

THE LAST CHORD.

The sharp, keen, frosty air swept down from the Appennines and snapped like a wolf or an angry cur at the scanty covered ankles of the poor. It was nightfall—the coldest part of the winter day in Tuscany. An hour before the red sunlight kept the people warm and merry, and in another hour they would have forgotten both the sunlight and the cold, and be merry again for their own sunny hearts.

Florence is so old, and yet so tender; and so beautiful, that it is impossible to be long miserable there if in one's soul there be any of the artist or the poet.

The hour following the gloaming passed swiftly, the darkness came quickly on its wake—darkness, but not silence.

High aloft, in the dim majesty of the white winter starlight, gleamed the wondrous needle of the Campanile while below the Duomo stood in silent grandeur, with the songs and laughter of the people ringing and buffeting against the great sides.

From out of one of the merry groups, with all their songs and laughter, tottered old Mariuccia, with her mandolin. As she advanced slowly along the piazza the people noticed that she seemed suddenly to have grown very much older. Her old bony fingers twitched nervously, the corners of her mouth drew up and down, and in her eyes there was a glare which seemed like the glare of death.

Slowly she wended her way along, and then, pausing under one of the brightest lights, she glanced curiously about her and seated herself on the cold pavement. She had done this same thing many hundred times before, but now, somehow, she was watched with more awe and respect than ever before, and, though she gave those who listened less music than commonly her motley audience was in some strange way moved to give her more coin for it.

Poor Mariuccia! Hers had been a sad but not an uncommon life; still as they watched her there in the cold starlight, and by aid of the smoking, flickering lamps, the people wondered that her sorrow had not killed her long ago. All at once it seemed to them that she had borne it all so bravely.

When she was 30 she was a singer in one of the theatres in Rome, and the great masters counted her among the marvellous voices. She sang on and on until Beppo, once her little lover and playmate in the old days in Florence, came down and married her. Together they went back to Florence.

For a few years life ran on smoothly with them, and then Beppo died of a fever. In a few years more their daughter, who had grown into womanhood, left Florence without giving the old woman any word as to where she was going or with whom she had gone.

When she came back she bore a helpless and probably a nameless child in her arms, and died before she could tell her friends with whom she had gone a year before.

After that life was very hard for old Mariuccia. At last her little store of money gave out, and then to keep food in her mouth and that of the little granddaughter, she had to sing—not in theatres, as she had done in Rome, but in the streets, for the little coin it brought her.

When the child was 7 years old, she suddenly became ill; and so strangely too that no physician in Florence was able to discover with what disease she was afflicted. Their utmost skill was baffled. They looked at her gravely and shook their heads in helplessness.

She grew paler and feebler and thinner through all the summer, and more and more beautiful with it all. The bright, pleasant autumn weather, from which so much was expected, did her no good; and now, in the mid-winter, death seemed very near. Old Mariuccia only hoped that she might live to provide food for the child while its frail, little life still lasted. It was two years since the old grandmother had been able to sing. Her throat seemed paralyzed—perhaps with age, perhaps with grief, and its music was dead. She could only ask humbly for alms when she played for strangers.

While she sat playing that night among the pitying people, by the

Duomo, the little grandchild in a garret near the Arno, lay watching the gleaming stars. The marvis in its humble cage at her side had long since gone to sleep. Each day a kind lady who had lived near the Ponto Vecchio gave old Mariuccia food for the bird, out of pity for the little one, and so sometimes the little songster fared better than the old woman or the sick child.

As the strength of the child flagged, so the song of the marvis every day grew softer and sweeter, until it became scarcely more than a gurgle in the gay little creature's throat. That day—that sad, strange day—an hour before nightfall, the marvis ceased singing altogether, and sat on its perch watching the sick child as if it knew that its little friend was dying. The eyes of the bird were fixed upon each other when the latter went to sleep.

Old Mariuccia twanged the strings of her mandolin more and more faintly as midnight drew near.

The people watched her longer than they ever had before, and wondered over and over again why, instead of going home to the sick child, she still sat playing in the frosty air. Her old watery eyes looked straight ahead but they seemed to see nothing. Her little box was almost full of coin—fuller than it had ever been any night before since her voice left her.

"Some one will have to look after the grandchild before morning" said a brown baker.

"Not for long," said another, she will follow the old woman closely."

Just then a stranger—young, handsome and splendidly dressed—suddenly joined the group, and made inquiry as to why the old woman was playing so late in the night. He was an Italian, but there was a trace of a northern tongue in his accent.

"She seems to be dying," said the brown baker. "She is playing for her little grandchild, and we don't dare disturb her. It might kill her, you see."

Something about the old woman's face made the stranger gasp for breath and clutch the sturdy baker by the arm. He asked who and what she was, and all about her.

They told him the old woman's story how her husband had died and her daughter had gone away; and then how she had then come back and died with a nameless babe in her arms.

When the stranger was told how tenderly the old woman had cared for the child and how bravely she had toiled for it sometimes fainting for bread herself so that the unknown little one did not starve, he the strong man, cried out in agony and threw himself into the bakers arms and wept.

The people looked from him to each other in silent wonderment. They could not understand why so fine a stranger should be so moved at the simple story of an old half-dying beggar and her family, which they all knew so well and had all known so long. Through all the story and the stranger's agitation the brave old woman sat still and twanged her mandolin in the same hopeless, listless way. She saw neither the stranger nor the people, and she did not even seem to hear the click of the coin which from time to time fell into her cup.

Finally the stranger recovered his self-possession and stood looking sorrowfully at the old woman. There were traces of tears in her eyes, and his lips were quivering with suppressed grief. Suddenly he pulled off his velvet cap, faced the people and began speaking.

"Friends," he said, "if you will let me call you so, yonder old woman was wrecked and saddened through me—but, wait until I have done before you pronounce the fault all mine. It was I who stole old Mariuccia's daughter away but I meant her no ill and made her my wife. The child she has brought back, and whom you say is dying too, is of honest birth. Three months after that marriage I was seized and imprisoned for a crime that my brother had done. My poor wife never knew what had happened to me, and I never once heard of her until to-night when you told me all here. In my hand is a package of papers of proof of what I have said. Here, honest baker, take it to some notary and see if I have not told the truth. I have plenty of gold, too, if I

am back in time for it to do any good to those who should have it. But with what dreadful news do you greet me! My wife dead—my child dying! Quick, take me to my babe before the light of life fades from her eyes, too, and she can no longer see the father at whose hands she came into the world. But, stay, see old Mariuccia!"

The old woman had arisen once more to her full stature, and stood with a strange smile upon her wrinkled lips and a strange light upon her withered and furrowed face. One of the thin, bony hands still held the mandolin, and with the other she pointed to the eastward.

"Listen," she whispered huskily, "I can hear the voices of the marvis and the child. Both are singing. And yet see, it is nearly midnight. How odd that they should be singing now. Some one must have given them a candle, else they would be sleeping. I must go and darken the room—their poor little room—or they will sing all night."

Slowly she wavered to and fro, as if she was about falling, but no one stepped forward to save her, for no one seemed able to move. And then still smiling, she sat down and again touched the mandolin. Her music was dreamy and wavering, and every now and then she played a false note; but the little group around her listened attentively, almost breathlessly, to every sound which came to them from her worn and polished instrument. She seemed to imagine that she was once more in some Roman theatre, and she frequently bowed her gray, disheveled head in acknowledgement of some imaginary tribute to what had once been her grace and beauty.

The moon had arisen, full and white. It gleamed coldly against the surrounding hills, glittering on all the spires and domes, and sent a great wavering glare down the broad, high, Campanile. As if called into being by the light itself, darker shadows crept into the vast arches of the Duomo, and they deepened almost into blackness.

Far away, in the cold, desolate garret by the Arno, the marvis still slept in its cage. The child, too, had been sleeping in her hard, comfortable bed, but something had just awakened her. She was startled, and cried out so loudly that she awakened the marvis, and it twittered in response.

The child tried to soothe the bird, but could not. She had spent her whole strength in that one cry, and now all the blood she had in her little pearly veins had burst the frail boundaries and as trickling down her throat. So on it stopped her breath, and she sank back dead. As she died a clock began striking twelve but before it had finished the marvis fell from its perch, and was also dead when it struck the bottom of its little cage.

Higher and higher sailed the moon, until one of its long shafts of light brightened the little bleak room in which the child and the marvis lay, and another shone into the faces of the stranger and his companion as they stood mutely watching the old woman.

When the hour of midnight began striking Mariuccia leaned forward and smiled as if some invisible phantom were whispering into her ear.

Then the shadow of death came upon her face and her eyes burned with a large fierce blaze. Lighter and lighter she touched her mandolin until but the faintest sound came in an answer to her weak old fingers. Fainter and feebler were the notes, until her motionless hand lay across the instrument and it ceased vibrates.

As she sat there, breathless and nearly lifeless, swift changes came over her face. In memory she was once more coursing along the pathway of her past.

Now she was the gay singer before great audiences, whom the masters—the very ones who made music and song—said was sure to win fame and future.

Now, Beppo—bright, handsome, loving Beppo—had come down from Florence, and the tenderness of his caresses had won her forever away from her singing and stage life. The masters had called her a fool for marrying; but she had believed that love was best. So it was, too, until the fever killed Beppo and left her alone with the baby. The poor baby!

She blamed herself because it had fled, only to come back after a time with a grandchild for the old woman. The grandchild! How she had loved the sweet little one, and how she had hoped, year after year, that its father would come and help it to a better, easier life—for she, true heart, had never once doubted that the baby, her daughter, Beppo's child and hers, was an honorable and lawful wife. True, the girl had fled with some lover; but it was all right; she was a wife for all that.

Now she had only the grandchild left, and even that was dying. Dying? God! Who said dying? Her cup was full of money; the people had been very generous; she could hurry home and save the grandchild.

Just then a divided ray of moonlight touched her dying face and the face of the dead grandchild at the same instant. Did she know it—could she tell and feel what it all meant? Is it given to the dying to know such things at such times? Who can tell? Anyhow, the mandolin found a pillow upon Mariuccia's bosom, and once, twice, three times, her old hand touched the wrong string, with all the vigor and fever of her youth, and the wonderful chord she brought from the sweet instrument will linger forever upon the ears in the hearts of every one who heard it.

But that chord was her last.

Once more the old fingers clutched the strings strongly, but it was with the strength—the destroying strength—of death. Every string fell broken quivering and useless at her violent and unnatural touch.

She was dead.

GIRLS, HELP FATHER.

"My hands are so cold I can hardly hold a pen," said Farmer Wilber as he sat down to "figure out" some accounts that were getting behind hand.

"Can I help you, father?" said Lucy, laying down her bright crocheted work. "I shall be glad to do so if you will only explain what you want."

"Well, I shouldn't wonder if you can, Lucy," he said, reflectively. "Pretty good at figures, are you?"

"I would be ashamed if I did not know something of them after going twice through the arithmetic," said Lucy, laughing.

"Well, I can show you in five minutes what I have to do, and it'll be a wonderful help if you can do it for me. I never was a master hand at accounts in my best days, and it does not grow any easier since I have put on spectacles."

Very patiently did the helpful daughter plod through the long lines of figures, leaving the gay worsted to lie idle all the evening, though she was in such haste to finish her scarf. It was reward enough to see her tired father, who had been toiling all day for herself and the other dear ones sitting so cozily in his easy chair enjoying his weekly paper.

The clock struck nine before her task was done, but the hearty "thank you daughter, a thousand times!" took away all sense of weariness that Lucy might have felt.

"It's rather looking up when a man can have a clerk," said the father. "It's not every farmer that can afford it."

"Not every farmer's daughter is capable of making one," said the mother, with a little pardonable maternal pride.

"Not every one that will be willing if able," said Mr. Wilbur, which last was a sad truth. How many daughters might be of use to their fathers in this and many other ways who never think of lightening a care or labor! If asked to perform some little service it is done at best with a reluctant step and unwilling air that robs it of all sunshine or claim of gratitude.

Girls, help your father. Give him a cheerful home to rest in when evening comes, and do not worry his life by fretting because he cannot afford you all the luxuries you covet. Children exert as great influence on their parents as parents on their children.—*Young Reader.*

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