PEREAT ROCHUS

ANTONIO FOGAZZARO

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BY

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I.

"It is a fine case, Don Rocco," said Professor Marin, gathering up the cards and smiling beatifically, while his neighbor on the right raved furiously against poor Don Rocco. The professor continued to look at him with a little laugh on his closed mouth, and with a glance sparkling with benevolent hilarity; then he turned to the lady of the house, who was napping in a corner of the sofa.

"It is a fine case, Countess Carlotta!"

"I understand that well enough," said she, "and it seems to me time to end it; isn't that so, Don Rocco?"

"No, Don Rocco," said the professor seriously, "on reflection it certainly is a case for the ecclesiastical court."

"I should say it was at least that," said his neighbor on the right.

Don Rocco, red as a poppy, with his two fingers in his snuff−box, kept silence, his head bent forward and his brows knit in a certain contrite way peculiar to him, facing the tempest with his bald spot, and looking slyly between one wink and another at the unfortunate cards. When he heard the words "ecclesiastical court" repeated by his companion, whom he held in considerable fear, it seemed to him that matters were becoming quite amusing, so he forced a little smile and took a pinch of snuff between his fingers.

"Oh, you laugh!" returned the implacable professor. "I hardly know whether, having played at terziglio and having brought such ill luck on your partner, you can say Mass in peace to−morrow morning."

"Oh! I can, I can," muttered Don Rocco, knitting his brows still more and raising a little his good−natured countryman's face. "We all make mistakes, all of us. Even he, over there, not to mention yourself, sometimes."

His voice had the tone of a peaceful animal badgered beyond all patience. The professor was laughing with his eyes. "You are quite right," said he.

The game was over, the players got up.

"Yes," said the professor with quizzical seriousness, "the case of Sigismondo is more complicated."

Don Rocco closed his beady little eyes in a smile, bending his head with a peculiar mixture of modesty, complacency, and confusion, and mumbled:

"Even that case can be unravelled."

"You see," added the professor, "I am well informed. It is a case, Countess, which Don Rocco must unravel at the next meeting of the ecclesiastical court."

"There is no such meeting going on here," said the countess. "Let it alone."

But it was not so easy to wrest a victim from the clutches of the professor.

"Let us then say no more about it," said he quietly. "But listen, Don Rocco; I am not of your opinion on that point. As for me, pereat mundus."

Don Rocco frowned furiously.

"I haven't spoken with any one," said he.

"Don Rocco, you have gossiped, and I know it," answered the professor. "Have patience, Countess, and give us your opinion."

Countess Carlotta did not care to enter upon the question, but the professor continued imperturbably to set forth the case of Sigismondo as it had been promulgated by the Episcopal tribunal.

A certain Sigismondo, fallen suddenly ill, asked for a confessor. Hardly was he alone with the priest when he hastened to tell him that some other person was on the point of committing a homicide, which he had himself instigated.

Hardly had he said these words when he lost voice and consciousness. The priest doubted whether Sigismondo had spoken in confession or not; and he could not prevent the crime, could not save this human life in peril, unless he made use of what he had heard in confidence. Should he do this or should he let a man be killed?"

"It is Don Rocco's opinion," concluded the professor, "that the priest should act as a policeman."

Poor Don Rocco, tortured in his conscience between the feeling that he ought not to discuss the question in a

secular conversation and a feeling of reverence for his bantering friend who was an ecclesiastic of mature age and a professor in the Episcopal seminary of P −, was twisting himself about and mumbling excuses.

"No...the fact is...I say...it seems to me..."

"I am surprised, Don Rocco, that you should think it worth while to make excuses," said the lady. "It amazes me that you should take seriously the jests of the professor."

But the professor protested, and with subtle questions pushed Don Rocco to the wall and began to squeeze out of him, little by little, the peculiar combination of right instincts and crooked arguments which he had in his head, showing him with the greatest charm of manner the fallacy of all his bad reasons and of all his good sense, and leaving him in a stupor of contrite humility. But the game lasted only a short while, because the countess dismissed the company with the excuse that it was after eleven o'clock. However, she asked Don Rocco to remain.

It was the Countess Carlotta who had chosen him, a few years before, as rector of the Church of St. Luke, which was her property. She took with him a sort of Episcopal air which was peacefully accepted by the thankful priest, as simple in spirit as he was humble−hearted.

"You would do better, my dear Don Rocco," said she when they were alone, "to bother yourself less with such affairs as that of Sigismondo, and a little more with your own."

"But why?" asked Don Rocco, surprised. "I do not know what you mean."

"Of course; the whole village knows it, but you are in complete ignorance."

Her eyes added quite clearly, "Poor simpleton." Don Rocco remained silent.

"When does Lucia return?" asked she. This Lucia was the servant of Don Rocco, to whom he had given permission to go home for five days.

"On Sunday," he answered. "To−morrow evening. Oh!" he suddenly exclaimed, smiling with satisfaction at his own keenness. "Now I understand, now I see what you mean. But it is not so, it is not so at all."

He had at last understood that it was a question of certain rumors current in the village on a love affair of his servant with a certain Moro, a bad specimen, well known at the police court, who combined craft with malevolence and strength in a most diabolical manner. Some believed that he was not entirely bad, but that necessity and the ill−treatment of an unjust master had led him to wrongdoing; but every one feared him.

"It is not true at all, is it?" answered she. "Then I don't know what the village will say when certain novelties will happen to the servant of the priest."

Don Rocco became red as fire and frowned most portentously.

"But it is not true at all," said he, brusquely and shortly. "I questioned her myself as soon as I heard the gossip. It is nothing but the maliciousness of people. Why, the man does not even see her!"

"Oh! Don Rocco," said the lady. "You are good, good, good. But as the world is not made that way, and as there is a scandal, if you don't make up your mind to send the creature away, I must decide on something myself."

"You will do what you like," answered the priest dryly. "Have I not got to consider what is right?"

The countess looked at him, and said, with a sudden solemnity, "Very well. You will reflect on this to−night, and to−morrow you will give me your final answer."

She rang the bell to have a lantern brought for Don Rocco, as the night was very dark. But, to her great surprise, Don Rocco carefully extracted one from the back pocket of his cloak.

"What made you do that?" exclaimed she. "You have probably got a spot on my chair!"

She got up, notwithstanding the assurances of Don Rocco, and taking one of the candles which still burned on the card table, she stooped down to look at the chair.

"There!" she said, "put your nose over that! It is spotted and ruined!"

Don Rocco came also, and, knitting his brows, bent down over a large spot of oil, a black island on the gray cloth, muttering most seriously, "Oh, yes!" and remaining absorbed in his gaze.

"Now, go!" said the lady. "What is done is done."

It seemed in fact, as if he were awaiting her permission to raise his nose from the repentant stool.

"Yes, I'll go now," he answered, lighting his lantern, "because I am alone at home at present, and I am even afraid that I left the door open."

Very suddenly he said "Good−night," and disappeared without even looking at the countess.

She was astonished. "Dear me, what a boor!" she said.

II.

It was a damp, cloudy night in November. Little Don Rocco was limping along towards his hermitage of St. Luke with awkward steps, his arms in parentheses, and his back arched, knitting his brows at the road−bed as he went along. He was ruminating over the dark words of Signora Carlotta, and their importance was gradually piercing his obtuse brain. He was also ruminating over the next assembly of the ecclesiastical court, over the pereat mundus and the subtle reasonings of the professor, of which he had understood so little; not to speak of the exposition of the Gospels for the next day, which he had not yet fully prepared. All this would often get inextricably confused in his mind. Certainly poor innocent Lucia must not be condemned, pereat mundus. Signora Carlotta was almost a padrona to him; but what about that other great padrone? Nemo potest duobus dominis servire; thus, beloved brethren, says the Gospel for the day.

Poor Don Rocco, as usual, had also lost at terziglio; and this gave a somewhat gray cast to his ideas, notwithstanding his proverbial carelessness of every mundane interest. That hole in his pocket, that continuous dropping, made him reflect. Would it not have been better for him to give the same amount in alms?

"There is this good thing about it," he thought, "that it is a terrible bore, and that they all badger me. I certainly do not play for pleasure."

He passed on the left of the road a dark clump of trees, ascending slowly in the darkness towards three large cypresses of unequal height, standing out black against the sky. There, between the old cypresses, stood the

little country church of St. Luke, attached to a small convent which had had no inmates for a hundred years. The little hillock garlanded with vines had no other structures. From the convent, and from the grassy knoll, on which stood the little cypress−overhung church, the main road could not be seen, but only other knolls gay with vineyards, villas, and country houses, islands on an immense plain, extending from the hills further away as far as the Alps and blending eastward in the mists of the invisible sea. The simple chaplain of Countess Carlotta lived alone in the convent, like a priest of silence, content with his meagre prebend, content to preach with might and main in the little church, to be called during the day to bless the beans, and at night to assist the dying, to cultivate the vine with his own hands; content with everything, in fine; even with his servant, an ugly old maid of about forty, at whose discretion he ate, drank, and dressed himself most resignedly, without exchanging more than a dozen words with her throughout the year.

"If I send her away," he said to himself, as he passed between the high hedges of the lane that led up from the main road to St. Luke, "it will damage and dishonor her. I cannot conscientiously do it, because I am sure that it isn't true. And with that Moro, of all men!"

The clock in the bell−tower struck eleven. Don Rocco began to think of his sermon, of which only three−quarters was written, and he rushed down from the church square to the door which led into his courtyard under the bell−tower at the end of a steep and stony lane. As he opened the gate and passed across the yard he was brought suddenly to a standstill. A faint light was shining from the windows of his sitting−room, the former refectory of the monks, on the lower floor.

Don Rocco had left at four o'clock to pay his visit to the Countess Carlotta, and had not returned in the meanwhile. He could not have left the lamps lighted. Therefore Lucia must have returned before the time she had set; that must certainly be the reason. He did not fatigue his brain by making any other suppositions, but entered.

"Is it you, Lucia?" he called. No answer. He passed through the vestibule, approached the kitchen, and stood motionless on the doorsill.

A man was sitting under the chimney−cap with his hands stretched out over the coals. He turned toward the priest and said, most unconcernedly:

"Don Rocco, your humble servant."

By the light of the smoky petroleum lamp which stood on the table, Don Rocco recognized the Moro. He was conscious of a feeling of weakness in his heart and in his legs. He did not move nor answer.

"Make yourself at home, Don Rocco," continued the Moro imperturbably, as if he were doing the honors of his own house. "You had better take a seat here also, for it is cold to−night and damp."

"Yes, it is cold," answered Don Rocco, infusing a forced benevolence into his tones; "it is damp."

And he put his lantern down on the table.

"Come here," said his companion. "Wait till I make you comfortable." He got a chair and placed it on the hearthstone near his own.

"There now," said he.

Meanwhile Don Rocco was getting his breath again, and carrying on, with a terrible knitting of his brows, most weighty reflections.

"Thanks," he answered, "I will go to put away my cloak and come back at once."

"Lay your cloak down here," replied the Moro, not without some haste and a new tone of imperiousness not at all pleasing to Don Rocco.

He silently placed his cloak and hat on the table and sat down under the chimney−cap beside his host.

"You will excuse me if I have made a little fire," he continued. "I have been here at least a half−hour. I thought you were at home studying. Isn't to−day Saturday? And are you not obliged to say to−morrow morning the few customary absurdities to the peasants?"

"You mean the exposition of the Gospel," answered Don Rocco with warmth, for on that ground he knew no fear.

"A hint is all you need!" said the Moro. "Excuse me, I am a peasant myself, and talk crudely, maybe, but respectfully. Will you give me a pinch of snuff?"

Don Rocco held out the snuff−box to him.

"Is this da trozi?" said he with a wink. This word, as well as the expression "by−paths tobacco," was used in speaking of the tobacco which was smuggled into the State.

"No," answered Don Rocco, rising. "Perhaps I have a little of that upstairs."

"Never mind, never mind," the Moro hastened to say. "Give here." And sticking three fingers into the snuff−box he took up about a pound of snuff and breathed it in little by little, as he gazed at the fire. The dying flame illumined his black beard, his earthy complexion, and his brilliant, intelligent eyes.

"Now that you are warmed," Don Rocco made bold to say after a moment's silence, "you may go home."

"Hum!" said the man, shrugging his shoulders. "I have a little business to transact before I leave."

Don Rocco squirmed in his chair, winking hard, and frowning heavily.

"I suggested it because it is so late," he mumbled, half churlishly, half timidly. "I also have something to do."

"The sermon, eh? the sermon, the sermon!" the Moro repeated mechanically, looking at the fire, and ruminating. "See here," he concluded, "suppose we do this. There are pens, paper, and inkstand in the sitting−room. Sit down there and write your stuff. Meanwhile, if you will allow me, I will take a mouthful, as it is sixteen hours since I have eaten. When we have finished we will talk."

At first Don Rocco was not disposed to agree, but he was as halting in his secular utterances as he was fiery in his sacred eloquence. He could only squirm and give out a few low, doubtful grunts; after which, as the other man kept silence, he got up from his chair with about as much difficulty as if he had been glued to it.

"I will go to find out," said he, "but I am afraid I shall find very little, the servant "

"Don't trouble yourself," interrupted the Moro. "Let me attend to it. You go and write." He left the hearth, lighted another lamp and carried it into the neighboring sitting−room, which had windows facing the south on the courtyard, while the kitchen windows were at the back of the old convent on the north side, where the cellar and the well were placed. Then he came back quickly, and under the eyes of the astonished priest took

down a key that was hanging in the darkest corner of the kitchen, opened a closet against the wall, put up his hand without hesitating and took down a cheese of goats' milk, the existence of which Don Rocco had not even suspected; he took bread from a cupboard, and a knife from a drawer in the table.

Now it happened for only the third or fourth time in the whole life of Don Rocco that the famous frown entirely disappeared for a few moments. Even the eyelids stopped winking.

"You look surprised, Don Rocco," said the Moro complacently, "because I am at home in your house. But just keep on writing. You will understand later. We must also keep the fire going," he added, when the priest, having slowly recovered from his amazement, passed into the sitting− room.

The Moro took the iron bellows, a sort of arquebuse barrel, turned one end toward the coals, and blew into the other in so unusual a way as to produce a strident whistle. Then he started on his supper.

What possessed him! At one moment he was devouring his food, at another he would raise his head and remain transfixed, while at another he would walk up and down the kitchen violently knocking the chairs and table. He seemed like an imprisoned wild beast which every now and then raises its fangs from the bone, listens and looks, seizes it again, leaves it, rushes around its cage in a rage and goes back to gnaw.

Meanwhile, Don Rocco was leaning over his paper, wondering still at what he had seen, unable in his unsuspiciousness to draw any inferences, listening to the steps and the noises in the next room with a torpid uneasiness that had about the same resemblance to fear as the intelligence of Don Rocco himself had to understanding. "'You will understand later,'" he repeated to himself. "What am I to understand? That he knows where the money is?" He kept it in a box in his bed− chamber, but there were only two ten−franc pieces, and Don Rocco reflected with satisfaction that the new wine was not yet sold, and that that money at least was safe from the clutches of the Moro.

It did not appear as if the latter threatened violence. "At the worst I should lose twenty francs," concluded Don Rocco, seeking refuge in his philosophical and Christian indifference to money. He mentally abandoned the twenty francs to their destiny and sought to concentrate his thoughts on the sacred text: Nemo potest duobus dominis servire. At the same moment he seemed to hear, between the hasty steps of the Moro, a heavy, dull thud from a greater distance, as of a door being broken open; then the bang of a chair knocked down in the kitchen; then still another distant noise. The Moro entered the sitting−room and violently closed the door behind him.

"Here I am, Don Rocco," said he. "Have you also finished?"

"Now is the time," thought the priest, who immediately forgot everything but the presence of this man.

"Not finished yet," he answered. "But I will finish after you have gone. What do you wish?"

The Moro took a seat opposite him and crossed his arms on the table.

"I am living a bad life, sir," said he. "The life of a dog and not of a man."

At this Don Rocco, although he had resigned himself to the worst, felt his heart expand. He answered severely, and with his eyes cast down: "You can change, my son, you can change."

"That's why I am here, Don Rocco," said the other. "I want to make confession. Now, at once," he added when he saw that the priest remained silent.

Don Rocco began to wink and to squirm somewhat.

"Very well," said he, still with his eyes cast down. "We can talk about it now, but the confession can come later. You can return for it to− morrow. It requires a little preparation. And it must be seen whether you have received proper instruction."

The Moro immediately fired off, with all placidity and sweetness, three or four sacrilegious oaths against God and the sacraments, as if he were reciting an Ave, and drew the conclusion that he knew as much about it as a member of the clergy.

"There, there, you see!" said Don Rocco, squirming more than ever. "You are beginning badly, my son. You want to confess, and you blaspheme!"

"Oh, you mustn't notice little things like that," answered the Moro. "I assure you that the Lord doesn't bother about it. It is a habit, so to speak, of the tongue, nothing more."

"Beastly habits, beastly habits," pronounced Don Rocco, frowning and looking into his handkerchief, which he held under his nose with both hands.

"In fine, I am going to confess," insisted the man. "Hush, now, don't say no! You will hear some stiff ones."

"Not now, really not now," protested Don Rocco, rising. "You are not prepared at present. We will now thank the Lord and the Virgin who have touched your heart, and then you will go home. To−morrow you will come to holy Mass, and after Mass we will meet together again."

"Very well," answered the Moro. "Go ahead."

Don Rocco got down on his knees near the lounge and, with his head turned, seemed to wait for the other to follow his example.

"Go ahead," said the Moro. "I have a bad knee and will say my prayers seated."

"Very well; sit here on the sofa, near me, where you will be more comfortable; accompany my words with your heart, and keep your eyes fixed on that crucifix in front of you. Come, like a good fellow, and we will pray the Lord and the Virgin to keep you in so good a state of mind that you may have the fortune to make a good confession. Come, like a good, devout fellow!"

Having said this, Don Rocco began to recite Paters and Aves, often devoutly raising his knitted brows. The Moro answered him from his seat on the sofa. He seemed to be the confessor and the priest the penitent.

Finally, Don Rocco crossed himself and got up.

"Now sit right here while I confess," said the Moro, as if there were nothing against it. But Don Rocco caught him up. Had they not already arranged that he should confess the next day? But the other would not listen with that ear, and continued hammering away at his request with obstinate placidity.

"Let us stop this," he said, all at once. "Pay attention, for I am beginning!"

"But I tell you that it is not possible and that I will not have it," replied Don Rocco. "Go home, I tell you! I am going to bed at once."

He started to leave; but the Moro was too quick for him, rushed to the door, locked it, and put the key in his pocket.

"No, sir! you don't go out of here! Might I not die to−night? Wouldn't I, if the Lord just blew on me like this?"

And he blew on the petroleum lamp and put it out.

"And if I go to hell," he continued in a sepulchral voice, in the dark, "you will go there too!"

The poor priest, at this unexpected violence, in the midst of this darkness, lost his presence of mind. He no longer knew where he was, and kept saying, "Let us go, let us go," trying to find the sofa, beating the air with his extended hands. The Moro lighted a match on his sleeve, and Don Rocco had a glimpse of the table, of the chairs, and of his strange penitent, before it became darker than ever.

"Could you see? Now I shall begin; with the biggest sin. It is fifteen years since I have been to confession, but my biggest sin is that I have made love to that ugly creature, your servant."

"Body of Bacchus!'" involuntarily exclaimed Don Rocco.

"If I am familiar with the kitchen," continued the Moro, "it is because I must have come here fifty times of an evening when you were not here, to eat and drink with Lucia. Perhaps you have even found that some few francs were missing..."

"I know nothing about it; no, I know nothing about it!" mumbled Don Rocco.

"Some of those few small bills in your box, first compartment to the left at the bottom."

Don Rocco gave forth a low exclamation of surprise and pain.

"Now, as for me, I have gotten through stealing," continued he; "but that witch would carry off even your house. She is a bad woman, a bad woman! We must get rid of her. Do you remember that shirt that you missed last year? I have it on now and she gave it to me. I cannot give it back because..."

"Never mind, don't bother, never mind," interrupted Don Rocco. "I'll give it to you."

"Then there were some glasses of wine, but I didn't drink them all myself. And then there is the silver snuff−box with the portrait of Pius Ninth."

"Body of Bacchus!" exclaimed Don Rocco, who thought he still had in his box that precious snuff−box given him by an old colleague. "That also?"

"I drank it; yes, sir, it took me fifteen days. Do not get excited, for we are in confession."

"What's that?"

It was a noise against the gate of the courtyard. A hard knock or a stone.

"It is evil−doers," said the Moro. "Rascally night−birds. Or perhaps some sick person. I'll go at once to find out."

"Yes, yes," said Don Rocco hastily.

"I will go and return to−morrow," continued the other, "for I see that you certainly do not care to confess me to−night."

He took out some matches and re−lighted the lamp, saying:

"Listen, Don Rocco, I want to be an honest man and work; but I must change my residence, and for the first few days how can I get along? You understand what I mean."

Don Rocco scratched his head.

"You are to come to−morrow morning of course," he said.

"Naturally! But I have a few debts here; and going around in broad daylight, I should like to show my face without being ashamed."

"Very well," responded Don Rocco, frowning considerably, but in a benevolent tone. "Wait a moment."

He took a lamp, left the sitting−room, and returned immediately with a ten−franc bill.

"Here you are," said he.

The man thanked him and left, accompanied by the priest, who carried the lamp as far as the middle of the courtyard and waited there until the Moro called to him from outside the gateway that no one was there. Then Don Rocco went to close the gate, and re−entered the house.

He could not go to bed at once. He was too agitated. Body of Bacchus! he kept repeating to himself. Body of Bacchus! One could hardly have imagined so extraordinary a case, and for it to happen to him, of all men! His head felt as confused as when he played at tresette and did not understand the game and every one badgered him. What a chaos there was in that head of good and of bad, of bitterness and of consolation! The more extraordinary did the thing appear to him, with the greater faith, with the more timorous reverence, did he refer it all to the hand of God. In thinking over his entrance into the kitchen, and that man seated at the hearth, memory gave him a stronger spasm of fear than the reality had, and it was immediately succeeded by mystic admiration of the hidden ways of the Lord. Certainly Lucia's fault was a bitter one, but how clearly the design of Providence could be seen in it! It led a man to the house of the priest; through sin to grace. What a great gift he had received from God, he the last of the priests of the parish, one of the last of the diocese! A soul so lost, so hardened in evil! He felt scruples at having allowed himself to be moved too strongly by the deception of his servant, the loss of the snuff−box. Kneeling by his bed, he recited, amid rapid winks, an interminable series of Paters, Aves, and Glorias, and prayed the Lord, St. Luke, and St. Rocco to help him in properly directing this still immature confession. Heavens! to come to confession with a string of oaths and to accuse others more than himself! To Don Rocco the heart of the Moro appeared under an image which pleased him, it seemed so new and clear. A healthy fruit with a first spot of decay; only in his case the image was reversed.

When he had gone to bed and was lying on his side, ready to sleep, it occurred to him that the next day Lucia would arrive. This thought immediately suggested another, and made him turn right over flat on his back.

It brought up, in fact, a grave problem. Had the Moro spoken of Lucia in confession or not? Don Rocco remembered that he had made no remark when the man, having blown out the light, declared that he wished to confess. Neither had he done so later when the man said: "Don't get excited, for we are in confession."

Therefore, there was at least a grave doubt that this had been a real confession; and even if the penitent had afterwards interrupted it, this did not in the least detract from its sacramental character, had it existed; and, consequently, what about Lucia? And his answer to the Countess Carlotta? Body of Bacchus! It seemed the case of Sigismondo. Don Rocco cast a formidable frown at the ceiling.

He remembered the pereat mundus, and the arguments of that well of science, that extraordinary man, the professor. It would be impossible now to send away Lucia. And finally the dark words of Countess Carlotta were quite clear to him. He himself must leave: pereat Rochus.

The hour was striking in the clock tower. The voice of the clock was dear to him by night. His rugged heart softened somewhat, and Satan saw his chance to show him the peaceful little church surrounded by the cypresses, his own, all his own, and a certain fig tree that was dear to him under the bell−tower; he made him feel the sweetness of the cells rendered holy by so many pious souls of old, the sweetness of living in that quiet niche of St. Luke, so well suited to his humble person, in the exercise of a ministry of deed and of word, without worldly aims and without responsibility of souls. Satan further showed him the difficulty of finding a good place; reminded him of the needs of his old father and his sister, poor peasants, one of them now too old and the other too infirm to gain their livelihood by working. And Satan finally turned casuist and sought to prove that, without betraying the secret, he could still send away the servant on some pretext, or even with none. But at this suggestion of profiting by the confession Don Rocco raised such a frightful frown that the devil fled without waiting for more. Let him keep Lucia, then, and let her see to it that she followed the sacred text: Nemo potest duobus dominis servire. Just see how the words of holy writ fitted the occasion! Don Rocco sought to mentally stitch together the last sentences of his sermon, but it was too fatiguing an attempt for him. He might have succeeded, however, had he not fallen asleep in the midst of a most difficult passage.

III.

He slept little and arose at dawn. Before going down he stepped to the window to consult the weather. In stepping back his eyes fell on the entrance to the cellar. It was open.

Don Rocco went down to the cellar, and came out again with a most unusual expression. The wine was no longer there. Neither wine nor cask. But outside there were fresh marks of wheels.

Don Rocco followed these as far as the main road. There they disappeared. There remained but a short curve from the edge to the middle of the road into the labyrinth of all the other wheel tracks. Don Rocco did not think at that time to go in search of the authorities in order to make a complaint. Ideas came to him very slowly, and perhaps this particular one would not be due before midday.

On the contrary he returned, wrapped in meditation, to St. Luke. "Those blows," said he to himself, "that stone thrown! It is fortunate that the Moro was with me then; otherwise, he would have been suspected." He went back to the cellar entrance, examined minutely the fractured door, contemplated the place where the cask had stood, and, scratching his head, went into the church to repeat some prayers.

IV.

At Mass there was a crowd. Both before and after it there was a great deal of talk of the theft. Everybody wanted to see the empty cellar, the broken door, the traces of the wheels.

Two bottles which had escaped the thieves disappeared into the pockets of one of the faithful. No one understood how the priest could have avoided noticing something; because he did assert without further

explanation that he had heard nothing. The women were sorry for him, but the men for the most part admired the deed and laughed at the poor priest, who had the great fault, in their eyes, of being abstemious and not knowing how to mingle with people with that easy−going fraternity which comes only from emptying the wine glass together.

They laughed, especially during the sermon, at the deep frown on the priest's face, which they attributed to the empty cellar.

No one mentioned the Moro. Neither did he appear at St. Luke, either at the Mass or afterwards; so that poor Don Rocco was full of scruples and remorse, fearing that he had not conducted the affair properly. But quite late the police arrived, examined everything, and questioned the priest. Had he no suspicions? No, none. Where did he sleep? How did it happen that he had not heard? Really, he did not know himself; there had been people in the house. At what time? Some time between eleven and one o'clock. One of the police smiled knowingly, but Don Rocco, innocent as a child, did not notice it. The other one asked if he did not suspect a certain Moro, knowing, as they did, that shortly before eleven o'clock he had been seen going up to St. Luke. At once Don Rocco showed great fervor in protesting that the man was certainly innocent, and, somewhat pressed by questions, brought forth his great reason: it was precisely the Moro who had visited him at that hour, on his own business. "Perhaps it was not on the business that you think," said the policeman. "If you knew what I think!" Don Rocco did not know, and in his humble placidity did not wish to know. He never bothered himself with the thoughts of others. It was sufficiently difficult for him to get a little lucidity into his own. They asked him a few more questions, and then left, carrying with them the only object that they found in the cellar, a corkscrew, which the scrupulous Don Rocco was not willing, through the uncertainty of his memory, to claim as belonging to him, although he had paid his predecessor twice the value of it. And now his cellar and his conscience were equally clear.

Towards dusk on the same day Don Rocco was reading the office, walking up and down for a little exercise without going far from the house. Who could tell? Perhaps that man might yet come. Every now and then Don Rocco would stop and listen. He heard nothing but the voices of wagon− drivers on the plain below, the noise of wheels, the barking of dogs. Finally there was a step on the little path that led down through the cypress trees; a step slow but not heavy, a lordly step, with a certain subdued creak of ecclesiastical shoes; a step which had its hidden meaning, expressing to the understanding mind a purpose which, though not urgent, was serious.

The gate opened, and Don Rocco, standing in the middle of the courtyard, saw the delicate, ironical face of Professor Marin.

The professor, when he perceived Don Rocco, came to a stand, with his legs well apart, his hands clasped behind his back, silently wagging his head and his shoulders from right to left, and smiling with an inexpressible mixture of condolence and banter. Poor Don Rocco on his side looked at him, also silent, smiling obsequiously, red as a tomato.

"The whole business, eh?" finally said the professor, cutting short his mimicry and becoming serious.

"Yes, the whole business," answered Don Rocco in sepulchral tones. "They didn't leave a drop."

"Thunder!" exclaimed the other, stifling a laugh; and he came forward.

"It is nothing, nothing at all, you know, my son," said he with sudden good nature. "Give me a pinch. It is nothing," he continued, taking the snuff. "These are things that can be remedied. The Countess Carlotta has made so much wine that, as I say, for her a few casks more, a few casks less... You understand me! She is a good woman, my son, the Countess Carlotta; a good woman."

"Yes, good, good," mumbled Don Rocco, looking into his snuff−box.

"You are a lucky man, my dear," continued Marin, slapping him on the shoulder. "You are as well off here as the Pope."

"I am satisfied, I am satisfied," said Don Rocco, smiling and smoothing out his brows for a moment. It pleased him to hear these words from an intimate friend of the Countess Carlotta.

The professor gazed around admiringly as if he saw the place for the first time. "It is a paradise!" said he, letting his eyes pass along the dirty walls of the courtyard and then raising them to the fig tree picturesquely hidden under the bell−tower in the high corner between the gateway and the old convent.

"Only for that fig tree!" he added. "Is it not a beauty? Does it not express the poetry of the southern winter, tepid and quiet? It is like a word of sweetness, of happy innocence, tempering the severity of the sacred walls. Beautiful!"

Don Rocco looked at his fig tree as if he saw it for the first time. He was fond of it, but he had never suspected that it possessed such wonderful qualities.

"But it gives little figs," said he, in the tone of a father who hears his son praised in his presence and rejoices, but says something severe lest he become puffed up, and also to hide his own emotion. Then he invited the professor to make himself at home in the house.

"No, no, my dear," answered the professor, silently laughing at that phrase about the little figs. "Let us take a short stroll: it is better."

Passing slowly across the courtyard, they came out into the vineyard, whose festoons crowned both declivities of the hill, and they passed along the easy, grassy ascent between one declivity and the other.

"It is delicious!" said the professor.

Between the immense cold sky and the damp shadows of the plain the last glimpses of light were softly dying away on the grayish hill, on the red vines, all at rest. The air was warm and still.

"Is all this yours?" asked the professor.

Don Rocco, perhaps through humility, perhaps through apprehension of what the immediate future might bring, kept silence.

"Make up your mind to stay here, my son," continued he. "I know very well, believe me, there is not another place as fortunate as this in the whole diocese."

"Well, as for me!..." began Don Rocco.

Professor Marin stopped.

"By the way!" said he, "Countess Carlotta has spoken to me. Look here, Don Rocco! I really hope that you will not be foolish!"

Don Rocco gazed savagely at his feet.

"Goodness!" continued the professor. "Sometimes the countess is impossible, but this time, my dear son, she is right. You know that I speak frankly. You are the only one here who does not know these things. It is a scandal, my son! The whole village cries out against it."

"I have never heard, I have not..." mumbled Don Rocco.

"Now I tell you of it myself! and the countess has told you more than once."

"You know what I answered her last night?"

"They were absurd things that you said to her."

At this blow Don Rocco shook himself a little, and with his eyes still lowered spoke up eagerly in his own defence.

"I answered according to my convictions, and now I cannot change."

He was humble−hearted, but here was a question of justice and truth. To speak according to truth, according to what one believes to be the truth, is a duty; therefore, why did they persecute him?

"You cannot change?" said the professor, bending over him and fixing on his face two squinting eyes. "You cannot change?"

Don Rocco kept silent.

The professor straightened up and started on his walk again.

"Very well," he said, with ostentatious quiet. "You are at liberty to do so."

He suddenly turned to Don Rocco, who was following him with heavy steps.

"Gracious!" he exclaimed with annoyance, "do you really think that you have in your house a regular saint? Do you take no account of the gossip, of the scandal? To go against the whole country, to go against those who give you your living, to go against your own good, against Providence, for that creature? Really, if I did not know you, my dear Don Rocco, I would not know what to think."

Don Rocco squirmed, winking furiously, as if he were fighting against secret anguish, and breathless, as if words were trying to break forth involuntarily.

"I cannot change; it is just that," said he when he got through his grimaces. "I cannot."

"But why, in the name of heaven?"

"Because I cannot, conscientiously."

Don Rocco finally raised his eyes. "I have already told the countess that I cannot go against justice."

"What justice! Your justice is blind, my dear. Blind, deaf, and bald. And if you said a foolish thing yesterday do you wish to repeat it again to−day? And if you do not believe what is said of Lucia are there lacking reasons for sending away a servant? Send her away because she does not take the spots off your coat, because she does not darn your stockings. Anything! Send her away because she cooks your macaroni without sauce,

and your squash without salt."

"The real reason would always be the other one," answered Don Rocco gloomily.

Even Professor Marin could not easily answer an argument of this kind. He could only mumble between his teeth: "Holy Virgin, what a pig−head!"

They reached the few consumptive cypresses along the ridge that led from the hill to another still higher hill. There they stopped again; and the professor, who was fond of Don Rocco on account of his simple goodness, and also because he could make him the butt of amiable banter, made him sit down by his side on the grass, and attempted a final argument, seeking in every way to extract from him his reasons for continuing so long to believe in the innocence of Lucia; but he did not succeed in getting at any result. Don Rocco kept always referring to what he had said the evening before to Countess Carlotta, and repeated that he could not change.

"Then, good−bye St. Luke, my son," said the resigned Marin.

Don Rocco began to wink furiously, but said not a word.

"The Countess Carlotta was expecting you today," said the professor, "but you did not go to her. She therefore charged me to tell you that if you did not immediately consent to send away Lucia on the first of December, you will be free for the new year, and even before if you wish."

"I cannot leave before Christmas," said Don Rocco timidly. "The parish priest always needs assistance at that time."

The professor smiled.

"What do you suppose?" said he. "That Countess Carlotta hasn't a priest ready and waiting? Think it over, for there is still time."

Don Rocco communed with himself. It rarely happened that he went through so rapid a process of reasoning. Granted, that this woman was a cause for scandal in the country, and that the countess had another priest at her disposal, the decision to be taken was obvious.

"Then," he answered, "I will leave as soon as possible. My father and my sister were to come and visit me one of these days. So that now it will be I who will visit them instead."

He even had in his heart the idea of taking this woman away from the village with him. His people had no need of a servant, and he, if he delayed finding a place, would not be able to keep her. But certain reasonable ideas, certain necessary things, never reached his heart, and reached his head very late, and when they did Don Rocco would either give himself a knock on the forehead, or a scratch behind, as if it bothered him.

In returning to St. Luke the professor told how the police were in search of the Moro, who was suspected as an accomplice in a recent highway murder, certain authors of which had fallen that very morning into the hands of justice. Don Rocco heard this not without satisfaction; for he now was able to explain why the man had not come. "Who knows," he made bold to say, "that he may not have gone away, and that he may not return? And then all this gossip will come to an end. Do you not think so?"

"Yes, my dear," answered the professor, who understood the point of his discourse, "but you know the Countess Carlotta. Henceforth whether the Moro goes or remains is of no consequence to her. Lucia must be dismissed."

Don Rocco said no more, neither did the professor. The former accompanied the latter as far as the church cypresses, stood looking after him until he disappeared at the end of the lane, and then returned, sighing, to his house. Later, when, bending under the weight of his cloak, he was passing, lamp in hand, through the entry leading to the choir of St. Luke, his doubt of the previous night came up again violently. "Had it really been a confession?" He stopped in the shadow of the deserted entry, looking at the lamp, giving vent for a moment to the sweet, tempting thoughts of the inert spirit. "Were he to take some pretext to send the woman away, to live and die in peace in his St. Luke." All at once his heart began to beat fiercely. These were thoughts from the devil. In the same way as perhaps in ancient times and in the same place some monk, tormented by heated nocturnal visions of love and of pleasure, may have done, Don Rocco made hastily the sign of the cross, hastened to the choir, and became immersed in a devout reading of the prayer−book.

V.

Ten days after, at the same hour, Don Rocco was praying before the altar of the Virgin, under the pulpit.

He was on the eve of leaving St. Luke for ever. He had agreed with the Countess Carlotta to give as an excuse a brief absence, a visit of a couple of weeks to his old father; and to write afterwards that for family reasons he could not return, and then this had happened that the poor old peasant, before learning of the new state of affairs, had written, asking for assistance; and Don Rocco had been obliged to sell some furniture as well to save cost of transportation as in order not to arrive home with empty hands. He was returning with the intention of remaining as short a time as possible, and of going away as chaplain wherever it pleased the Curia to which he had directed his request.

No certain information had been secured, either of the wine or of the thieves; but suspicions were rife against a woman who kept an inn, a new favorite of the Moro, who was thought to have received the wine. The Moro was said by some to have fled, by others to have gone into hiding. It seemed as if the police were of the second opinion. They came and went, searching everywhere, but always uselessly.

Lucia had returned, and for several days had behaved in an unusual and peculiar manner. She neglected her work, was brusque with her master, and wept without apparent motive. One evening she went out, saying that she intended going to the parish church to say her prayers. At nine o'clock Don Rocco, as she had not returned, went philosophically to bed, and never knew at what time she came into the house. On the contrary, he congratulated himself the next day on the happy change that had taken place in her, owing to her religious exercises, because she seemed no longer as she had been, but was quiet, attentive, active, spoke with satisfaction of the approaching departure, the position which Don Rocco hoped to find for her with a certain arch−priest, a friend of his; a promotion for her. She seemed to be possessed of an entirely novel ascetic zeal. As soon as Don Rocco retired for the night, she would go to church to spend there hour after hour.

And now, Don Rocco had taken his last supper in the monastic refectory, was reading his breviary for the last time in the little church of St. Luke, as rustic, simple, and religious as he, from its pavement to the black beams of its roof. His heart was heavy, poor priest, thus to leave his nest without honor; to carry humiliation and bitterness to his father and his sister, whose only hope and pride he was! He had every reason to frown as he looked at his breviary.

When he had finished reading, he took his seat on a bench. It was painful to him to take leave of his church. It was his last evening! He stood there with fixed eyes, his eyelids moving regularly, discouraged, cast down, like a stricken beast awaiting the axe. He had passed some hours of the afternoon among his vines, those planted three years before, which had already given him their first fruit. The large cypresses, the splendid view of the plain and of the other hillsides, inspired him with not a single dream; his peasant's heart grew tender toward the beautiful vines, the fertile furrows. Though blushing and ashamed of it, he had taken a sprig of a vine and an ear of corn to carry away as mementos. This was his poetry. Of the church he could carry

away nothing. But he left there his heart, a little everywhere; on the altar that had witnessed his first exposition of the Gospel, on the ancient altar front that inspired him with devotion as he said Mass, on the beautiful Madonna, whose mantle had been modestly raised around her neck by his care, on the tomb of a bishop to whom, two centuries before, the peace of St. Luke had seemed preferable to worldly splendors. Who could tell whether he would ever have again a church so his own entirely his own? He could not seem to rise, he felt an inner sense of dissolution, of which he had never dreamed. His eyelids kept on winking as if bidding away importunate tears. In fact, he did not weep, but his little eyes shone more than usual.

At half−past nine Lucia entered the church through the choir to look after her master. "I am coming at once, at once, go back," said Don Rocco.

He believed himself alone in the church, but had he bent his head back he might have seen something unusual. Very slowly a human head showed itself in the pulpit by the light of the petroleum lamp and looked down upon the priest. It had the diabolic eyes of the Moro set in a shaven ecclesiastical face. The head rose up in the shadow, two long arms made in the air a violent gesture of impatience. At the same time Don Rocco repeated to the woman who stood hesitating: "Go back, go back, I am coming at once."

She went out.

Then the priest got up from his bench and went up to the high altar. The human figure in the pulpit came down again, and went rapidly into hiding. Don Rocco turned around so as to stand in cornu epistolae, toward the empty benches, imagined them full of people, of his people of every Sunday, and a spirit of eloquence entered into him.

"I bless you all," said he in a strong voice. "I wish that you were all present, but that is not possible, because I must not let any one know. I bless you all, and ask you to pardon me if I have been wanting. Gloria Dei cum omnibus vobis."

The temptation was too strong for a certain person to resist. A cavernous voice resounded through the empty church:

"Amen."

Don Rocco remained breathless, with his hands in the air.

"Hurry up," said the servant, returning. "Do you not remember that you must leave out your cloak and your clothes?"

Poor Don Rocco was not well found in clothes, for he carried on his back omnia bona sua, and there was sewing to be done and spots to be taken out, according to Lucia, before the journey of the next morning. Don Rocco descended from the altar without answering and went all through the church, lowering the lamp between all the benches and confessionals.

"What is it; what are you looking for?" asked the servant, anxiously coming along behind him. For a while Don Rocco did not answer.

"I said a few words of prayer," he said finally, "and I heard some one answer 'Amen.'"

"You fancied so." replied Lucia. "It must have been a trick of the imagination."

"No, no," said Don Rocco. "I really heard the 'Amen.' It seemed to be a voice from under the earth. A great

big voice. It did not seem that of a man, but rather of a bull."

"It may have been the bishop," suggested the woman. "Isn't there a bishop buried here? Such things have been heard of."

Don Rocco kept silent. In his simplicity, in his innate disposition to faith, he was inclined to willingly believe anything supernatural, especially if connected with religion. The more astonishing it was, the more did he in sign of reverence knit his brows and drink it in devoutly.

"Now let us go," said the woman. "It is late, you know, and I have considerable work to do."

"Let us at least recite a pater, an ave, and a gloria to St. Luke," said Don Rocco. "It is the last evening that I say my prayers here. I must leave a salute." He spoke of a pater, and an ave, and a gloria; but he strung along at least a dozen, finding as many reasons to salute other saints of his particular acquaintance. One was to promote the eternal salvation of the two devotees, one their temporal salvation, one the grace to conquer temptations, one a suitable position, one a good death, and another a good journey. The last pater was recited by Don Rocco with remarkable fervor for the complete conversion of a sinful soul. Had the priest been less absorbed in his paters he might, perhaps, have heard after the fourth or fifth some smothered ejaculations of that humorous bishop who had perpetrated the "Amen." But he heard only Lucia answering him with much devotion, and was touched to the heart by it.

A few moments after he was still meditating, in the dark, in the wretched little bed of his cell, on the salutary and evident effects of the divine grace which he had sought in the sacraments. He meditated also on the action of the Moro, on the ray of light that had shone into that dark conscience, harbinger, if nothing less, of better and lasting light. And in his mystic imagination he saw the design of Providence which recompensed him for a sacrifice which he had suffered for duty's sake. It was a blessing to think of that, to know that he was losing all his few earthly possessions for such a recompense. He offered up also the sorrow of his father and his sister, his own humiliation, the straitened circumstances in which he should find himself. He saw in front of his bed, through the window, the vague, far−off brightness of the sky, his hope, his end. Little by little his eyes closed, in a delicious sense of confidence and peace. He slept profoundly.

VI.

He was not yet entirely awake when the clock of St. Luke struck half− past seven. Immediately after the bells also rang, because Don Rocco had the day before notified the boy accustomed to serve him at Mass that he would meet him at about eight o'clock. He jumped out of bed, and went to get the clothes that Lucia was to have placed outside the door. Nothing there. He called once, twice, three times. No answer. Perplexed, he returned to his room and called out of the window: "Lucia! Lucia!" Perfect silence. Finally the little sacristan appeared. He had not seen Lucia. He had come to get the keys of the church, had found the gate of the courtyard open, as well as the door of the house; no one in the kitchen, no one in the sitting−room. Not finding the keys, he had entered the church by the inner entry. Don Rocco sent him to the sitting−room to get his clothes, as it was there that Lucia usually worked in the evening. The boy returned to say that there were no clothes there. "How? There are no clothes?" Don Rocco ordered him to stand on guard before the entrance of the house and went down to look for them himself, in his shirt. Half−way down the stairs he stopped and sniffed. What an abominable odor of pipe was this? Don Rocco, with darkened brow, went on. He went directly to the sitting−room, looked, searched; there was nothing. He returned to the kitchen, his heart beating. A horrid smell, but no clothes. Yes, under the table there was a little pile of soiled things; a jacket, a pair of drawers, a peasant's hat. Don Rocco gathered up, unfolded, and examined them with portentous frowns. It seemed to him that he had seen these things somewhere before. His brain did not yet understand anything, but his heart began to understand and to beat more strongly than before. He took hold of his chin and his cheeks with his left hand, squeezed them hard, trying to squeeze from them the where, the how, and

the when. And lo! his eyes rested on the wall, and he finally perceived something there which was not there the day before. There was written in charcoal on the right: "Many salutations." And on the left:

"The wine is good."

"The servant is good."

"The cloak is good."

"Don Rocco is good."

He read, raised his hand to his head, read again read again, seemed to lose his eyesight, felt a sensation of cold, of torpidity spreading from his breast throughout his body. Some one called out in the courtyard, "Where is that Don Rocco?" With difficulty he went up to his room again, cast himself on his bed, almost without knowing what he was doing, almost without thought or sensation.

Below they were looking and calling for him. Professor Marin was there, and some few other persons who had come to attend the Mass. No one could understand how the door of the church was still closed. The professor went into the house, called Lucia, called Don Rocco, without receiving any answer. He finally reached the room of the priest and stood still on the doorsill, amazed to see him in bed. "Well," said he, "Don Rocco! in bed? And what about Mass?"

"I cannot," answered Don Rocco in a low voice, immovable on his back like a mummy.

"But what is it?" replied the other, approaching the bed with sincere alarm. "What is the matter with you?"

This troubled face, this affectionate tone, softened poor Don Rocco's heart, petrified by pain and surprise. This time two real tears fell from his palpitating eyelids. His mouth, closed tight, was twisting and trembling, but still resisted. Seeing then that he answered not a word, the professor ran to the stairs and called down that the physician should be sent for.

"No, no," Don Rocco forced himself to say without moving. His voice was filled with sobs. The professor heard him only as he was returning to the bed.

"No?" said he. "But what, then, is the matter? Speak."

Meanwhile three poor women and a beggar, who had come to listen to Mass, entered quite frightened into the room, surrounding the two, and in their turn questioning Don Rocco. He kept silent like a Job, seeking to master himself. Perhaps his annoyance at all these curious faces hanging over his own helped him. "Go away," said he finally to the last comers. "There is no need of the doctor, no need of anything, go away!"

The four faces withdrew somewhat, but continued looking at him fixedly with an expression, perhaps, of increased alarm.

"Go away, I tell you!" continued Don Rocco.

They went out silently and stopped outside to listen and spy.

"Well, then," said the professor, "what are your feelings?"

"Nothing."

"But, then, why are you in bed?"

Don Rocco turned with his face to the wall. The tears were coming back again now. He was unable to speak.

"But in the name of heaven," insisted the professor, "what is it?"

"I am getting over it, I am getting over it," sobbed Don Rocco.

The professor did not know what to do nor what to think. He asked him whether he wanted water, and the old beggar went down at once to get a glassful and gave it to Marin. Don Rocco did not want it in the least, but kept on repeating: "Thanks, thanks, I am getting over it," and drank it obsequiously.

"Well, then?" continued the professor.

"You are right," answered Don Rocco.

"About what?"

"About the woman."

"Lucia? Right! And by the way, where is Lucia? Not here? Run away?"

Don Rocco nodded. Marin looked at him stupefied and repeating, "Run away? Run away?" The other four came back into the room echoing, "Run away? Run away?"

"But listen!" said the professor. "Are you staying in bed for this reason? Are you humiliating yourself in this way? Come on and get dressed."

Don Rocco looked at him, reddened up to the top of his head, narrowed his tear−wet eyes in a smile, which meant: "Now it will be your turn to laugh."

"I have no clothes," he said.

"What?"

The professor added to this word a gesture which meant, "Did she carry them away?" Don Rocco responded also by a mere nod; and seeing that his friend with difficulty restrained a burst of laughter, he also tried to laugh.

"Poor Don Rocco," said the professor, and added, still with a laugh in his throat, heartfelt words of sympathy, of comfort, and asked for every detail of what had happened. "Oh, if you had only listened to me!" he concluded. "If you had only sent her away!"

"Yes," said Don Rocco, accepting even this with humiliation. "You are right. And now what will the countess say?"

The professor sighed.

"What can I say, my son? She will say nothing. This also has happened, that your successor wrote yesterday that he had definitively gotten rid of his present engagements and was at the disposal of the countess."

Don Rocco was silent, heart−broken. "I must look at the time," said he, after a moment's silence, "because at half−past nine they will come here with a horse to take me away. It will be necessary to ask the archpriest or the chaplain to lend me a suit of clothes."

"Let me, let me!" exclaimed the professor, full of zeal. "I will go home and send it to you immediately. You will give it back to me at your leisure, when you are able." A lively gratitude cleared the face and moved the eyelids of Don Rocco.

"Thanks!" said he, fixing his eyes humbly on the end of his nose. "Thank you very much!"

"Body of Bacchus!" he added to himself, as the professor was going down the stairs. "He is a span higher than I am, that just occurs to me!"

But it certainly did not occur to him to call him back.

VII.

At half−past nine Don Rocco appeared in the doorway of his house to start on his exodus. The overcoat of the professor danced around his heels and swallowed up his hands down to his finger tips. The stove−pipe hat, of enormous size, came down to his ears. The professor followed right behind him, laughing silently. In the courtyard some people attracted by the report of what had happened were laughing. "Oh, Don Rocco, see what he looks like!" said the women. And one of them would tell him about some action of Lucia, and another about another, things of all kinds which he had never suspected. "Enough, enough," he answered, disturbed in his conscience at all this malicious gossip. "It is now all over, all over."

He went on, followed by them all, gave a last look at the fig tree near the bell−tower, and passing between the cypresses in front of the church, turned back toward the door, devoutly raised his hat, and bent his knee.

The little wagon was awaiting him on the main road. The driver, seeing him in this costume, laughed no less heartily than the rest.

Then Don Rocco took leave of all, again thanked the professor, sent his respects to the countess, and reduced to silence those who were still heaping abuse on Lucia. When he had taken his seat the beggar approached him and put his right hand upon one of his shoes. "Is this yours?" said he.

"Yes, yes, the shoes are," answered the priest with a certain satisfaction, as the horse started.

The beggar carried to his forehead the hand that had touched the shoe of Don Rocco, and said with solemnity:

"In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. Amen."