Her son, who never went himself to a public table, had taken it for granted that his mother would prefer to have her meals served privately in one of the four large rooms which he had engaged for her at the inn.

"I think I like it better in the big dining-room, John," Mrs. Ash had replied. She did not tell him that she found it less difficult to eat her dinner when the attention of the waiter was distracted by the necessity of attending to the wants of ten persons than when his gaze was concentrated upon her solitary knife and fork alone.

John Ash was fond of his mother. It did not occur to him that this nomad life abroad was causing her any suffering. Her shyness, her dread of being looked at, her dread of foreign servants, he did not fully see, because when he was present she controlled them; when he was present, also, in a great measure, they disappeared. He knew that she would not have had one moment's content had he left her behind him, even if he had left her in the finest house his money could purchase; so he took her with him, and travelled slowly, for her sake, making no journeys that she could not make, sending forward to engage the best rooms for her at the inns where he intended to stop.

That he had not taken her to Pæstum was not an evidence of neglect. During the first months of their wanderings he had been at pains to take her everywhere he had thought that she would enjoy it. But Mrs. Ash had enjoyed nothing – save the going about on her son's arm. If he left her alone amid the most exquisite scenery in the world, she did not even see the scenery; she thought a dusty jaunt in a horse-car "very pleasant" if John was there. So at last John gave her his simple presence often, but troubled her with descriptions and excursions no more.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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