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ONLY A MONTH;

OR, A CURIOUS MYSTERY EXPLAINED.

CHAPTER XXVI.—(Cont'd)

Frithiof's clouded face instantly cleared.

"Thank you," he said, simply.

"Well, now, is it possible for an outsider to help in unraveling the mystery?" said Donati. "For when a man like you is accused in this way I take it for granted there must be a mystery."

"No one can possibly explain it," said Frithiof. "I can't tell in the least how the thing happened, but appearances were altogether against me. It is the most extraordinary affair, but God knows I had no hand in it."

"I want to hear all about it," said Donati. "I am leaving England to-morrow; can't you come back and have supper with me now, and let me hear this just as it all happened?"

Even if he had wished to refuse, Frithiof could hardly have done so; and, as it was, he was so miserable that he would have caught at much less hearty sympathy. They walked along the crowded pavement toward Sackville Street, and had almost reached the carriage when a conversation immediately behind them became distinctly audible.

"They make such a fuss over this Donati," said the speaker. "But I happen to know that he's a most reputable character. I was hearing all about him the other day from some one who used to know him intimately. They say you know that—"

Here the conversation died away in the distance, and what that curse of modern society—the almighty "They"—said as to Donati's private affairs remained unknown to him. Frithiof glanced at the singer's face.

"No matter," said Donati in a minute, "I do not sing for a gossiping public. I sing for Christ."

"But that they should dare say such a thing as that!" exclaimed Frithiof.

"For one's self," said Donati, "it is—well—not much; but for the sake of those belonging to one it certainly does carry a sting. But every one who serves the public in a public capacity is in the same boat. It doesn't make one immoral to be considered immoral, and it doesn't make you a thief to be considered dishonest. But now I want to hear about this accusation of Mr. Horner's. When did it all happen?"

In the dim light Frithiof told his story; it was a relief to tell it to sympathetic ears; Donati's faith in him seemed to fill him with new life, and though the strange events



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of that miserable Monday did not grow any clearer in the telling, yet somehow a hope began to dawn in his heart.

"It certainly is most unaccountable," said Donati as the carriage drew up before a pretty little villa in Avenue Road. He paused to speak to the coachman. "We shall want the carriage in time to go to the 9.40 train at Charing Cross, Wilson; good-night."

"But if you start so early," said Frithiof, "I had better not hinder you any longer."

"You do not hinder me; I am very much interested. You must certainly come in to supper, and afterward I want to hear more about this. How unlucky it was that the five-pound note should have been changed that day by Sardon!"

At this moment the door was opened; Frithiof caught a vision of a slim figure in a pale rose-colored tea-gown, and the loveliest face he had ever seen was raised to kiss Donati as he entered.

"How nice and early you are!" exclaimed a fresh, merry voice. Then catching sight of a strange, and blushing a little, she added: "I fancied it was Jack and Domenica you were bringing back with you."

"Let me introduce you to my wife, Herr Falck," said Donati.

The house was prettily, but very simply, furnished, and about it there was that indefinable air of home that Frithiof had so often noticed in Rowan Tree House.

"You must forgive a very unceremonious supper, Herr Falck," said Francesca, "but the fact is, I have sent all the servants to bed, for I knew they would have to be up early to-morrow, and they feel the traveling a good deal."

"Much more than you and I do," said Donati. "We have grown quite hardened to it."

"Then this is not your regular home?" asked Frithiof.

"Yes, it is our English home. We generally have five months here and five at Naples, with the rest of the time either at Paris or Berlin or Vienna. After all, a wandering life makes very little difference when you carry about your home with you."

"And baby is the best traveler in the world," said Donati, "and in every way the most model baby. I think," glancing at his wife, "that she is as true a gypsy as Gigi himself."

"Poor Gigi! he can't bear being left behind! By the bye, had you time to take him back to school before the concert or did he go alone?"

"I had just time to take him," said Donati, waiting upon Frithiof as he talked. "He was rather doleful, poor old man; but cheered up when I told him that he was to spend the summer holidays at Merlebank, and to come to Naples at Christmas. It is a nephew of mine of whom we speak," he explained to Frithiof; "and, of course, his education has to be thought of, and can not always fit in with my engagements. You go in very much for education in Norway, I understand?"

Frithiof found himself talking quite naturally and composedly about Norwegian customs and his former life, and it was not until afterward that it struck him as a strange thing that on the very day after his disgrace, when, but for Mr. Boniface's kindness, he might actually have been in prison he should be quietly, and even for the time happily, talking of the old days.

They did not linger long over the supper-table, for Frithiof was suffering too much to eat, and Donati, like most of his countrymen, had a

very small appetite. Francesca, with a kindly good-night to the Norwegian, went upstairs to her baby, and the two men drew their chairs up to the open French window at the back of the room looking on to the little garden to which the moonlight gave a certain mysterious charm.

"I have thought over it," said Donati almost abruptly, "but I can't find the very slightest clew. It is certainly a mystery."

"And must always remain so," said Frithiof; despairingly.

"I do not think that at all. Some day all will probably be explained. And be sure to let me hear when it is, for I shall be anxious to know."

"It will never be explained," Frithiof said. "I was born under an unlucky star; at the very moment when all seems well something has always interfered to spoil my life, and with my father it was exactly the same—it was an undeserved disgrace that actually killed him."

And then, to his own astonishment, he found himself telling Donati, bit by bit, the whole of his own story. The Italian said very little, but he listened intently, and in truth possessed exactly the right characteristics for a confidant—rare sympathy, tact, and absolute faithfulness.

"It is to this injustice," said Frithiof, as he ended his tale, "to this unrighteous success of the mercenary and scheming, and failure of the honorable, that Christianity tells one to be resigned. It is that which sets me against religion—which makes it all seem false and illogical—actually immoral."

Probably Donati would not even have alluded to religion had not his companion himself introduced the subject. "Pardon me, if I venture to show you a flaw in your argument," he said, quietly. "You say we are told to be resigned. Very well. But what is resignation? It was well defined once by a noble Russian writer who said that it is 'placing God between ourselves and our trouble.' There is nothing illogical in that. It is the merest common sense. When finite things worry and perplex you, turn to the Infinite from which they may be safely and peacefully viewed."

Frithiof thought of those words which had involuntarily escaped his companion after the remark of the passer-by in Piccadilly—"No matter!—I do not sing for a gossiping world." He began to understand Donati better—he longed with an intensity of longing to be able to look at life with such eyes as his.

"These things are so real to you," he said, quickly. "But to me they are only a hope—or, if for an hour or two real, they fade away again. It may be all very well for you in your successful, happy life, but it is impossible for me with everything against me."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Donati, his eyes flashing.

"If not impossible, at any rate very difficult," he replied.

"Yes, yes," said Donati, his eyes full of sympathy. "It is that to all

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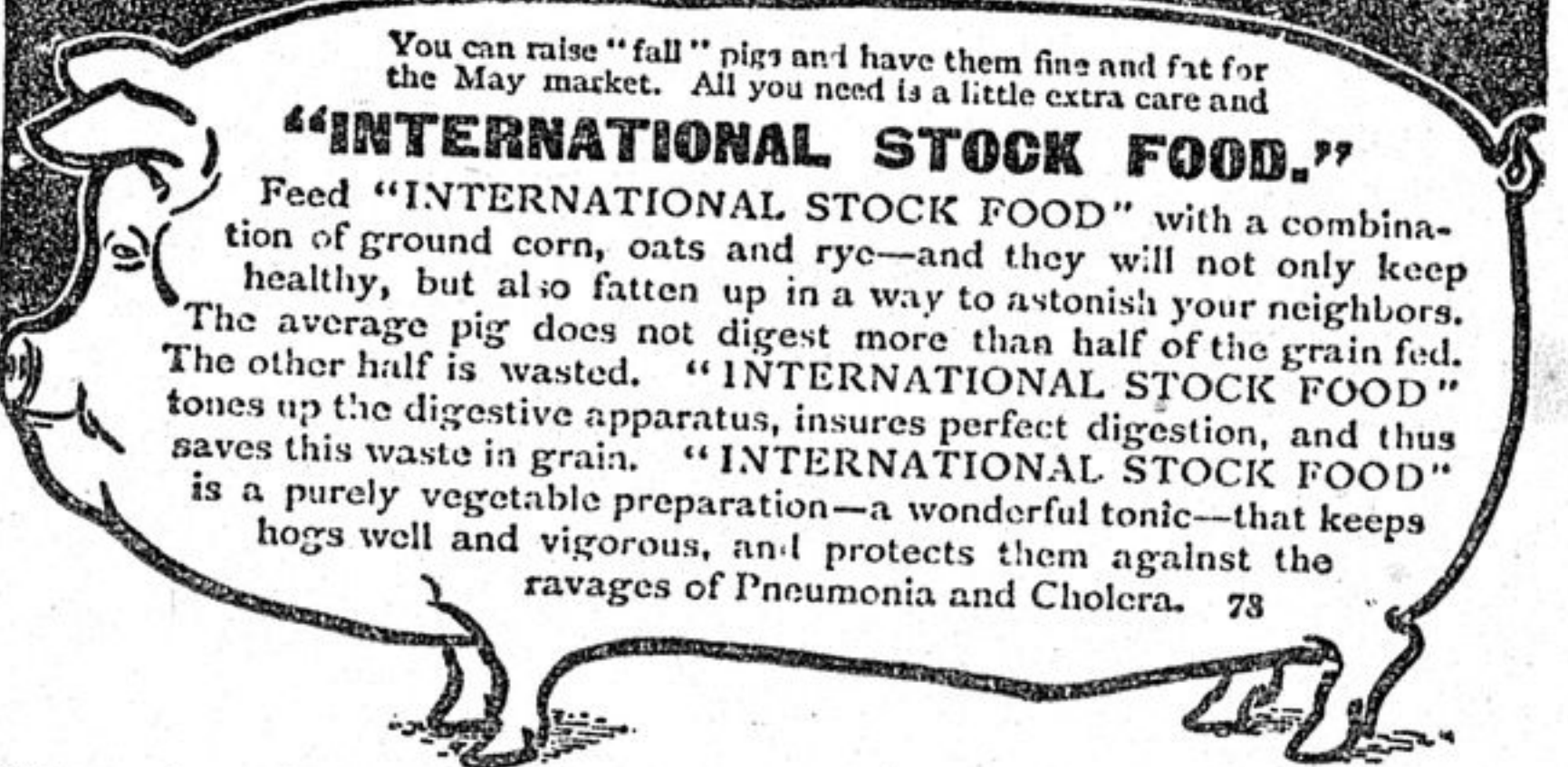
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of us. Don't think I make light of your difficulties. It is hard to seek God in uncongenial surroundings, in a life harassed and misunderstood, and in apparent failure. But—don't let the hardness daunt you—just go on."

"Do you know," said Frithiof, smiling, "that is almost what you said to me the first time I saw you. You have forgotten it; but a year ago you said a few words to me which kept me from making an end of myself in a fit of despair. Do you remember coming to the shop about a song of Knight's?"

"Why, yes," said Donati. "Was that really you? It all comes back to me now—I remember you found the song for me though I had only the merest scrap of it, without the composer's name."

"It was just before my illness," said Frithiof. "I never forgot you, and recognized you the moment I saw you to-night. Somehow you saved my life then just by giving me a hope."

When at length he rose to go, Donati had, as it were, saved Frithiof from moral death, had drawn him out of the Slough of Despond, and started him with renewed hope

on his way.

"Wait just one moment," he said, as they stood by the door; "I will give you one of my cards and write on it the Italian address. There 'Villa Valentina, Napoli.' Don't forget to write and tell me when this affair is cleared up."

Frithiof grasped his hand, and, again thanking him, passed out into the quiet, moonlit street.

CHAPTER XXVII.

The events of Monday had cast a shadow over Rowan Tree House. Cecil no longer sung as she went to and fro, Mr. Boniface was paying the penalty of a stormy interview late on Monday evening with his partner, and was not well enough to leave his room, and Mrs. Boniface looked grave and sad, for she foresaw the difficulties in which Frithiof's disgrace would involve others.

"I wish Roy had been at home," she said to her daughter as they sat together in the veranda.

Cecil looked up for a moment from the little frock which she was making for Gwen.

(To be continued.)



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