

# A LEMON TREE.

WRITTEN FOR THE DISPATCH BY "QUIDA."

"But put it out of your head, out of your head, little one!" he said. "Even if the boy should keep of the same mind, never would Lillo consent."

"Cecco will keep in the same mind," said Lizina, with the serene, undoubting certainty of childhood, and she broke off a little twig of the lemon tree with a bud upon it and three leaves, and gave it to Cecco that evening in the dusk as they sat again upon the river wall.

It was all she had to give, except her little waking heart. The next day he went away along the dusty high-road in his father's cart to begin his new life. He sobbed as if his heart would break, and fastened in his shirt the lemon shoot.

"To break off a bud. Oh, Lizina," cried her father in reproach and reproach. A bud meant a fruit, and a fruit meant a half-penny, perhaps a penny.

"It is only one," said the child, "and I have nothing else."

Lizina did not speak of him, nor did she seem to fret in any way. Her little voice rang in clear carol over the green river water as she sat on the wall whilst her father worked below, and she ate her dry bread with healthy and happy appetite.

"She is only a baby. She has forgotten the boy already," thought her father, half disappointed, half-relieved, whilst he broke up the earth about the roots of the lemon trees, and counted the little pointed fruits coming out on it, green as malachite, and promising a fair crop.

No letters could arrive to stimulate her memory, for Cecco could scarcely scrawl his name, and Lizina could not read her A, B, C. Absence to the poor is a complete rupture, an absolute blank, over which the intelligence can throw no bridge.

Fringuello worked early and late, worked like a willing mule, and lost no chance of doing anything, however hard, which could bring in a centime, and he was so tired when night fell that he could do little except swallow his bread soup and fling himself down on his bed of dry leaves thrust into an old sack. So that as long as Lizina's voice was heard in song, and her little bare feet ran busily to and fro, he noticed nothing else, and was content, believing all was with her.

The winter which followed on Cecco's departure to his military service was of unusual rigour for the vale of Arno; the waters were stormy and dark and the fields were frozen and brown, and snow lay on the long lines of the mountains from their summit to their base. But the lemon tree flourished before its narrow window, and Lizina was well and gay in the cold little brook-floored, plaster-walled, unceiled garret; and her father asked nothing more of Fate, and went out to his work in the bitter coldness and darkness of the morning dawns with an empty stomach, but a warm heart, leaving her sleeping, easily and dreamlessly, curled up like a little dormouse in her corner of the room.

The winter passed and the spring came, making all the orchard lands once more become seas of white flowers, and setting the chaffinches and linnets and nightingales to work at their nests amongst the lovely labyrinth of bursting blossoms; and one sunny afternoon toward the close of April, the village priest, coming along the road by the river, saw Fringuello, who was backing his sand-cart into the bed of the now shallow stream, and beckoned to him. The priest had an open letter in his hand, and his plump, smooth, olive face was sad.

"Dario," he said gravely, "I have some terrible news in this paper. Little's son Cecco is dead. I have to go and tell the family. The authorities have written to me."

He stopped suddenly, surprised by the effect the news had on his hearer.

"Saints protect us, how you look!" he

cried. "One would think you were the lad's father!"

"Is it sure? Is it true?" stammered Fringuello.

"Aye, aye, it is true and sure enough. The authorities write to me," answered the vicar with some pride. "For lad! Poor, good, pretty lad! They sent him to the Maremma marshes, and the ague and fever got on him, and he died in the fort a week ago. And only to think that this time last year he was bringing me armfuls of blooming cherry boughs for the altar at Easter Day. And now dead and buried! Good lack! Far away from all his friends, poor lad! The decrees of heaven are inscrutable, but it is, of course, for the best."

He crossed himself and went on his way. Fringuello doffed his cap mechanically, and crossed himself also, and rested against the shaft of his cart with his face leaning on his hands. His hope was struck down into nothingness; the future no longer had a smile. Though he had told himself and them that children were fickle and unstable, and that nothing was less likely than that the lad would come back in the same mind, he had nevertheless clung to and cherished the idea of such a fate for his little daughter with a tenacity of which he had been unconscious until his air castle was scattered to the winds by the words of the priest. The boy was dead; and never would Lizina go to dwell in peace and plenty at the old farm house by the great pine.

"It was too good to be. Patience," he said to himself with a groan as he lifted his head and bade the mule between the shafts move onward. His job had to be done; his load had to be carried; he had no leisure to sit down alone with his regret. "And it is worse for Lillo than it is for me," he said to himself, with an unselfish thought for the lad's father. He looked up at the little window of his own attic, which he could see afar off; the lemon tree was visible, and besides it the little brown head of Lizina as she sat sewing.

"Perhaps she will not care; I hope she will not care," he thought.

He longed to go and tell her himself lest she should hear it from some gossip, but he could not leave his work. Yet, he could not bear the child to learn it first from the careless chattering of neighboring gossips.

When he had discharged the load he carried he fastened the mule to a post by the water side, and said to a fellow carter: "Will you watch him a moment whilst I run home?" and, on the man's assenting, he flew with lightning speed along the road and up the staircase of his house. Lizina dropped her sewing in amazement as he burst into the room and stood on the threshold with a look which frightened her.

She ran to him quickly.

"Babbo! Babbo! What is the matter?" she cried to him.

Then, before he could answer, she said timidly, under her breath, "Is anything wrong—with Cecco?"

Then Fringuello turned his head away and wept aloud.

He had hoped the child had forgotten. He knew now that she had remembered only too well. All through the year which had gone by since the departure of the youth she had been as happy as a field-mouse undisturbed in the wheat. The grain was not ripe yet for her, but she was sure that it would be, and that her harvest would be plentiful. She had always been sure, quite sure, that Cecco would come back; and now, in an instant, she understood that he was dead.

Lizina said little then or at any time; but the little gay life of her changed, grew dull, seemed to shrink into itself and wither up as a flower will when a worm is at its root. She had been so sure that Cecco would return.

"She is so young; soon it will not matter to her," her father told himself; but the months went by and the seasons, and she

did not recover her bloom, her mirth, her elasticity; her small face was always grave and pale. She went about her work in the same way, and was docile, and industrious, and uncomplaining, but something was wrong with her. She did not laugh, she did not sing, she seldom even spoke unless she was spoken to first. He tried to persuade himself that there was no change in her; but he knew that he tried to feed himself on falsehood. He might as well have thought his lemon tree unaltered if he had found it withered up by fire.

Once she said to him: "Could one walk there?"

"Where, dear? Where?"

"Where they have put Cecco," she answered, knowing nothing of distance or measurements or the meaning of travel and change of place. She had never been farther than across the ferry to the other bank of the river.

He threw up his hands in despair.

"Lord! my treasure! why it is miles and miles and miles away! I don't know right or wrong, but somewhere the sun goes down."

And her idea of walking thither seemed to him so stupifying, so amazing, so incredible, that he stared at her timorously, afraid that her brain was going wrong. He had never gone anywhere in all his life.

"Ask how one can get there," she persisted, and would her arm about his throat, and laid her cheek against his in her old caressing way.

"You are mad, little one; quite mad!" said Fringuello, against and against; and he begged the priest to come and see her.

The priest did come, but said sorrowfully to him: "Were I you I would take her down to one of the hospitals in the town; she is ill."

He did so. He had been in town but a few times in his whole life; she never. It was now winter weather; the roads were wet, the winds were cold; the child coughed as she walked, and shivered in her scanty and too thin clothes. The wise men at the hospital looked at her hastily among a crowd of sick people, and said some unkind things, and scrawled something on a piece of paper—a medicine, as it proved—which cost to buy more than a day of a sand carter's wages.

"Has she really any illness?" he asked, with wild imploring eyes, of the chemist who made up the medicine.

"Oh, no; a mere nothing," said the man in answer; but thought as he spoke: "The doctors might spare the poor devil a money. When the blood is all water like that, there is nothing to be done, the life just goes out like a wind-blown candle. Get her good wine, butcher's meat, plenty of nourishing food," he added, reflecting that while there is youth there is hope.

The father groaned aloud as he laid down the coins which were the price of the medicine. Wine! Meat! Nourishment! They might as well have bidden him feed her on powdered pearls and melted gold. They got home that day footsore and wet through; he made a little fire of boughs and vine branches, and for the first time, ever since it had been planted, he forgot to look at the lemon tree.

"You are not ill, my Lizina!" he said eagerly; "the chemist told me it was nothing."

"Oh, no, it is nothing," said the child, and she spoke cheerfully, and tried to control the cough which shook her from head to foot.

Tears rolled down her father's cheeks and fell onto the smoldering hearth which he had set alight. Wine! Meat! Nourishment!—the three vain words rang through his head all night. They might as well have bidden him set her on a golden throne, and call the stars down from their spheres to circle round her.

"My poor little baby!" he thought; "never did she have a finger ache, or a winter chill, or a hurtful discomf, or a moment's pain in mind or body until now."

"Oh, my pretty, what should we do, you and I, in a strange place!" moaned Fringuello, weeping with fear at the thought of change and with grief at the worn, fevered face lifted up to his. "Never have I stirred from here since I was born, nor you. To

move to and fro—that is for well-to-do folks, not for us; and when you are ill, my poor little one, that you can scarcely stand on your feet, if you were to die on the way—"

"I shall not die on the way," said the child firmly.

"But I know nothing of the way," he cried, wildly and piteously. "Never was I in one of those strings of fire-led wagons, nor was ever any one of my people that ever I heard tell of; how should we ever reach the place," she said, with that quiet persistency which was so new in her.

"I know," said Lizina, and she took a crumpled scrap of paper out of the breast of her worn and frayed cotton frock. It bore the name of the seashore town where Cecco had died. She had got the priest to write it down for her. "If we show this all along as we go people will put us right until we reach the place," she said, with that quiet persistency which was so new in her.

Lizina, in the double cruelty of her childhood and of her ill health, was merciless to her father, and to the tree which had been her companion so long. She was possessed by the egotism of sorrow. She was a little thing, now entebled and broken by long nights without sleep and long days without food, and her heart was set on this one idea, which she did not reveal—that she would die down there and then they would put her in the same ground with him. This was her idea.

In the night she got up noiselessly, whilst her father was for awhile sunk in the deep sleep which comes after hard manual toil, and came up to the lemon tree and laid her cheek against its earthy base. "I am sorry to send you away, dear," she said to it; "but there is no other way to go to him."

Her father hid his face in his hands; he felt helpless before her stronger will. She would force him to do what she desired; he knew and he trembled, for he had neither knowledge nor means to make such a journey as this would be, to the marsh lands in the west, where Cecco lay.

"And the tree, the tree," he muttered. He had seen the tree so long by that little square window; it was part of his life and of her.

The thought of its sale terrified him as if he were going to sell some human friend into bondage.

"There is no other way," said Lizina, sadly. "She, too, was loath to sell the tree; but they had nothing else to sell, and the intense selfishness of a fixed idea possessed her to the exclusion of all other feeling."

He had to go, and a little froth of blood came to her lips.

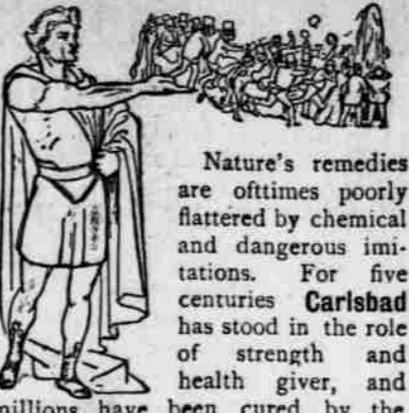
She felt as if it must understand and must feel wounded. Then she broke off a little branch—a small one with a few flowers on it. "That is for him," she said to it; and she stood there stupidly with the moonlight pouring in on her and the lemon tree through the little square hole of the window. When she got back to her bed she was chilled to the bone, and she stifled the rough sacking of her coverlet between her teeth, to stop the coughing which might wake her father. She had put the little branches of her lemon tree into the broken pitcher which stood by her at night to slake her thirst.

"Sell it, Babba, quick, quick," she said in the morning. She was afraid her strength would not last for the journey, but she did not say so. She tried to seem cheerful—he thought her better.

But she was so young, and had been always so strong, he thought, this would pass before long; and she would be herself again—brisk, brown, agile, mirthful, singing at the top of her voice as she ran through the lines of cherry trees. He denied himself everything to get her food, and left himself scarce enough to keep the spark of life in him. He sold even his one better suit of clothes and his one pair of boots; but she had no appetite, and, perceiving his sacrifice, took it so piteously to heart that it made her worse.

[To be continued to-morrow.]

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