

trying hard to keep awake enough to watch his father stirring the *polenta* in the caldron. On the stranger's entrance every eye was turned to him as he stood dripping in the doorway. One glance was enough to show he was to be trusted, and the natural politeness of the Tuscan mountaineers showed itself on the instant. They pressed him to come to the fire, removed his damp coat and boots, and though they had no available substitutes to produce, a woman brought a large shawl and put it over his shoulders. Then as he stood warming himself, and feeling as if he had suddenly got into an old picture, the assembled group stood regarding him with a persistent stare, calculated to put a more nervous man out of countenance.

One or two of the men set off to show the driver to a rough stable for his horses, and the sturdy father, who had conscientiously kept on stirring the *polenta*, in spite of distractions, announced that it was ready to be served. His wife, putting a stiff, swaddled baby on the ground near the kitten, brought a huge bowl, and the yellow steaming mess was turned into it, and placed on the massive worm-eaten oaken table at the side. Then the father, seating himself so as to be on a level with the dish, took a piece of string, and holding one end in his mouth, sliced and then cut in pieces the whole mess, which by this time was quite firm. The children woke up as if by instinct, and came crowding to obtain their handful of the steaming compound, and the old woman putting some rough plates and glasses and some coarse bread on the table, the meal was ready.

Arthur Mostyn, hungry enough not to be fastidious, willingly partook, making one of the homely party assembled round the old oak table, while a gaudy colored Madonna on the wall in front of him gazed down smilingly through a veil of several layers of smoke acquired in the course of years. The simple peasants all looked toward her, and crossed themselves devoutly before eating. During the meal they told him that the house and its surroundings belonged to Count Mastini, a name already familiar to him, as his aunt in England was a friend of the late Countess and had given him an introduction to the present Count. He, however, seldom visited it, leaving the care of the villa to his *contadino*, or peasant, who was now speaking. "You see, Signore Inglese" (let any Englishman try to conceal his nationality from a Continental to whom he has spoken two words if he can), "this place is sort of lonely like, five miles from the nearest village, which is but a poor place at the best. And the Padrone (master) spends most of his time at Rome or Florence, which he likes better than this old villa on account of—"

"But it is not the loneliness," burst in the irrepressible boy of the *trappelo*, who sat by the fire discussing a huge slice of *polenta*.

"Can't you be quiet," said the driver, giving him a kick; "who asked you to talk nonsense?"

"Father says—" began the boy.

"Tell your father to mind his own business," exclaimed the peasant, with a look that silenced the boy at

once. Then to change the subject he added: "'Tis lucky you found us up at this hour; we generally sup at eight o'clock, only there was a *funzione* (service) at the church, some miles off, this evening, and that made us late—we only got home just before the storm. 'Tis the vigil of San Giovanni (St. John's Eve), you know."

His frugal supper ended, the traveler began to agitate the—to him important—subject of a bed, but found that considerable difficulties awaited him. In fact, there was not an article of that description in all the cottages that did not do double, or even triple, duty. The driver and boy were content, the one to sleep on a large "settle" by the dying fire, the other to repose on the same straw as his *trappelo*; but for the gentleman was no place found, unless he would consent to make a third on the mattress shared by two bachelor brothers. Gathering from the peasants that the large villa was furnished, and that they had the key, he proposed to sleep there if they would prepare him a bed, urging as a claim that he had with him a letter of introduction to Count Mastini. He was not surprised—having some traveling experience—to find that a hundred difficulties were made, but the start of horror that ran through the assembly rather puzzled him. The difficulties he surmounted one by one, however; when the peasants had no more reasonable objections to offer, yet remained as obstinate as ever in refusing, he lost patience and began to insist; and what will not Saxon determination backed up by Saxon gold conquer?

The peasant yielded at length, unwillingly it must be confessed, also much worried by many sleeve twitchings and mutterings from the female members of the family, who evidently did not approve of the Englishman's design. The ancient dame, finding all private advice unavailing, placed herself in their path, and in a trembling voice, but with a certain dignity, said: "Beppe, my son, beware of what you do. Englishman, you know not what may happen if you insist!"

Beppe, the stalwart, father of the younger family, shrugged his shoulders, saying, "If the Signore chooses to go in spite of our advice, he can't blame us." Then calling to his wife for some clean sheets, which she gave him from an old oaken chest, he took a lantern and led the way out.

"Alas!" cried the old dame, as Beppe good naturedly put her aside, "it is time for me to go; no one minds me, not even my own son."

The irrepressible boy gave vent to his feelings by a prolonged whistle, and ejaculated, "If he knew what I know he'd be stilettoed rather than sleep there." But the grandmother and driver both turning angrily on him, he forthwith took his way to seek the company of his sleeping companion, the mule, while the old woman went sighing up the creaking stairs to bed.

## II.

The *contadino* whom they called "Beppe" led the way with the bundle of linen under his arm, a lamp in one hand and a great key in the other, muttering as he went down the cottage steps, "My mother is growing old,