

CHAPTER I

THE DREAM BEFORE AWAKING

A glory of Italian noonday lay upon the little town of Locarno. Surrounding Alpine heights were yet snowy with winter's livery, and the near forests of pine showed grand and gloomy against the distant peaks of piercing whiteness, but Lago Maggiore¹ rippled as blue and calm as in midsummer, reflecting a heaven without a cloud.

The narrow streets of Locarno shut off the sunshine well, except in the broad marketplace, where the usual vendors of country provisions sat and sold and chattered in the *patois* (dialect) of the mountains.

On this particular day some absorbing subject interested them. Many glances were directed toward the huge dark monastery which overtopped and shadowed the other buildings, as the Church in that age towered above and eclipsed all secular things. A side of the square was filled with the gray massive front and ponderous portals of a convent. Occasionally a dingy lay brother entered or emerged from it, with fifty pairs of eager black eyes following his movements, and fifty glib tongues gossiping about him in whispers.

"And you say," observed a peasant girl carrying a fruit-basket to an aged crone who sold relics and images at a stall in one corner, "that the heretic ladies are before His Eminence even now?"

¹ The Great Lake

“Even now,” echoed Dame Ursula, crossing herself quickly. “The holy saints defend us from heresy and witchcraft, and all evil! I saw them entering two hours ago. His Eminence condescends to argue with them, hoping to draw them again into the true faith. If they are obstinate, why, the Church has power to punish yet, in spite of Luther and all his fiends.” The old woman pursed her withered lips firmly together, as she replaced on its proper end a leaden Madonna which had rattled down against a bead rosary, and propped it up securely with a crucifix.

“But, Mother Ursula, they would not burn women, would they?” And the dark eyes of the maiden opened wide with a sort of dread, as she nestled closer to the old relic-vendor.

“No, foolish child, not here, though I have heard of it in other places; but the Church has ways of punishing besides that, believe me.” The crone put up her brown bony finger, and nodded mysteriously, as if she knew a great deal, were she only willing to tell. “You have heard of the Holy Office, Child?”

Twelve years before, in 1543, Pope Paul the Third had issued his bull founding in Rome the congregation *sancti officii*, constituting six cardinals inquisitors-general, and endowing them with terrific power for the extirpation of Lutheran opinions. From then on the dawn of Divine truth in Italy began to be overcast with the darkness of premature eclipse.

Caterina, the peasant girl, had never heard the tremendous name, which was to prove a watchword of terror to the most extreme verge of her native soil. Old Mother Ursula knew little more than the name, but drawing on her vivid Southern imagination for her facts, she quickly sketched a few items of horror which blanched her listener’s cheek and lips.

“The poor ladies! I hope His Eminence will convince them of their errors,” sighed the girl. “It must be a terrible calamity to be a heretic! Now, what is it that they don’t believe, Mother Ursula?”

“Everything!” answered the other, oracularly. “They don’t believe the very saints are in Heaven! No, they blaspheme the adorable sacrifice of the mass, affirming that any common piece

of bread is as good as the blessed Eucharist! Sancta Cecilia, pardon me for saying the words!" And she crossed herself vehemently many times, and pattered a few prayers on her bead amulet.

"These very ears," she continued, "heard the physician's wife declare that extreme unction was of no avail to a soul that had lived in sin. When I confessed it to Father Pietro, he said it was rank heresy, and an invention of the Lutherans. And as for purgatory, they don't believe in it at all."

Here the relic-seller grasped her companion's wrist, as she glanced at two men who passed by the stall.

"There he goes, the Signor di Montalto, her husband; the best leech in Locarno, and kindest to the poor — more's the pity that he should be tainted with a heretic wife. And that tall youth beside him is a young doctor fresh from Padua — Signor Francesco they call him; a most gentle and learned student, who cured my cough with a draught of herbs the other day. He has a certain look of my son Giovanni, don't you think, Caterina? The same firm burnt cheek, and great eyes, as black and bright as midnight around the stars. But I forget; you do not know Giovan, who has gone to the wars — all the saints preserve him!"

The two gentlemen thus noticed passed by the convent, and entered a labyrinth of wretched streets beyond, bound on some professional visit, much to Dame Ursula's disappointment, and that of other gazers in the market-place, who hoped that the plot was thickening by their arrival.

Let us, readers of today, do what they longed for in vain — enter the monastery and oversee the conference between His Eminence the papal nuncio Riverda, bishop of Terracina, and these two Lutheran ladies of Locarno.

He had been more than two hours convincing them, these weak women, with the triple power of his own episcopal theology, and that of two Dominican divines besides; and they were not yet convinced, nor even frightened. Brucioli's Italian Bible was their armoury of arguments, which all the authority of popes

and fathers could not foil. His Eminence the nuncio was getting angry — with some cause. For is it not provoking when the battering ram that could crush in a fortification strikes harmless against a soft cushion?

“Truly the Church was wise when she forbade the reading of the Scriptures in the vulgar tongue to the common people,” he said, with bitterness. “It has always been a fertile source of the most pernicious errors, for the unlearned and the ignorant will wrest them to their own destruction.”

“My lord, we are ready to be taught,” replied Lucia di Orello, gently. “We desire to be instructed by those wiser than ourselves. If Your Eminence can prove to us from God’s Word that we are wrong . . .”

“But we must have such proof, and none other will suffice,” interposed the more impetuous Barbara di Montalto. “We submit to no human authority in matters of faith, not even to that of His Holiness, or of a general council.”

The priests looked at one another.

“You are a bold woman,” said the nuncio, as he noted something in tablets before him, “to thus declare yourself superior to the voice of the Church in all ages.”

“But the voice of the Church has uttered error,” answered the lady, firmly; “and God has enabled us to discern that error through the light of His Spirit through His Scripture. Therefore we will endure all things rather than yield an iota of the truth.”

The nuncio had grown suddenly cool; except for an evil light lurking in his deep-set eyes, like lurid flame in a cavern, one might have thought he asked rather an indifferent question in his next words.

“And what, Signora, do you call truth which the Holy Roman Church does not call truth?”

A slight gesture of his hand, imperceptible except to the person for whom it was meant, caused the Dominican beside him to record the answer in his tablets, unperceived by the speaker, whose enthusiasm kindled a bright glow in her eye and cheek as she stood before him.

“All that God has written in His holy Scripture is truth. All that the popes have published in their decretals, adding to Scripture, is error. The whole system of the papacy is one vast error. Show me anything in its doctrines or practices that is not alloyed with falsehood!”

As she paused for a moment, the nuncio shrugged his shoulders slightly, and his lips contracted back over his white teeth in a sort of smile. “The doctrine of the adorable Eucharist!” he said, insidiously.

“You know, my lord, that there, most of all, your Church has failed in keeping the truth,” was the undaunted reply. “You know that Peter and John never understood the sacred bread and wine to contain the very body and soul of Christ, which then sat with them at the table. But your Church has made merchandise of the Holy Supper, turning it into an idolatrous mass, and causing men to worship the work of their own hands.”

“Barbara,” said the soft voice of her friend Lucia, as she pulled the skirt of the speaker’s robe, “you are over-bold — you forget . . .”

“I do not forget. I know that they have my life in their hands, that they can send me to the stake if they will. But I must speak the truth; and I say that the Roman Catholic mass *is* idolatrous, and an insult to the majesty of Heaven as well as to the reason of men!”

“*Basta!* It is enough!” exclaimed the nuncio, rising, with that evil smile on his lips still. “I thank you, ladies, for your courtesy and your plain words. My desire was to convince you of your heresy, and bring you back to the one fold under the one shepherd, and as I have failed, and these learned doctors have failed, our conference had best come to a close.”

He waved his hand, on which glittered the costly ring of his episcopate.

The Lutheran ladies made their obeisance and withdrew.

“Oh, Barbara!” said the gentle Lucia, drawing a free breath when they reached the open air of the streets by a secluded postern. “How I trembled for you! The eyes of that Dominican

were like daggers. You are too brave, my friend. You have a lion heart.”

“Not braver than your own, my Lucia, though you have the grace of gentleness,” said the Signora di Montalto, looking at her affectionately. “I know that you would stand as firmly as I, but perhaps with less rash demonstration of strength. Ah! Here comes Francesco.”

“Well, Signora, are you convinced?” the young physician asked, with a smile. And it was apparent from the conversation which followed that others in the Montalto household besides its mistress were tainted with the leaven of heresy.

The house which they approached was more like a fortress than a private dwelling. Immensely thick walls, slit with loopholes, and battlemented at top — the foundation on a rock circled on three sides by the waters of the Lago Maggiore — one could easily believe that its origin was during the wars between the Guelfs and Ghibellines, when every man’s home required the strength of a castle.

Night came down over the beautiful lake, arrayed in purple robes pierced with a thousand stars. In a turret of the fortified house a lamp burned, hour after hour, gleaming redly out on the darkness. It shone on the coarse yellowish pages of a large volume under the eyes of Barbara di Montalto — a copy of Brucioli’s translation of the Bible. When her spirit was overwhelmed within her, when the sure reaction came after her excitement before the nuncio, she sought for cordial here. And in a still small voice these words breathed into her soul:

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you . . . when you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned . . . for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.
(Isaiah 43:2, 3)

And her dauntless eyes filled with happy tears in the realization of the presence and help of the precious Saviour.

A sound as of some person speaking in the next room, which opened from the turret by a curtained archway, attracted her attention.

Shading the lamp with her hand, she entered, and stood by the couch on which her husband lay in restless sleep. His face startled her. The large veins were swollen on his forehead, the brows knit heavily, the lips drawn back from the clenched teeth. He flung out his arm violently.

“Off — off!” he exclaimed fiercely, grasping the side of the couch, as if engaged in a hand-to-hand struggle. “Villains, traitors! You shall not dare . . . !”

She could look on the agony of his face no longer. She put her hand on his shoulder, and called him by name. Di Montalto’s eyes opened widely, and glared around him with the indistinct vision of one suddenly awakened.

“It was only a dream, *mio caro* (my dear),” said his wife gently; “only a dream.” And she pushed back the matted hair which had fallen over his damp brow.

He drew a long deep breath of relief. “It was horrible as a reality,” he said. “They were dragging me to the dungeons of the Holy Office, Barbara. I tell you I have seen nothing more plainly in my waking hours than the dark, reeking walls of that torture-chamber just now. I clung to them; I fought desperately. God be thanked, it was only a dream!”

His wife’s face had paled somewhat, and a slight shiver ran through her frame. The dream was no impossibility for her.