

HE DIDN'T HAVE HIS MONK'S long beard anymore, nor his poor friar's hood, now that he got himself shaved every Sunday, and went out walking in his grand cassock of fine cloth, with his silk-lined cloak over his arm. And on those occasions when he was looking at his own fields, and his own vineyards, and his own flocks, and his own laborers, with his hands in his pockets and his little pipe in his mouth, if he ever did chance to recall the days when he washed up dishes for the Capucin monks and they out of charity put on him a lay-brother's long frock, he would make the sign of the cross with his left hand.

Yet if they hadn't taught him to say mass and to read and write, all out of charity, he would never have succeeded in wedging himself in among the first families of the place, nor in

nailing down in his account books the names of all those half-profits peasants who labored and prayed to God and good fortune for him, and then swore like Turks when it came to reckoning day. "Mind what I am, not what I was once," says the proverb. Who he was, everybody knew, for his mother still did his housecleaning. His Reverence had no family pride, no; and when he went to the baroness's to play at piquet with her, he had his brother to wait in the anteroom for him, holding the lantern.

His charity began at home, as God Himself enjoins; so he's taken one of his nieces into his house, not bad-looking, but without a rag to her back, so that she'd never have found the ghost of a husband; and he kept her and maintained her, what's more he put her in the fine room with glass in the windows, and the bed with bed-curtains, and he wasn't going to have her work, to ruin her hands with rough jobs. So that everybody thought it a real God's penalty when the poor creature was seized with scruples, such as will happen to women who have nothing else to do and pass their days in church beating their breasts because they're in mortal sin — though not when her uncle was there, for he wasn't one of those priests who like to show themselves on the altar in pomp and splendor before their inamoratas. As for other women, outside their homes it was enough for him to give them a little caress with two fingers on their cheek, paternally, or through the little window of the confession box to give them the benediction after they had rinsed out their consciences and emptied the sack of their own and other people's sins, by which means he always learned something useful, being a man who speculated in country produce.

Blessed Lord, he didn't pretend to be a holy man, not he! Holy men died of hunger, like the vicar who celebrated mass even when he wasn't paid for it, and went round the beggarly houses in a cassock so tattered that it was a scandal to Religion.

His Reverence wanted to get on, and he got on, with the wind full-sail, at first a little bit scuttling, because of that blessed frock which bothered him, so much so that for pitching it into the vegetable garden he had been had up before the Monastic Tribunal, and the confraternity had helped him to get the better of it, so as to be rid of him, because so long as he was in the monastery there were stools and dishes flying at every election of provincials; Father Battistino, a servant of God sturdy as a muleteer, had been half slaughtered, and Father Giammaria, the superior, had lost all his teeth in the fray. His Reverence, himself, kept mum in his cell, after he'd stirred up the fire, and in that way he'd managed to become a reverend, with all his teeth, which were of good use to him; and everybody said to Father Giammaria, who had been the one to take this scorpion into their sleeve, "Good for him!"

But Father Giammaria, good soul, chewing his lips with his bare gums, replied:

"Well, what do you want! He was never cut out for a Capucin friar. He's like Pope Sixtus, who started by being a swineherd and then became what he was. Didn't you see what promise he gave as a boy?"

And so Father Giammaria remained superior of the Capucin friars, without a shirt on his back or a cent in his pocket, hearing confession for the love of God, and cooking vegetable soup for the poor.

His Reverence, as a boy, when he saw his brother — the one with the lantern — breaking his back hoeing in the fields, and his sisters unable to find a husband even if they'd give themselves away for nothing, and his mother spinning worsted yarn in the dark so as to save the floating-wick lamp, had said: "I want to be a priest!"

They had sold the mule and the scrap of land in order to send him to school, in the hope that if they got so far as to have

a priest in the house, it would be better than the patch of land and the mule. But it took more than that to keep him at the seminary. And so the boy began to buzz round the monastery for them to take him as a novice; and one day when they were expecting the provincial, and there was a lot to do in the kitchen, they called him in to lend a hand. Father Giammaria, who had a good heart, said to him: "You like it here? Then you stop with us."

And Brother Carmelo, the porter, in the long hours when he had nothing to do, wearying of sitting on the low wall of the cloister knocking his sandals one against the other, put together a bit of a frock for him out of the rags of cassocks that they'd flung on to the fig tree to scare away the sparrows. His mother, his brother, and his sister protested that if he became a friar it was all over with them, and they gave up the money that had gone for his schooling as lost, for they'd never get another halfpenny out of him. But he, who had it in his blood to be a friar, shrugged his shoulders and answered, "You mean to tell me a fellow can't follow the vocation God has called him to?"

Father Giammaria had taken a fancy to him because he was as light as a cat in the kitchen, and the same at all the menial jobs, even in serving at mass, as if he'd never done anything else all his life long, with his eyes lowered and his lips sewed together like a seraph. Now that he no longer served at mass he still kept his lowered eyes and his sewed-up lips, when it was a question of some shady business with the gentry, or when there was occasion for him to bid in the auction of the communal lands, or to take his oath before the magistrate.

He had to take a fat oath, indeed, in 1854, at the altar, in front of the ark that holds the Sacrament, while he was saying holy mass, and people were accusing him of spreading the cholera, and wanting to make him dance for it.

“By this consecrated host that I have in my hand,” said he to the faithful who were kneeling, crouching low on to their heels, “I am innocent, my children! Moreover I promise you the scourge shall cease within a week. Have patience!”

Yes, they had patience; perforce they had patience! Since he was well in with the judge and the force captain, and King Bomba sent him fat chickens at Easter and at Christmas, because he was so much obliged to him, they said; and Bomba had sent him also the counterpoison, in case there did come a serious accident.

An old aunt of his whom he'd had to take under his roof so as to prevent folks talking, and who was no good for anything anymore except to eat the bread of a traitor, had uncorked the bottle for somebody else, and so had caught the cholera out and out; but her own nephew, for fear of raising people's suspicions, hadn't been able to administer the counterpoison to her.

“Give me the counterpoison; give me the counterpoison!” pleaded the old woman, who was already as black as coal, without any regard for the doctor and the lawyer who were both there, looking one another in the face embarrassed. His Reverence, with his brazen face, as if it wasn't his affair, muttered, shrugging his shoulders, “Take no notice of her, she is delirious.”

The counterpoison, if he really had got it, had been sent to him by the king under seal of confession, and he couldn't give it to anybody. The judge himself had gone to beg it of him on his knees, for his wife who was dying, and he'd got nothing for answer from his Reverence except this:

“You may command me in life and death, dear friend; but in this business, really, I can do nothing for you.”

This was the story as everybody knew it, and since they knew that by dint of intrigues and cleverness he had managed to become the intimate friend of the king, of the judge, and of

the force captain, and had managed to get a handle over the police, like the intendant himself, so that his reports arrived at Naples without ever passing through the hands of the lieutenant, nobody dared to fall out with him, and when he cast his eye upon an olive garden or piece of tilled land that was for sale, or on a lot of the communal lands that was to be leased out by auction, even the big somebodies of the place, if they dared to bid against him, did it with smooth words and smarmy phrases, offering him a pinch of snuff. Once, with the baron himself, they kept on for half a day haffling and chaffling. The baron played the sugary, and his Reverence, seated in front of him with his gown gathered between his legs, at every higher bid offered him his silver snuff-box, sighing:

“Why, whatever are you thinking of, Baron, my dear sir? Now the donkey’s fallen down, we’ve got to get him up again.”

And so until the lot was knocked down, and the baron gave in, green with bile.

Which the peasants quite approved of, because big dogs always quarrel among themselves over a good bone, and there’s never anything left for poor devils to gnaw. But what made them murmur again was that that servant of God squeezed them worse than the antichrist. Whenever they had to share with him, he had no scruple about laying hold of his neighbor’s property, since he had all the implements of confession in his own hands, and if he fell into mortal sin he could give himself absolution.

“Everything depends on having a priest in the house,” they sighed. And the most well-to-do among them denied themselves the bread out of their mouths to send their son to the seminary.

“When a man works the land, he has to give himself to it completely,” said his Reverence as an excuse for himself when he had no regard for anybody. Even mass itself he wouldn’t cel-

brate save on Sunday, when there was nothing else to do, for he wasn't one of those little priests who'd run round after the small change for the mass. He wasn't in want. So that Monsignor the Bishop, in his pastoral visit, arriving in his house and finding his breviary covered with dust, wrote on it with his finger: "*Deo gratias!*" But his Reverence had something else to do but waste his time reading his breviary, and he laughed at the monsignor's reproof. If his breviary was covered with dust, his oxen were glossy, his sheep had deep fleeces, and his wheat stood as high as a man, so that his half-profits laborers enjoyed at least the sight of it, and could build fine castles in the air on it, before they came to reckon with the master. The poor devils opened their hearts like anything. Wheat standing like magic! The Lord must have passed by it in the night! You can see it belongs to a servant of God; and that it's good to work for him who's got the mass and the benediction in his hands!

In May, in the season when they looked up into the sky to conjure away any cloud that was passing, they knew that their master was saying mass for the harvest, which was worth more than the images of saints, or the blessed seeds to drive away the evil eye or ill fortune. So it was, his Reverence didn't want them to scatter the blessed seed loaves among the wheat, because it does no good except to attract sparrows and other mischievous birds. Of images of the saints however he had pocketfuls, since he took as many as he liked from the sacristy, good ones too, and gave them to his peasants.

But at harvesttime he came on horseback, along with his brother, who served him as estate keeper, with his gun on his shoulder, and then he never stirred, but slept there, in the malaria, to look after his own interests, without bothering even about Christ. Those poor devils, who had forgotten the hard days of winter in that fine weather, stood open-mouthed when they heard the litany of their debts being recited to them. So

many measures of beans that your wife came for in the time of the snow — so many bundles of kindling given to your boy — so many measures of corn advanced for seed, with interest at so much a month. — Add it up for yourself!

A swindling account! In the year of famine, after Uncle Carmenio had left his sweat and his health in his Reverence's fields, he had to leave his ass as well, come harvesttime, to pay off the debt, and went away himself empty-handed, swearing with awful words that made heaven and earth shudder. His Reverence, who wasn't there to confess him, let him say his say, and led the ass into the stable.

Since he had become rich he had discovered that his family, who had never even had bread to eat, possessed a benefice as fat as a canonry, and at the time of the abolishing of the mortmains, he had applied for the release and had definitely laid hands on the farm. Only he was annoyed at the money he had to pay for the release, and called the government a thief for not letting the property of the benefices go gratis to those whom it belonged to.

On this score of the government he had had to swallow a fair amount of bile, until 1860, when they had made the revolution, and he'd had to hide in a hole like a rat, because the peasants, all those who had had trouble with him, wanted to do him in. After that, had come the litany of the taxes, which there was no end to paying, and the very thought of it turned his wine at table into poison. Now they were setting on the Holy Father, and wanting to take away from him the temporal power. But when the pope sent out the excommunication against all those who profited by the mortmains, his Reverence felt the fly settle on his own nose, and he grumbled:

"What's the pope got to do with my property? He's got nothing to do with the temporal power." And he went on saying mass better than ever.



The peasants went to hear his mass, but without wishing it they thought of all the robberies of the celebrant, and were distracted. Their women, while they were confessing their sins to him, couldn't help letting out to his face:

"Father, I accuse myself of having spoken ill of you who are a servant of God, because we've been without beans and without grain this winter, because of you."

"Because of me? Do I make good weather or bad luck? Or am I to own the land so that you lot can sow it and use it to your own advantage? Have you no conscience, and no fear of God? Why have you come here to confess yourself? This is the devil tempting you, to make you lose the sacrament of penitence. When you go and get all those children of yours you never think that they're so many mouths to feed? And what fault is it of mine if then there isn't enough bread for you? Did I make you get all those children? I became a priest so as not to have any."

However, he absolved them, because he was obliged to; but nevertheless in the heads of those rough people there still remained some confusion between the priest who raised his hand to bless in the name of God, and the master who falsified the accounts, and sent them away from the farm with their sack empty and their sickle under their arm.

"We can't do anything, we can't do anything," muttered the poor creatures resignedly. "The pitcher doesn't win against the stone, and we can't go to law with his Reverence, because it's he who knows the law."

He did know it too! When they were before the judge, with a lawyer, he stopped everybody's mouth with his saying: "The law is like this and like that." And it was always as it suited him. In the good days gone by he laughed at his enemies and his envious. They had bedeviled him, they had gone to the bishop, they had thrown his niece in his face, Farmer Carmenio and

the ill-gotten gains, they had had mass and confession taken away from him. Very well! What then? He had no need either of the bishop or anybody. He had his own possessions, and was respected like those who lead the band in the village; he was at home with the baroness, and the more row they made about him, the worse was the scandal. The big people are never touched, not even by the bishop, and you take your hat off to them, out of prudence and love of peace.

But after heresy had triumphed, with the revolution, what good was all that to him? The peasants were learning to read and write, and could reckon up accounts better than you could yourself; the political parties were wrangling for the local government, and dividing the spoil without regard to the rest of the world; the first beggar that came along could find a gratuitous counsel, if he had a lawsuit with you, and he made you pay all the costs of the case yourself! A priest didn't count anymore, neither with the judge, nor with the force captain; nowadays he couldn't even get a man put into prison on a mere hint, if they were wanting in respect to him, and he was no good anymore except to say mass, and hear confession, like a public servant. The judge feared the newspapers, and public opinion, what so and so might say, and he dispensed justice like Solomon! And then even the property he'd got together with the sweat of his own brow, they envied it him, they'd thrown the evil eye on him and black magic; that bit of nourishment he ate at table gave him a great to-do in the night; while his brother, who led a hard life, and ate bread and onion, digested better than an ostrich, knowing that within a hundred years' time, when he himself was dead, he'd be his heir, and would find himself rich without lifting a finger. The mother, poor thing, was good for nothing anymore, and only lived on to suffer and make others suffer, nailed down in bed with paralysis, so that she had to be waited on herself now; and

his niece herself, fat, well-clad, provided with everything she could want, with nothing to do but go into church, tormented him when she took it into her head to be in mortal sin, as if he was one of those excommunicated scoundrels who had dispossessed the pope, and she had made the bishop take away mass from him.

“There’s neither religion, nor justice, nor anything left!” grumbled his Reverence as he grew to be old. “Now everybody wants to have his say. Those that have got nothing want to take what you’ve got from you. — ‘You get up, so that I can take your place!’ Those that have got nothing else to do come looking for fleas in your house! They wanted to make a priest no better than a sexton, say mass and sweep the church. They don’t want to do the will of God anymore, that’s where it is!”