

'I suppose you would not come?' she asked.

'Why, of course not. I cannot leave the stall. Besides, I don't care much about nursing,' she added, frankly.

'Well, it's really very tiresome. I must find somebody. We are full up, and now there is a man brought in last night, and no one in the accident ward to nurse him.'

The 'accident ward' was a spacious apartment, about twelve feet square, where any of the villagers who happened to break a limb, or scald themselves, or otherwise get into trouble, were nursed. The 'hospital' consisted of two small buildings, severely separated, one for women, and one for men, where about forty old folk found a home. Each of the buildings had, besides, a few rooms set apart for the sick. There was the 'accident ward,' the 'consumption ward' (a trifle larger), and one or two others. The Sisters spoke with pride of their 'wards' when they showed visitors round the 'hospital.'

An accident? asked Caterina, brightening. (How is it that the misfortunes of others are always so interesting?).

'Yes, poor man. He was at work on the new wing at the Capuccini, and he fell off a ladder and broke his leg. The Brothers brought him down last night, and the doctor set his leg.'

'What sort of man is he, old or young?' asked Caterina.

'Well, I'm afraid I didn't notice,' said the Sister, simply. 'Middle-aged, I should think.'

(Caterina thought she would not be a nun; no, not for all the gold in Egypt!)

'Well, cheer up, Sister, I'll come and help you. Just wait till I tell Ninetta (that's my sister) to mind the stall, and then I'll come along.'

She was very tired of sitting there, doing nothing but think, think, think, about Francesco. Considering that she did not care two pins for him, it was foolish to waste time thinking like that. But then there was the scarf—she had not quite despaired of it yet.

Half-an-hour later she appeared at the convent, leaving Ninetta in her place behind the stall, with strict orders to send Peppino on to her as soon as he returned.

When she arrived at the convent, Sister Elizabeth, with a very bright color, was talking to the Reverend Mother.

'I can't think how you could be so silly, Sister Elizabeth,' said the latter, when she heard who was coming to nurse the sick man.

'Is it becoming, is it possible, for a young girl of eighteen to be put in charge of that man? He must not be left, the doctor says. How can I leave that child with him?'

'But he is so ill, I thought we must find someone. Of course when he is better—but perhaps he won't get better for ever so long,' said Sister Elizabeth, in quite a hopeful tone.

'I am surprised at you, Sister,' said the Reverend Mother, severely. She was very cross. I am afraid I cannot call it worried this time, for she was more than cross—she was in a very bad temper.

'I thought you knew better, Sister Elizabeth,' she said.

'Yes, Mother,' said Sister Elizabeth, quite crushed by this time, and unable to find another reply.

At this point, Caterina arrived, and Reverend Mother, greeting her without enthusiasm, said she hoped she would make herself useful, and help with the old women.

'Old women; why, I thought I was to look after a man who had broken his leg!'

'No!' said Reverend Mother, firmly. 'You are not experienced enough.'

'Experienced! Didn't my own father break his leg last summer, and I had to nurse him because you couldn't find room for him here? And didn't I nurse him all right? If you don't want me I'll go. I'm not going to wait on old women.'

The Reverend Mother cast an 'I told you so'

glance at Sister Elizabeth, who was busy looking out of the window.

'Nonsense, Caterina,' she replied. 'Of course, you will stay. I will give you two francs a day, and you will have your dinner here. Go and find Sister Lucy, and tell her you have come to take her place and say she is to come to me.'

'Oh, very well, Mother,' said Caterina, rather wearily. 'Anything was better than doing nothing! Anything to make the time pass.'

She found Sister Lucy in St. Ann's, trying to coax a very cross old woman to drink a cup of milk. (St. Ann was the patron of the woman's quarters, while St. Joachim fulfilled similar duties in connection with the men's side).

'Such mean ways!' the old woman was saying. 'Never a bit of meat, when there's others not half so ill as me getting fat on chicken, and anything they like to ask for. All I can say is that it is most unfair!'

Sister Lucy only smiled.

'Here, dear, drink this nice milk. You know you shall have meat the first minute the doctor gives permission. Come, be good, and drink it up nicely!'

'Ay, be good, be good,' said another old woman, sarcastically. 'I'd thank you to be good, Sister Lucy, and let us have a little more liberty. Why am I ill? Because I never have a bit of exercise, kept under lock and key, and never allowed outside the gates!'

'Why, Marietta, you know you have the whole garden to walk in all day long, if you like,' said the Sister, brightly. 'We are afraid to let them go out alone; they always come back the worse for drink. Besides, they are so old, poor dears, it is not safe. But they love to grumble, poor old things,' she whispered to Caterina.

'Well, I hope they won't grumble at me,' said Caterina. 'I've come to take your place, Sister, and Reverend Mother wants you, please.'

An old woman sat near the window, smiling sweetly, and twisting and untwisting a piece of cotton round her finger.

'After consideration—no!' she repeated, monotonously.

'Oh,' cried Caterina. 'I can't be left with her, Sister. I wouldn't for anything! I'm afraid of her.'

'Why, she is quite harmless. She wouldn't harm a fly. She will be as good as gold, won't you, dear?'

'After consideration—no!' said the poor creature, without lifting her head.

'Well,' said the Sister, laughing. 'I will take her into the workroom. Sister Rosa is mending the table-cloths. She will keep an eye on her.'

Caterina watched her lead the old woman from the room, coaxing her with kind words.

'Well, how anyone can give up everything to go and take care of lunatics for the rest of their natural existence, I can't think. I call it sheer folly.'

(Quite right, Caterina. It is folly—the folly of the Cross.)

II.

Caterina spent a dull morning, listening to their grumbles and wondering what time Peppino would be back. At twelve o'clock a little Sister appeared with a message, but not from Peppino.

'Reverend Mother says, please, that you are to go up to the accident ward, while Sister Lucy goes to meditation.'

Caterina roused herself from calculating the distance to the Villa Mondragone, and the time it would take the laziest boy to get there and back. So they could not get on without her in that accident ward after all, she thought with a smile!

She ran upstairs and pushed open the door of that spacious apartment. A big form, with a blue-white face, and a spreading broom-like beard, lay on the bed.

'I must leave you now, dear, for a little while. You are quite comfortable, aren't you?' asked Sister Lucy, gently, of her patient.

(The Sisters, in their simplicity, had the habit of calling everyone who was seriously ill, 'dear.' I have