

MOUNTAIN MYSTERIES:

A MIDSUMMER SCHERZO.

"PER BACCO! It is of no use! We shall have to turn back! and if your Excellency had only listened to me in the first—"

What more the driver of the little mountain carriage would have said is uncertain, his voice being silenced at this point by the explosion of a terrific peal of thunder coming almost simultaneously with the electric flame which illumined the whole landscape. It showed distinctly the wild precipitous road skirted by forests of great chestnuts bending and creaking before the furious blast, while beyond were lofty cliffs crowned with isolated villages, and the Apennines range upon range in the distance.

The next moment all was dark again, but the sudden gleam had served to show a group of buildings, high above the road on the right; one of the houses seemed superior to the rest, and in good preservation.

The solitary traveler answered the unfinished remark of the *vetturino* by proposing to seek shelter for the night at this dwelling.

The driver either did not hear or would not heed this remark, being engaged in a struggle with his horse. The poor creature, terrified at the storm, had involved itself in a difficulty with his *trappelo*. A *trappelo*, be it known, is an extra horse, ox or mule, harnessed loosely with ropes in front of the driven one; it is added at the foot of any steep ascent in the mountain roads, and is under the charge of some village urchin or country lass, who takes it back to its owners when the ascent is accomplished.

The two animals in their fright had tangled their harness and tied themselves head and tail, a complication which it took the driver and the boy a considerable time to disentangle, and involved a great deal of discussion.

They both talked at once, and made more free use of their hands in conversation than in loosening the ropes; and as all the chances were talked over of what might have happened had the mule reared on the other side, which was a sheer precipice, instead of on the inner side of the road, and various theories were propounded as to how she got reversed at all, the two energetic voices rising above the continued roar of the storm, it may easily be imagined the traveler lost his patience ere he found a hearing, and again proposed to take shelter at the house he had seen just above them.

But here, alas! a new discussion arose. Regardless of wind and rain, the man and boy, one gesticulating at each side of the storm-beaten carriage, urged their opposite opinions on the Englishman, the man counseling their going on to the next village, the boy advising their return to the one they came from—his own house, by the by—and both denying that any shelter was to be found nearer.

"But I saw several houses close by," exclaimed the traveler.

Two forefingers black in the light of the dim lamp were shaken in his face from opposite directions, and for

once the two voices agreed in saying that he had been mistaken. A sheet of lightning illumined the scene at that instant; the two Italians crossed themselves, and the traveler cried in triumph, "There, you have seen! there is quite a hamlet close by; let us have no more dispute, I insist—" a terrific peal of thunder finished the sentence for him.

The driver shrugged his shoulders, and with that unanswerable "*come vuole lei*" (you must do as you choose), succumbed to superior power.

Not so the boy, who began some disparaging remarks on the house, but the driver cut him short with a word and a push, telling him to "look after his *trappelo*, who was going over the precipice this time," and turning to Mr. Mostyn, suggested that he should himself go up to the house and ask for shelter, as they could not leave the horses.

Inwardly grumbling at the discomfiture of his position, and stumbling in the darkness over stones and fragments of rock, our traveler floundered into a pool, and then emerged on a damp lawn with long grass. Another flash showed him the house, which seemed to be of solid construction, standing a few yards in front of him. That the windows and door should be tightly closed was not to be wondered at during such a storm and at that late hour. Something, however, in the aspect of the building seemed to tell him that it was abandoned, and indeed his urgent knocks elicited no sign of life within.

Hesitating in perplexity what to do next, he observed in a window of one of the adjoining cottages a glimmer of light. Making his way as quickly as possible toward this beacon, he knocked vigorously at the nearest door.

After what seemed a long interval the casement was cautiously opened, and an old woman's head appeared, showing darkly against the light within, which touched her gray hair with silver. To her "*Chi è?*" (Who's there?) he replied with an urgent request for refuge from the storm; but her answer was doubtful. She was evidently suspicious of entertaining an unknown guest, arriving in mystery, like the demon of the storm. She withdrew, and the sound of several voices arguing together was heard within. All the while Arthur Mostyn was being drenched without, for mountain rain falls in cascades, not in single drops.

At length the door was opened slowly by a young man, and the traveler entering found himself in one of those large, low chambers, at once kitchen and sitting room, common to the mountains. The walls were perfectly black with age and smoke; the ceiling, of loose poles laid across beams, was equally black. This might be explained by the fact that the fire was in the middle of the floor, bricked round for the purpose, and that the smoke ascended through the open roof and escaped above. The scene was perfectly Rembrandtesque, glowing fire burned in the centre, while a huge caldron hung from a beam steaming in its midst, and around were grouped a large family party—grandmother and grandchildren, stalwart sons and their wives, a kitten and a baby, curled up together fast asleep on the floor, another sleepy child