

MY LADY'S LOVE.

An Italian Love Story in Which Figure a Countess and a Street-Musician.

How cold and gray the skies are, with never a glimmer of sunlight for two weeks past—O Dio mio, can this be Italy in summertime, with breezes sweeping down from the hills with the freshness and sharpness of winter. No flower-girls around the fountains—even the crowd in the Pincio dwindled to a few grand carriages and fewer pedestrians. Little Beppino, standing near the gateway of the great Farnese Palace, grumbles to himself about the weather, and draws his ragged jacket closer on his shoulders.

Yet he is not so little—one should call him slight—a lad of barely 18, with swarthy cheeks and strong, sturdy, yet slender limbs, graceful as a young deer when he moves; with eyes of deep blue which seem to look away beyond the noise and clamor of a city to the peaceful mountains, where there is rest and quiet and the eternal snows.

His old battered cap covers completely the dark hair which curls lightly over his head. The brow is a trifle low, the mouth is rather large, and the lips too

thick, but there is a beauty of expression in the eyes forever looking to the distance, and a gentleness of gesture and a subtle grace of motion which show that a drop of pure patrician blood mingles with the common stock in his coarse purple veins.

He has been playing for a party up in the Via Mascherone, and one of the gay ladies there paid him with a kiss instead of soldi. And now Beppo curses himself heartily for not refusing the one and demanding the other, for kisses will not buy the supper he is almost starving for, and soldi would.

However, it is over, and he will not play there again. Those grand dames have no sympathy with such a how-how could they, when they talked so openly of their hostess ruining young Prince Ferrar, just come to his majority, and everything spent within the year? Well, he was glad now that she had not given him the soldi, since it was not absolutely hers to give; you see he was too young to reason very correctly, and he did not appreciate kisses. It was past 4, and so cold. But it was colder yet in the little garret-room he called his home. Should he go on to the Piazza di Spagna, where there were generally some Americans and English inside of Piale's Library, who always listened when he played? Or should he go to his garret?

While in such indecision the doors of the palace opened, and a lady with two gentlemen came down the steps.

She was tall and dark, with a haughty, indifferent look on her handsome features. Her eyes were half veiled with their heavy lashes, and she kept them on the ground as she came along, but she smiled once at something one of the men said, and O how cruelly the lips curled even at a light jest.

Half way to her carriage she suddenly stopped, for her eyes fell on Beppo. "Merely one of the lazaroni," said the man with the blonde beard, and opened the carriage door with a low bow.

"Mon ami, I will look at him if I please, and as long as I please," answered the lady imperiously.

"Chere Comtesse," the man replied, with a shrug of the shoulders, "don't for worlds get that malady which is so unfashionable for your sex—philanthropy. It generally comes to women with age—like religion does. We all believe you to be under 30. Let no undue manifestation of the quality I have mentioned destroy that belief."

The other man—the one with dark hair and tawny skin, in a uniform of blue, with white and yellow braiding, such as the Garde Imperiale of the Second Empire used to wear—laughed brutally, and struck Beppo with his cane.

"Victor!" cried the Comtesse, sternly. "I won't have him abused, and I will be philanthropic—for once."

She raised her eyes this time from their haughty, indifferent languor, and turned them full on Beppo. Her hand was outstretched to him—he saw a gold piece shining in the cold, gray light.

He flushed deeply, he knew not why, for he had often taken gold before, why should he flush then—he, a poor little beggar, whose sole idea of living was to ramble through the streets the day long, watching like a hungry hawk for far less than she held out to him.

"There will be another for you tomorrow," said my lady, looking at him for a moment. "Will you come?"

"Ah, Miladi!" cried Beppo, "I will play for you night and day for this, but I cannot take it and not play."

"O, Diavolo!" muttered the dark man called Victor, "we don't want any concert in the street. Get out, you vagabond!"

"Give him your address, chere amie, in case he would like to call," said he of the blonde beard, ironically.

"I'll take you at your word, Baron," said the Comtesse, and drawing a card from her pocket she gave it to Beppo.

"There is my address. Come to me the day after to-morrow."

Then she got into her carriage, and the men followed laughing. Beppo stood motionless for a long time. Should he come there again on the morrow, and would she be there also, and would there be another gold-piece, which was most important of all?

Then he sighed. Ah, no. Doubtless she would forget. It was only a whim of a lady's to be charitable. It was

quickly supplanted by others less noble and good.

Still, he must wander somewhere on the morrow, and the pavement by the great palace was much the same as any. The French Embassy were occupying it now, and there were always some young Frenchmen going and coming who liked much to listen to martial music, in time of peace especially, when they could make their cigarettes at ease and join in the chorus of "Aux armes, Citoyens!"

The gold-piece was not all spent for a feast that evening, but the greater part of it prudently laid by for other days, also, when kisses were given in place of soldi, for Beppo had small faith in her ladyship's word.

At 5 o'clock the next day he stood again by the gateway of the palace. The Comtesse again came out, but she was alone. She approached Beppo, and put her small, gloved hand on his shoulder. Its light touch sent a sudden thrill through his slender frame, and involuntarily his eyes drooped before her steady gaze.

"You are here as I told you, as I knew you would be," she said as if talking softly to herself.

Then she appeared to remember the object which had prompted this obedience, and drawing from her pocket a gold piece she offered it in silence.

Timidly, hesitatingly, Beppo regarded it. Some inexplicable feeling urged him to reject it, but the other would soon be spent, and times were dull, and so many would proffer kisses instead of soldi, as that grand dame did yesterday, though why he could not tell, being a modest lad and placing no value whatever on his wonderful advantages of face and figure, and—so he would take it, with many thanks and blessings on the beautiful giver. But his face burned hotly as his fingers closed upon it, and he saw that she still gazed at him as steadily as ever.

"Will you come to me to-morrow?" she asked abruptly.

"Will I come?" he answered earnestly. "O, Miladi, I will come and play for you, or do anything you tell me, for my gratefulness." There was a passionate ring in his voice which seemed to please her, for she smiled—not the smile she had given the day before to the Boccaccio-like story which the gentleman in blue and yellow had been relating, but a smile full of gentleness, and—Beppo thought—compassion.

"Very well," she said. "See that you do come. I am not accustomed to—being disappointed." She had almost said disobeyed, but something in his face, his manner, had strangely inclined her towards him, and she could not be rough to him as she often was to the others. Besides, he was not in bondage yet, and he might rebel.

The next day near evening Beppo took his way towards the spot indicated by the address on the card.

My lady's villa was a long way off from the crowded Pincio and the streets which were most familiar to his footsteps, and once he paused uncertain whether he had found the right road or not. Several men were coming out of a gateway which opened into a garden dense with trees and shrubs, in the midst of which Beppo could discern a small stonehouse.

He looked at the card. Surely this was the place, yet he would not venture in while the richly-dressed gentlemen—nobles, may be—were lounging around the gate.

Finally they shook hands and separated, and two came down the shady path by Beppo.

"Diavolo!" cried one, who was evidently much intoxicated, for his gait was unsteady and he clung to his companion for evident support. "What's the little rascal doing? Cospetto! but we'll take him back with us and have a dance with my lady before the ball begins to-night—eh, Marco?"

The one addressed as Marco looked at Beppo closely, and asked why he was there at that hour and where he was going.

"I am going to the Comtesse de Charneau," replied the lad.

"No use for baggage there," said the man who had spoken first. "We're pretty much the same ourselves—eh, Marco? And we've been turned off in consequence."

"But Miladi sent for me, and so I am going," answered Beppo boldly, endeavoring to push past them.

The one called Marco caught him by the shoulder and held him at arm's length.

"Sent for you, did she?" he ejaculated. "Then go, in God's name, though I never thought she'd fancy such a you."

With brutal roughness he thrust Beppo from him, and the two went on laughing boisterously.

Beppo looked after them wondering—he could not comprehend their words—then passed on to the gate and along the path bordered with yellow anemones which stretched out on both sides like broad strips of meadow.

The footman seemed to know him, for he was not repulsed—far from it—for with the utmost deference the man ushered him into a small salon, and said that my lady would presently be down.

The rich carpet was like softest velvet to his feet—soft like the moss which grew on the hillsides, but the fragrance of Nature was wanting. Instead, there seemed a strange odor of stale tobacco and perfume mingled together, and the atmosphere of the room was very close.

But Beppo did not notice or comment on that unfavorably. There was invariably a smell of tobacco in the Countess's when she sat down, and she

the granddames smoked before his face and drank iced wines and sherbet with the avidity of troopers.

But surely my lady did not do those things?

He caught himself speculating as to the probability of her having done so or not, and straightway took up his violin and ran his finger over the strings and hummed a little air from "Figaro" to banish from his mind such disloyal thoughts towards one who had already been to him a benefactress.

The velvet curtains at the lower end of the room were carefully pushed aside, and in their dim shadow stood my lady, and her eyes fell on the slender figure by the window with the same intent expression with which they had regarded him the previous day.

She was a woman of apparently 28 or 27, but in reality much older, with features which would have impressed even an ordinary observer with a sudden sense of their owner's marked individuality. The square, broad chin gave proof of vigor and determination, but it was white and dimpled. The mouth was rather large, but beautifully formed lips and delicate curves about it tempered the harsher lines which it showed perceptibly when in repose.

The brow was low, and gently receded beneath the hair, which fell over it in wavy masses. The eyes were deep and lustrous, but burning ever with a dim, monotonous light, as if the hauteur which overshadowed her whole countenance had its abiding place in them.

The head was well shaped save for the fact that there was more behind the ears than one usually finds save in those completely given over by Nature and habit to material pleasures.

But it seemed as if there was a sense of restraint—of instinctive repression upon her as she stood in the presence of that poor little beggar, and hesitated ere she tried the effect of her soft, seductive beauty upon him. Some subtle feeling emanating from the better spirit which often strove with numerous others within her for supremacy, cast a softened influence upon the wayward woman of the world.

With a far different manner from the one she had intended to assume she glided towards him, and spoke, and told him he was welcome.

He gratefully kissed the hand she gave him, then held it in his own a moment, and seeing she said nothing, raised it to his lips again.

"I—I have come to play a little," he ventured timidly.

She started—the intentness of her look vanished. She shrugged her shoulders and smiled—the smile that Beppo did not like and could not bear to see. "Eh bien, are you so soon tired of being idle? Then play me something—what you will."

She sat down on a low sofa near and motioned Beppo to proceed with his self-imposed task at once.

His fingers and bow flew over the strings of the violin with loving touch. But a strain from an old song of his early home in the mountains brought a bright color to my lady's face and a sudden quiver to her voice.

"Where did you learn that?" she asked, interrupting him with a gesture of annoyance.

"Oh, far, far off, in Serra—in Tuscany, miladi, when I was a little lad," he answered, and went on.

When the music ceased he looked at her questioningly, and when she did not answer he asked if there were others she would have him play which she liked better, but she only shook her head.

"Don't I please you, miladi?" he asked, disappointedly.

"Yes; but that is enough. I don't care for mountain music. When you come again have something else, mon enfant."

He did not understand her French phrases, and he did not like the hard, metallic sound of her voice, which had been so gentle and sweet in its greeting, but he only said: "When shall I come again?" She considered for a moment, then answered:

"I am at home every evening at this time. You may—may come again to-morrow." She waved her hand with a careless gesture, then turned her back on him as he left the room.

Beppo went away thoroughly satisfied. How kind to let one little tune pay for the two gold pieces! And then how good she had been to him, though to be sure her humor had been so quick to change. But then one can never depend on a woman's humors, and Beppo had not played among them these ten years without finding that out.

But she was different from those in the Via Mascherone—he took a peculiar satisfaction in repeating that to himself, though he could not say in what particular, circumstantial evidence being strong against her, for the house smelt fearfully of tobacco; and then that big drunken fellow who had spoken to him near the gate—well, he could not comprehend it all; but he would not wrong her by so much as an evil thought.

Not only the next day did Beppo go to the Comtesse de Charneau's villa, but many days thereafter, and the gold pieces were plenty, and he lived like a Prince among his ragged comrades. "I do not like such small smoke around," he said one evening when the atmosphere was unusually stifling and close. "I cannot play where the fresh air does not come." There was not the slightest fault to be found with the atmosphere of the villa after that.

In his dim way he saw that she strove to please him, to gain his favor and

did not trouble his head with vain imaginings.

One night he was later than usual. A noisy crowd around the Church of St. Clement detained him, and it was past 9 when he entered the small salon.

The heavy chandeliers were ablaze with light, and she stood directly underneath them. She was clad in a ball costume of creamy satin with rare jewels flushing on her breast and arms.

Beppo paused on the threshold as that vision of beauty met his gaze. She smiled, and stretched out her hand to him, and blinded, bewildered, he went slowly towards her.

He bowed, and said bashfully: "Ah, miladi is so charming!" But that was not enough for her. Deeply in love with Beppo, she longed for the admiration which only love can give.

"I want to be charming—to you," she murmured, and drew him to her, so near that he felt her hot breath on his forehead. "Why will you not understand?" she said, her arm resting caressingly on his neck. "Caro, caro, why are you blind to me?"

Never blind to her beauty—oh no. Could he be blind to her love, so freely offered, too?

A deathly paleness came upon his face as he raised it to hers and saw in the depths of her eyes a passion such as he could not believe he was capable of inspiring in a woman so far removed from him. "You are playing with me—torturing me," he cried angrily, thrusting the hand from his neck and moving a little distance off. "I am only a poor beggar, and you are a great lady and should be content with other game, and not disturb one like me, who has an honest heart to give."

His voice sank into a whisper. My lady came over by the fireplace, where he stood, and took his hand in hers.

"And that is what I want—an honest heart," she said boldly. Then she laid his head upon her bosom and kissed his throbbing temples again and again.

Ah! how sweet to be loved like that! All his life long he had dimly dreamt of Cupid's coming. Why repulse it now?

So forgetful of the world-wide difference between them, oblivious of what the future might bring, he gave himself up to the delicious intoxication of this suddenly-awakened passion, and was nearer Paradise than he had ever imagined it possible for a mortal to be and live.

"Caro, caro," she kept murmuring between her kisses, and so Beppo took courage and kissed her in his turn.

"We shall live together always," she said softly. "Nothing shall ever part us now. I have a fortune for both, Beppo—you will not deny me the luxury of sharing that?"

"But I have not a scudi in the whole world!" he answered, the sense of his poverty falling more heavily upon him than it ever had when he was almost starving. She answered nothing. Something in his tone seemed to ring through her heart like the echo of a voice heard long ago.

"You are very dear to me," she said presently, at length, looking into his face with an earnestness which somewhat abashed him. "I cannot bear to let you leave me." But midnight came in, and she had to send him from her.

When he left she was still standing by the fire-place, and she stood there for many an hour after.

Why had she yielded to this strange infatuation? Simply because he reminded her of a first love, dead now and sleeping in a green valley by the northern hills of Italy? Because he brought before her a shadowy realization of what a little child, born to her among the Tuscan Mountains some eighteen years ago might have become, had he not died, as the peasant woman said, with whom she left him? She raised her head defiantly as such thoughts crowded on her memory and laughed harshly, and struck her hand fiercely on the marble mantel, and vowed that she would marry him, come what would.

The desire of possessing him was so strong upon her that she mistook it for a different love than that which lawfully she should have for him. But she was blind then, and did not know, or would not.

The next evening he came at his usual hour, but the charm of the old violin had departed, and they only sat and talked of their future.

They would live in Italy always, my lady said—it was because she could not face her old coterie in Paris with such a youthful husband beside her? Or was it that the wines were less adulterated, and the olives had a richer flavor, and the air was purer there than across the border?

Maybe the latter, for one must be charitable in such things, and I am charitable, for I am a man and can be so toward women, which one of their own sex cannot.

She had so much to say of her plans, of her vague desires for dreamy rest and ease forever within sight of the blue Mediterranean, that she had little leisure to give to thoughts concerning Beppo's past history, and slight wish to be questioned on her own.

But one night it occurred to her to ask him if he had lived long in Serra, whose mountain music had so displeased her at his first visit.

"I cannot remember much, for I left there when I was so young," he said.

"How young, Beppo?"

"When I was 5 years old."

"And that was—"

aspect was not a pleasant one. "My mother is dead," he continued presently. "I can't remember her, but she was very good to me, and when she died the priest took off all our furniture to pay for the masses he was going to say, and so I was left with nothing, and begged my way to Rome, where I could make my living with a violin."

"And have you nothing to remind you of that time?" she asked idly. He hesitated, then drew from his breast a small onyx locket with the initial R. cut on one side under a coat of arms. He opened it, and the face of a man past the prime of life, with low brow and short, crisp curling hair, was disclosed in view.

Little did Beppo imagine who it really was, but the Comtesse knew in that one glance, and sat as if turned to stone. "They said he was my father," said Beppo softly, "but the time is far off, and he never came to me, and so I cannot tell."

Reverently he kissed the portrait, then closed the locket and replaced it among the folds of his shirt.

The Comtesse did not speak. She only sat there silent, with the same pleasant smile of indifferent curiosity on her handsome face, but her heart had almost stopped its beating in the dull terror which the portrait in the locket brought to her.

It seemed as if she could not breathe. She arose and went over to the window, and Beppo followed her. A convulsive sob burst from her lips, but no tears came from her eyes, and her face was as impassive as ever. Tenderly he laid her head on his shoulder and kissed the wavy masses of dark-brown hair. Then all self-control deserted her, and she yielded to the terrible emotions which swept over her guilty soul like a torrent. Hot tears of joy for the son so unexpectedly found—tears of rage and disappointment for the lover so suddenly torn from her anxious grasp.

For the portrait was that of Beppo's father—the lover among the hills one summer years ago, and the locket she had given him as a love gift. Now it stood forth in undeniable evidence of Beppo's claim upon her, and in the fury of her selfish passion she would not acknowledge it.

Now all her dreams were over, the luxurious future with him gone. She took his face between her hands and gazed at it with a look which he remembered ever after, then pressed him tightly in her arms and kissed him as if they were never to meet again, and these kisses were the last she could ever bestow upon him, then thrust him from her and said that he must go.

Obediently Beppo took his departure, little thinking that when he came again he too would find his dream broken, and the mistress of the villa gone.

Yes, gone; for she could not stay, now that she knew the truth. Better that she should believe her false to the vows she had so passionately pledged than that she should know why love such as they felt for each other was unnatural and sinful.

"He will love me still, though he will curse me," she thought; "but love would go at once and for all time if I confessed."

So the villa was closed, and my lady went away to Paris. Beppo's heart was broken. But, as she had said, he loved her through everything, and would not believe but that she would soon return to him.

And she did return, when he least expected it, when he was most thankful for her presence.

Three years my lady passed quietly in Paris, when a great fever broke out in the lower quarter of Rome, and poor Beppo fell a victim to it.

Strange that the man who had sarcastically advised her to invite Beppo

"Caro—caro," he murmured feebly, "do not grieve for me, I had such faith in you I felt sure you would come back. And you are here, and in your arms I am content. Why did you go? I care not. You will be with me to the end, and that is all I ask—all that you can give me—your love till I die."

She looked on that pale face now illumined with a happiness which all her strength and fortitude could not disturb—no, she would not dare to tell him. Let him die as he said—content.

But she took him in her arms and held his head on her throbbing breast, and moaned to think that in that last hour there could not be perfect truth between them. Was it so after all what a holy father once said to her—that we make a heaven or hell for ourselves on earth? Perhaps. She thought so now.

The shadow deepened in that dreary chamber, for the day was closing fast. Beppo lay very still; she could scarcely hear him breathe, though his lips were by her cheek.

For an hour he did not stir again or give one sign of life, then he opened his eyes and murmured: "Caro—caro, hold me—do not let me go," and gave a stifled cry, and hid his face in her bosom. Then she knew that the end had come, and that the child which she had abandoned in that unhappy time was taken from her now, and her arms were empty, for his soul had fled.

Not in any cemetery in Italy was Beppo laid, but in a certain corner of Pere-la-Chaise, in the great vault where those of his mother's race forever sleep.

And tender boughs of cypress wave above it; and the wind, however harsh and boisterous elsewhere, seems to hush here to gentle murmurs which seem to say it like soft cypresses, an