

THE ITALIAN'S DAUGHTER. A True Story of the English Poor

Dinah Maria Craik

THE ITALIAN'S DAUGHTER. A True Story of the English Poor.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|---|
| <u>THE ITALIAN'S DAUGHTER. A True Story of the English Poor</u> | 1 |
| <u>Dinah Maria Craik</u> | 1 |

THE ITALIAN'S DAUGHTER. A True Story of the English Poor.

Dinah Maria Craik

This page copyright © 2002 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

IN one of the midland counties of England there is a district, the name of which we shall not give, but merely allude to its characteristics. It has risen up within the last century, until, from a few clusters of poor cottages, the seat of a manufacture of trifling importance, it has become one of the wealthiest, most populous, and most intelligent communities within the three kingdoms. The five or six small hamlets have grown into towns, whose boundaries meeting, have all merged into one mass of habitations; so that, but for the diversity of name which each portion still preserves, it might be considered as one large city of manufactures, such as Manchester or Birmingham. But like most newly-risen places, this region still presents an anomalous mixture of town and country; for instance, between two colonies where the manufacture is carried on, a few green meadows yet unbuilt upon, will intervene; and the tall chimney of "the works" sometimes casts its smoke upon a puny corn-field or a blackberry hedge. Alternately the eye views green wooded undulations and hills covered with red brick houses, as if town and country were struggling together for the mastery. But as soon as the habitations are left behind, the ruralities of the place triumph, and the naturally beautiful face of the country is seen in all its luxuriousness.

On a little hill up which the road winds, just without the town, was perhaps is a row of cottages inhabited by working people. But with one only have we to do. Its inmates sat or lolled outside the door, enjoying the cool summer evening. They were a mother and some half-dozen children, of all sizes and ages. Mrs. Sutton was a comfortable-looking, middle-aged woman, clad with tolerable neatness. Whether she had ever been pretty, was a matter entirely traditional: probably she had, for the neighbourhood to which she belonged is remarkable for the good looks of its damsels; but the wear and tear of eight-and-thirty years had entirely obliterated Mrs. Sutton's beauty, if she ever had any. She stood tossing her youngest hope, a baby of three months old, and watching the two others playing at marbles. They were sturdy boys, save that their faces had the paleness which was the result of their occupation; a circumstance which never fails to strike a visitant to this region, where the workpeople all acquire the same pallid hue. Yet it is not unhealthy; and it gives the young girls a delicate complexion, which, though fleeting, is still very attractive while it lasts. Mrs. Sutton's little maidens were an evidence of this fact: two fairer blossoms never grew up in a poor man's home than did the twins, Edna and Keziah.

And here to account for such extraordinary appellations we must premise that Scripture names of the most out-of-the-way character are at a premium in the neighbourhood of which we write the boys being all Enochs, Calebs, or Obadiahs; the girls all Miriams, Jemimas, or Naomis, with a sprinkling of such ultra-romantic cognomens as Thyrsa, Zillah, or Rosanna. One cannot but observe how these things mark the character of the early inhabitants of a region which was once the stronghold of Wesley and Whitfield; how, whether or no the descendants of these saintly-named children have kept up their progenitors' Christian zeal, they have certainly kept up their Christian names.

But we are wandering from Mrs. Sutton. She, good soul, was wandering too, at least her eyes were, for she was watching up the hill a couple who seemed both weary and waysore; a young woman, and a man who might have been any age from twenty to forty, for he had the hard sallow features which never show the progress of time. Still less would years be marked on his low and ungainly figure, which was stunted and slightly deformed a

THE ITALIAN'S DAUGHTER. A True Story of the English Poor.

strong contrast to the tall and upright form of his companion. This ill-matched pair came near Mrs. Sutton's door, and then the man, after whispering to his fellow-traveller, addressed the good dame in broken English, which she could not understand. She looked inquiringly at the woman.

"My husband" Mrs. Sutton could not help a slight start, and glance of surprise at the man, as the young creature said this "my husband means that we are very tired, and would be glad of a lodging for the night, if you can give us one, or direct us elsewhere. We can pay you," she added, with a half smile, seeing the doubtful expression of Mrs. Sutton's face. But to do the latter justice, we must say that it was caused as much by her surprise at hearing the young wife speak in the good vernacular tongue, mingled with a natural feminine curiosity to know the reason that any Englishwoman could marry such a man.

Perhaps this latter quality, added to her good-nature, made her assent to their request.

"You can sit down and rest," she said, "and I'll get you some supper; but I can't promise more till my 'master' comes home" **master** being the S shire equivalent for husband; and, alas! sometimes the title is only too true. But in this case it was a mere form of speech, as every one knew that Mrs. Sutton was both master and mistress herself in her own house.

So the two wanderers sat down, and soon the cottage-hearth was blazing with a friendly brightness which is at the will of the poorest labourer in this plentiful land of coal. Oh, there are no such fires out of S shire! The foreigner bent over his supper in hungry taciturnity, occasionally darting glances from his large, bright, black eyes, that seemed the more piercing from the bushy eyebrows under which they gleamed, and, in conjunction with the long, matted hair and the yellow skin, made Mrs. Sutton feel rather uncomfortable. She hated foreigners; but her motherly and womanly sympathy was excited by the weary and sickly look of the young wife, who had all an Englishwoman's claims to compassion; and Mrs. Sutton inly resolved that, whatever her "master" said, these strange wayfarers should remain for a night's shelter under her roof.

They did remain, and before noon on the following day, Pietro Ponti that was his name, he said had so ingratiated himself with the children, as to win a few kindly opinions from the mother herself; while his gentle wife was liked so much, that Mrs. Sutton almost felt it a relief when, after paying for their lodging, they requested to occupy it for another day or so.

"She is such a mild, soft-spoken young creature," was Mrs. Sutton's confidential observation to her husband John, after the first day passed with their inmates "she seems almost a lady. I wonder what on earth could have made her marry that ugly little fellow!"

And probably the good dame's curiosity would have led her on to direct questionings instead of vague wonderment, had she not been withheld by a certain reserve and refinement which marked the young woman's deportment, and caused the mechanic's wife to treat her with unconscious deference. Yet she was not proud, for she always helped Mrs. Sutton in her domestic duties without any reluctance or awkwardness.

At last Pietro spoke of proceeding onwards; and then the anxious looks of his wife loosened Mrs. Sutton's tongue. She boldly asked whither they intended going.

"I I hardly know," said the wife, timidly. Ponti, in his broken English, explained that he was an Italian, who gained his living by catching bullfinches and larks, and teaching them to sing, in the hope of meeting purchasers.

"A pretty way of making a fortune!" thought Mrs. Sutton; and then she said, "Well, master, if such is your trade, you may as well follow it here as anywhere: you will find plenty of birds in the fields hereabouts; and as your wife seems comfortable, why, suppose you were to stay with us a little longer?"

THE ITALIAN'S DAUGHTER. A True Story of the English Poor.

This proposal caused a consultation between the husband and wife, if a consultation it could be called, where Pietro had all the talk to himself, and his helpmate meekly acquiesced. It ended in an assent to the offer, and the Italian and his wife were fairly established in the Sutton family.

"I am really glad you are not going, Mrs. Ponti," was the hearty exclamation of the kindly hostess to her young friend the first time they happened to be alone. "I wonder your husband could think of dragging you up and down the country."

"He never thought about it, I believe," was the deprecating reply. "But," added the wife, while her cheek flushed and her head drooped, "I am glad to stay here for the present. I would not like going among strangers now."

"Ah, no, no, poor girl!" quickly answered Mrs. Sutton: "but have you no mother to be with you?" She repented of her words ere they were well uttered; for the girl burst into a fit of weeping so violent, that all the consolatory endearments that women of all classes instinctively use to one another in time of affliction were employed by Mrs. Sutton in vain. At last the wife of the Italian grew calmer, and said without tears, though in accent of the deepest sorrow, "I have no relatives, no friends in the wide world, except my husband."

"Poor thing poor thing! But you know, my dear, a good husband is something, and he seems very fond of you." Mrs. Sutton tried hard to say this, as if she really believed the fact.

"Yes yes, Pietro is very kind," answered the young woman, faintly smiling. "I thought so, or I would not have married him. Shall I tell you how it was?"

Now this was the climax of all Mrs. Sutton's wishes; but she had self-denial enough to say, "Not if it troubles you, Mrs. Ponti."

"I wish you would call me Anne," said the girl, taking her hand: "you are the first woman who has seemed to love me since my mother died." And here she began to weep afresh, but soon recovered herself so as to tell her story: how that she came from York; that she was an only child, and fatherless, and had been left utterly friendless and helpless on her mother's death.

"It was during her illness," Anne continued, "that Pietro Ponti, who lived in the same house, showed us much kindness. He was so much older than I, he treated me as a father would a child, and helped me out of all my troubles. When I was quite broken-hearted, I heard that he was going away on his usual rounds, and I went to him to ask his advice as to how I could support myself. My poor mother had been a dressmaker; but I was too young to take her business, for I was only seventeen. I felt that I must starve or beg, for I had no money. Then Pietro talked to me quietly and seriously, and told me that there was but one way in which he could maintain me, and save me from poverty if I would marry him. He said this doubtingly, almost afraid that I would be angry; but I was not, for I saw tears in his eyes when he spoke of my youth and beauty being thrown away on a poor deformed creature like himself. I knew it was all his kindness; and I told him how grateful I was, and that, if he would let me think of it for a week, I would see if I could not make up my mind to be his wife. Pietro asked me if I had any other lover any one I preferred to him? But I said no; there was no one who seemed to me so good and kind as he. And so, at the end of the week, I married him; and he has ever been a good husband to me. I fear I hardly love him as he deserves; but indeed I try; and I do obey him in all things."

To this long story Mrs. Sutton had listened without a word. As Anne ended, the good woman pressed her hand, bade "God bless her!" in rather a husky voice, and muttering a hope that she would stay long with them, and be very happy, went about her household business. But all that day Mrs. Sutton's voice at times raised sharply enough sounded softer than usual; and when Pietro Ponti came into supper, the best portion of the meal, and the warmest corner of the fireplace, were kindly, though abruptly, bestowed on the little deformed Italian.

THE ITALIAN'S DAUGHTER. A True Story of the English Poor.

Two or three months passed, and Ponti and his wife became like members of the family. The bird-catcher pursued his trade successfully, being taken to the woodland haunts for miles round by the younger Suttons, with whom he was an especial favourite. They Anglicised his name into Peter, which appellation was soon given him by the whole family. And ten times better than even they liked Peter did they all love the pretty Anne, who seemed so young that she was almost a playmate for the children. But a continual pensiveness darkened her face, though not detracting from its mild beauty. Her husband was always kind, yet still there was a perpetual yearning a restless void in the girl's heart. How could it be otherwise? She never uttered a word of complaint, or even of sadness; but often, when she sat preparing for the little being that was soon to give her new ties of love, Anne would let the work fall from her hands, while her dark-blue eyes, so dreamy in their depths, were fixed on vacancy, as if looking wistfully into the dim future. Good, plain Mrs. Sutton, could not understand these fancies, and sometimes wished that Anne would think less and talk more it would be much better for her.

Birth and death came hand in hand together. The babe lived the mother died! Kind-hearted Mrs. Sutton closed the eyes of the poor young creature who had so twined round her honest heart. She had tended her with a mother's care until the last; when she saw how peaceful and beautiful the dead face looked, the good woman dried her tears.

"Poor thing! poor thing! She has nothing to trouble her now! Perhaps it is as well God knows best!"

And then Mrs. Sutton heard the wail of the little motherless babe, and for a time forgot the dead in her care over the living.

"Charley is six months old now," she said to her husband. "He is strong and healthy; I shall turn him away, and take this poor little creature, who wants the most."

So she nursed the babe, and became a mother to it in the stead of her who had now no need of the comfort of a child. Many a time, when the little one grew older, and began to laugh and crow in her arms, Mrs. Sutton would think of its dead mother; how Anne's heart would have leaped to feel the bliss of maternal love the tiny, twining fingers the kiss of the little soft lips. But then she would remember that a child's love is not all-sufficient, and that, perhaps, it was well for poor Anne that she lived no longer.

Whether the widower grieved much for the loss of his sweet young wife it was impossible to tell. The Italian was always of a reserved disposition; and when the first shock was over, he seemed to return to his old habits much as if nothing had happened. His taciturnity increased; and sometimes, after spending the day out in the fields, he came home, silently took his place in his own warm corner, and uttered not a syllable until it was time to go to rest. He rarely noticed his child, except that when Mrs. Sutton began to talk to him about the name of the babe, hinting that, as a matter of course, the little one should be christened Anne, Pietro shrank from her with an expression of acute pain, and at once said, "No: that the child should be called Ginevra."

"Jenny what?" cried Mrs. Sutton, aghast at this foreign appellation.

"Ginevra!" said the Italian, lingering on the melodious syllables as if it were a name long unuttered, but most dear, and saying it over and over again, coupled with the tender and musical diminutives of his own language. All this was incomprehensible to the worthy woman, and she tried again to protest against "so unchristian and heathenish a name." But the only answer she gained was the distinct repetition of the name, in a tone so firm that she saw it was useless to dispute the father's will. As a contest of words between herself and the foreigner would have been highly unprofitable to both, Mrs. Sutton wisely yielded her point, probably for the first time in her life. So the babe was christened Ginevra; but Mrs. Sutton, determined to make the baptismal name void, gave to her nursling the pet diminutive of Jenny; and Jenny she was called evermore by the household.

THE ITALIAN'S DAUGHTER. A True Story of the English Poor.

The child grew up as a younger sister in the family: no one seemed to look upon her in any other light. She learned to call her nurse "mother," and John Sutton "father;" while her own father was "Peter," as he was called by the rest of the children. Nor did the Italian seem to care for the abolition of these parental ties; he treated his own daughter just as he did the little Suttons, with neither more nor less regard than he had ever shown to them. Only he always called her Ginevra; sometimes adding to it sweet diminutives, but these seemed less meant for the child than recollections awakened by the name she bore.

In truth, as the little girl grew older, no one could have guessed her Italian descent. She was in all respects an English child, with her soft blue eyes and brown hair, like her mother's her true mother now so utterly forgotten, that her very existence was unknown to the child whose life had been her death. Once or twice, smitten in conscience, Mrs. Sutton tried to explain the truth to Jenny; but the mystery was too great for the little girl's mind. And besides, Mrs. Sutton loved her nursling so much, it was a pain to remember she was not her own child so at last she let the matter rest.

Time passed on; Jenny became of an age to go to school; and to school she was accordingly sent, with her foster brother Charley Pietro Ponti never interfering in the matter at all. Indeed, from the child's birth, he had seemed to give her up entirely to the Suttons. She was clothed and fed by the honest labourer with his own children; and not a murmur did worthy John Sutton and his equally worthy helpmate utter with regard to the little one thus quartered on them, and dependent on their bounty. In everything she was to them as their own. Oh, there are noble hearts in the dwellings of the English poor! and good deeds, of which the greatest philanthropist might be proud, are often concealed under thatched roofs, and highways, and hedges, unknown and unchronicled, except by the All-seeing.

When Jenny was ten years old, her father died. They found him one morning lying dead in his bed, in the little room where he slept, and where he taught his birds; rising up at daybreak, whistling and talking to them in his own tongue. The little birds were now warbling joyously, carolling in the sunshine over the pillow of the dead man. Poor Pietro! in life they had been his only companions, and they were the only witnesses of his death. The same kind hands which had laid his wife in her grave now laid her husband beside her; but there was little mourning for him. He had come a stranger, and remained a stranger to the last. For some time Pietro's trade had not prospered, and he had owed his very subsistence to the charity of those whose inmate he had been so long. Now, but for John Sutton, the Italian might have found a parish grave.

The only treasures left by Pietro Ponti were his birds, a silver crucifix, and a little Italian story-book, in which was written a name the name he had given his daughter Ginevra. It might have been his mother's, a sister's, perhaps some early memory still dearer; for the human heart is the same all over the world. But nothing more was ever known of the father of Ginevra Ponti. After a time, Mrs. Sutton explained to her adopted child as much of her history as she knew herself, and then, clasping Jenny in her arms, told her that she need think of it no more, for that she was henceforth her own daughter.

Two years or more passed away; the sons and daughters of Mrs. Sutton grew up: one girl married; two boys went away another turned out ill, and gave many a gnawing care to his parents. It was a hard time for trade, and anxieties came heavily upon John Sutton, yet he never complained of the additional burden which he had in his adopted child: the idea never crossed his mind, nor his wife's either. They seemed to think that Jenny was always to live with them; to send her away would be like parting with their own. That any one should claim her was equally improbable; but strange things happen sometimes.

One day a visitor, who appeared not exactly a lady, though she was very well dressed, came to inquire for Mrs. Sutton.

"I wanted to speak to you," she said abruptly. "My name is Dalton. Miss Dalton." Mrs. Sutton started. "You seem to know the name!"

THE ITALIAN'S DAUGHTER. A True Story of the English Poor.

"I have heard it before," answered Mrs. Sutton, briefly and rather grimly, being struck with a presentiment which was either pleasure or dread she knew not which.

"I don't belong to these parts," continued Miss Dalton, in a tone that, if not exactly refined, sounded honest and straightforward; "but in crossing that churchyard, I saw a stone with the name of Anne Meredith Ponti. Now, I have been long looking for my brother's child, of whom I only know that her name was Anne Meredith Dalton, and that she married a wandering Italian called Ponti. The sexton sent me to you for information."

Though incensed at the imperative tone of her visitor, Mrs. Sutton honestly related all she knew.

"It must have been my niece," said Miss Dalton, musingly. Mrs. Sutton began to speak of poor Anne what she was like in person; but the latter stopped her quickly "You need not describe her, as I never saw her; but let me look at the child."

Jenny came, was much admired, and at last acknowledged in favour of her mouth and chin, which were, the lady avouched, exactly those of a Dalton. She at once declared her intention of talking away her niece, to educate and adopt.

Mrs. Sutton was perfectly overwhelmed! To part with Jenny, her darling Jenny, was a thing dreadful even to imagine. She burst into tears, snatched the child to her bosom, and ran away with her out of the house.

But with calm reflection came a dread of the injury she might be doing to Jenny's interests in thus keeping her to share the poverty which was coming darkly on, when she might be made a lady of by one to whom she was bound by ties of kindred. The simple-hearted but upright woman thought of all this, until she was well-nigh bewildered; and then she had to convince her husband, too. But Mary Sutton was a woman who, through prejudice and ignorance, possessed that rare faculty of seeing **the right**, and of acting up to what she saw. The end was, that within a week the adopted parents of the little Jenny consented to Miss Dalton's proposition.

"If she should come to any harm," cried the poor woman, folding her darling to her heart in the agony of a parting which Jenny could hardly comprehend "if you do not teach her what is right, and be kind to her, I shall never forgive myself."

Miss Dalton promised, with an earnestness and sincerity which was proved by her moistened eyes and softened voice, that she would try to be as good a mother to the orphan as the excellent woman who had nurtured Jenny for so many years. Then she took the child away; and Jenny's sweet face was seen no more among those of her adopted brothers and sisters. From the far distant home to which she was taken came her childish letters, every line of which was wept over, though with some self-reproach, since Jenny said she was "so happy!" But year by year they grew less frequent; and at last altogether ceased. A neighbour once passing through the town, tried to get a sight of her, but failed; and though the circumstance brought a few tears to Mrs. Sutton's eyes, and a pain to her heart, at the thought of her darling having forgotten her, still the regret soon passed away. The poor have no time for much sentiment, and Mrs. Sutton was engrossed by her own thickly-gathering cares.

It is all very well for political economists and theoretical philanthropists to talk about the wisdom of laying up for old age, and providing against the evil day; but for a labouring man, whose weekly earnings only suffice to provide weekly food for the many little mouths that must be filled, the matter is extremely difficult. Many and many an honest man, who has brought up a large family, which has not required his care, is thrown upon parish charity in his old age. It was not quite so bad as this with John Sutton; but still, when all their young nestlings were fledged, and had gone out into the wide world some for good, and some for evil the parents were left, aged, solitary, and poor.

THE ITALIAN'S DAUGHTER. A True Story of the English Poor.

"Ah, if Keziah had but stayed!" lamented the poor old mother, while the prettiest of the twins stole away one fine morning, and secretly married a worthless young man, leaving her parents deprived of the few comforts which her earnings, as the last of the flock, had brought them.

"Children always turn out so," angrily said John Sutton. "and we that were fools enough to bring up another body's child, too; much good **she** has been, either."

"Don't say that, John," answered Mrs. Sutton, and her voice was gentler than it had once been: trouble is a great softener sometimes. "I will never believe it was poor Jenny's fault; and anyhow, we did what was right, and that ought to be comfort to us."

It was years since the name of the Italian's daughter had been mentioned by the Suttons. The wounded feelings of the old man had brought up the subject now, and his wife could not drive it from her mind. Her own daughter's unkindness made her think of the little gentle creature whom she had loved so much, and who had ever been willing and dutiful, far more so than her own wild troop of children. As the old woman knelt before her hearth, kneading the dough for the one loaf which was sufficient now for their weekly need, her thoughts went back twenty years, wandering, by a natural train of ideas, to the pile of bread she had used to bake when the cottage was filled with merry children, now scattered far and wide. In fancy, she saw little Jenny standing by her side, burying her round, rosy arms in the dough, as she was so fond of doing and the good woman stopped to wipe her eyes, which these old memories made dim.

"Poor Jenny, if she could but come back, and be as she used to be. But that's quite impossible," thought Mrs. Sutton with a heavy sigh.

Life is more full of strange coincidences than we are aware. How often, on meeting unexpectedly some dear, long-lost friend, do we remember that our thoughts had, only the day before, with a curious wilfulness, persisted in bringing up the very face we were so soon to see, and we laugh, and say, "What an odd chance it was!" As if there were such a thing as chance in this world!

Little did Mrs. Sutton think, as she got the tea ready, that when she and her good man went to rest that night it would be with the happy knowledge that the dear lost Jenny was once more sleeping under their roof. But so it was.

While they sat at their homely meal the latch was lifted, a young girl's face appeared, and a sweet voice said, "May I come in, **mother**?"

"**Mother!**" Who could it be? Alas, not the erring Keziah; nor yet the other twin, Edna her home was beyond the Atlantic. It was the child of their adoption, the long lost Jenny.

What a tea-drinking that was! The old couple forgot all their cares in the delight of welcoming her. They were never weary of looking at and admiring Jenny, now grown a tall and graceful woman, like what her mother had been. But the sadness that had darkened the face of poor Anne was not found in her daughter's.

After the first delight was passed, Mrs. Sutton said mournfully, "But we shall not have you long, Jenny: you are a rich lady now, I suppose?"

Jenny put her arm round the neck of her old nurse, and whispered, merrily, "Dear mother, I am not a lady; and I am as poor as Job: and I will never go away from you again, if you will let me stay."

And then she told at length, what we must relate in a few words, how her aunt, who was a prosperous dress-maker in a large city, as Jenny grew a woman, had made her cease all communication with the Suttons.

THE ITALIAN'S DAUGHTER. A True Story of the English Poor.

They were "not respectable enough." It was only the accident of the neighbour's inquiring for her that brought to Jenny any news of them or their troubles.

"Then," said the young girl, deeply blushing, "I thought how wicked and ungrateful I must seem to you; and I asked my aunt to let me come and see you, but she refused. I could not rest; I was very miserable. But she fell ill, and I thought it would be wrong to leave her so I tended her six months, until she died."

"And what became of the business?" asked Mrs. Sutton, who had not lost her prudence, especially for those she loved. "She promised me to provide for you, Jenny. How comes it you're 'as poor as Job?'"

Jenny hung her head. "She told me I should have all she had if I would never come near you again. So" added the girl simply, clinging fondly to her adopted parents "she left her money and the business to some one else, and I have got to earn my living. Never mind I am a capital dress-maker. I'll make a fortune, now I am come back to you."

"And how did you come all alone, poor child?"

"I walked almost all the way, for I had hardly any money. Oh, mother, don't cry I am so happy! You shall never want a child, nor I a mother, any more!" Nor did they one or other of them. Jenny worked skilfully at the dress-making; and though she never "made a fortune," she kept the aged pair in plenty till they died. It was none of their own children, but the adopted one, who closed their eyes.

And, as afterwards it came to pass that Jenny, like many another of the good women nay, the best women of this world never married, she, in her turn, adopted a desolate baby Keziah's orphan child. Thus the blessing of a good deed came down even to the third generation.