

A Sermon for Clowns

By Max Pemberton

I

On the morning of the feast of the Ascension, in the year 1702, Scavezzo, the fat Canon of St. Mark's, stood before the booth of old Barbarino, the clown, and rated its owner soundly.

"What!" he cried; "to mock a Canon of the Ducal House, to hold him up to the ridicule of the people, to ape his sermons and his gestures. Out on you for a rogue who shall be whipped before dawn to-morrow!"

It was obvious to the densest person that the good churchman was exceedingly angry. What with his loud and penetrating voice, the menace of his gold-topped staff, and the meek and humble attitude of old Barbarino, all the people on the Piazzetta came running up to the booth,—some to take the part of the clown; some to show their loyalty, for reasons of profit, to the colossal and unwieldy churchman. Even gondoliers left their boats at the neighbouring quay to learn the cause of the clamour; while over yonder, at the cafés, on the Piazza, gallants and great dames ceased their chatter to listen to the brawl.

"Excellency," said the clown, bowing humbly before the Canon's wrath, "I beg you to listen to me. I hope that I know who I am. If I am little and you are big—"

The crowd roared with merriment at the unhappy slip. As for the fat preacher, he positively shook with anger.

"How! You insult me, rogue! here at the door of my own church! But I must teach you a lesson. I must show you that there is still justice in Venice for her churchmen. Wait until the whip falls upon your shoulders; you shall tell me then if I am big or no.

The poor clown, terrified by his threats, wrung his hands in despair.

"Oh! a thousand pardons, Excellency!" he exclaimed. "I am sorry for my words. I should have said that you are—" "Enormous," cried someone in the mob. The Canon strode from the booth and shook his stick at them.

"To-morrow," he said dramatically, "tomorrow not one stone of this house shall remain upon another."

The crowd roared anew at the sally. Venice was never a great respecter of her priests, and Venice loved old Barbarino, the clown,—principally, perhaps, for the sake of his daughter Nina, the prettiest dancing girl in all the city.

"By Bacchus!" cried a merry gondolier. "Not one stone upon another, eh, and the house built of wood? A miracle, your Excellency, a miracle!"

"Do not disturb his Excellency's thoughts," chimed in a second; "he is about to give us his blessing."

"Not at all," said a third. "His Excellency is not very well to-day. Was it not a black fast yesterday, my friends, and did not the good Canon keep it on three capons and a boar's head? A plague on you for slanderers of a holy man!"

But Scavezzo, the fat Canon, was already out of hearing. Bristling with anger, his vanity sore wounded, he had gone at once to the police, and had laid his complaint before them. They obeyed him promptly.

Within an hour there came to old Barbarino the intimation that, at dawn to-morrow, he and his must leave the city.

In vain the old man pleaded with the Chief of the Police that for ten years he had been as much a part of Venice as the Patriarch himself; in vain he recalled the honours which great men had heaped on his head, the licence they had permitted him. No word of his was allowed to prevail above that of so mighty a personage as a Canon of St. Mark's. At dawn to-morrow he must go.

Never was there assembled in any booth a company of clowns so melancholy as those gathered in the booth of old Barbarino that afternoon. Punchinello, Columbine, Harlequin—tears were upon the cheeks of them all. To quit Venice,—their home; to wander as beggars on the high-road of Italy! Not to know whence their bread would come or straw for their pillows! And all this for a word against a beggarly canon whom Venice could well spare, ay, and a dozen of their kind. No surprise, then, that the feast of the Ascension, the great feast, meant nothing to the clowns. Their day was done; others would enjoy their triumphs and eat their bread.

Little Nina, the dancing girl, listened to these doleful complaints, but did not share them. She loved Venice, though she was but sixteen years old, loved the city as well as those who beat and starved her and robbed her of the *scudi* that her talent earned. She had a good wit of her own, too, and when old Barbarino returned from the palace with tears in his eyes, she nodded her pretty head cunningly, and crept from the booth unheeded and unobserved.

Half-an-hour later, she had crossed the canal in her own little gondola and had reached the house of one who, in all but name, was then the first man in Venice,—Era Giovanni, the Capuchin friar, whose pity for children was as the pity of the Master who sent him to the work.

There were many waiting to speak to the great priest, noble women and senators and even the captains of the police, but when he came out from his library and saw the clown's daughter waiting timidly in his anteroom, he beckoned to her before them all and at once asked her for her news.

"Well," he said, shutting the door of the library upon a great dame who would have thrust her way in with the young girl, "and what is little Nina's trouble to-day?"

"Oh, Excellency," she cried, holding his hand in both of hers, "we have no longer a home in Venice; we are to leave at dawn. God help us; we shall have to beg our bread!"

Frà Giovanni sat in his big chair, and stroked her pretty hair.

"They beat you and starve you—and yet you speak of begging your bread. Would that be so great a hardship, little Nina?"

"Excellency," she said simply, "I love Venice; it is the only home I have ever known. And for my father's sake—oh, I know that you will help us. It was yesterday,—the day of fast. My father preached to the people, and the people said he was Scavezzo, the Canon of St. Mark's. Oh, Excellency, if you could have heard them laugh. And now we are to be punished; the police say so; we are to sleep in our booth no more—and all because the Canon is fat, Excellency, oh, so fat, and my father wore a sack at his girth—and you know—"

She stopped for very want of breath. A curious smile spread over the face of the friar. He continued to stroke her hair in silence. Her heart beat quick, for she knew that he would help her.

"So it is Scavezzo, the Canon, who complains, Nina. The people laughed, you say?"

"You could not hear yourself speak, Excellency. Oh, they do not love Scavezzo; they would not wish us to leave them. And Venice is so dear to us—you will not send us away, Excellency?"

Era Giovanni shook his head doubtfully.

"Who am I, Nina, that the police should listen to me?"

"You are the friend of the friendless, Excellency."

“And you think that the Canon will hear me?”

She bowed her head, for she could not answer him.

“What shall I do if you will not help me, Excellency?” she exclaimed.

He did not answer her for a little while. Some scheme seemed running in his mind. When he spoke again, the smile was still upon his face.

“Come,” he said cheerily, “we must dry up those tears. Tell me, would your father be at his booth if I went there now?”

“He would say that God sent you, Excellency.”

Again the priest seemed lost in thought. But it was not to be hidden from her that his thoughts amused him.

“Well,” he said, rising from his chair presently, “we are going to see your father, Nina. And while we go, you will be on your way to Murano. You know the church of San Pietro there?”

“As I know your house, Excellency!”

“And the home of Michael, the woodcarver—you have been there, Nina!”

She thought upon it a little and then answered,—“Michael, the wood-carver—but, Excellency, he is as fat as Scavezzo himself; you could not tell one from the other.”

A great light burst upon her. She began to clap her hands joyfully.

“Oh, Excellency,” she cried, “you are going to save us, then!”

“Before vespers to-morrow, little Nina, Scavezzo, the Canon, shall ask pardon of you on his knees.”

She kissed his hand rapturously; but the priest drew his cowl about his face, and, regardless of those who waited for him, set out upon his way to the booth of Barbarino, the clown.

II

Scavezzo, the fat Canon of St. Mark's, kept the feast of the Ascension right well. All day long there had been the clash of silver bells from the steeples of Venice, the thunder of cannon from her forts. Measureless processions had passed through the square before the great church on their way to witness the wedding of the Adriatic. Nobles in splendid robes of silk and velvet, deacons bearing tapers, captains of the city in scarlet, chancellors, equerries, beautiful women glittering in jewels, the Doge himself in ermine and blue and cloth of gold,—all these, in gondolas decked out with gaudy draperies and weighed down with flowers, had gone out once more to wed that sea which Venice had ruled so long.

And when night fell, and there was music of fifes and the strings were tuned in every house, and the city put on a dazzling raiment of countless lanterns, the people had their turn, and hurried in their thousands to welcome the people's procession upon the Piazza,—to assist in a masquerade surpassing anything known in all the history of carnival.

Scavezzo, the fat Canon, was supping when this second procession emerged from the church; but his faithful servant, Giacomo, stood at the window of the presbytery, and gave him constant news of it. Not for such a trifle as the most splendid pageant in all Europe would Scavezzo turn from a grinning boar's head or a goblet filled to the brim with the luscious wine of Cyprus. Processions,—he had taken part in those all day. And that fat *poulet*, his mouth watered at the steaming odour of it. A fig for the people and their pleasures when a canon supped.

“They are coming, you say, Giacomo; then who carries the cross before them?”

“Gabrino, the clerk—he walks like a prince, my master. And there are a hundred priests behind him. Body of Mark! there is cloth of gold enough down yonder to hang the walls of a city. Hark to the roll of the drums! It is like thunder in the hills.”

Scavezzo took a large piece of meat upon his fork and surveyed it with great satisfaction.

“And behind the priests—who walk behind the priests, Giacomo?”

“Two hundred and fifty with torches, your Excellency. It is night made day. The eyes are blinded with the fire. And lanterns, Saint Paul, who shall count the lanterns I see?”

Scavezzo ate the dainty morsel and smacked his lips in token of his satisfaction.

“It is good!” he sighed; and then, “there will be the women of the city, too, Giacomo.”

Giacomo leered pleasantly.

“They have come down from Paradise, Excellency; never were such women seen. Your Reverence does well to turn your eyes away.

The fat Canon groaned inaudibly; he emptied his goblet at a draught.

“Let us not speak of them, Giacomo. let us remember to mortify—His platitude, doubtlessly good, was cut short by a new exclamation from the old servant at the window.

“Ho! ho!” he said, “here come the clowns! I see Barbarino, the fool, and little Nina, the dancing girl. And there is Harlequin—legs of a thousand devils, I can hear the laughter now. Were there ever such fellows in all the world, and faithful servants of Holy Church, too, your Excellency!”

Scavezzo, recalled suddenly to a memory of the morning, ground his teeth.

“To-morrow,” he said to himself, “to-morrow there will be one booth the less in Venice.”

But Giacomo continued, unconscious of his master’s anger,—

“A plague upon the banners which hide them from my sight, Excellency, for there is Il Magnifico himself, and the Doctor in his Bologna gown, and the lovers at the play. Saint John, if all the love in Venice were made like that! But I must not ask your Reverence to be an authority on such a point.”

He continued to grin and to leer as the love play went on in the vast square below. Scavezzo, meanwhile, had brought his supper to an abrupt conclusion. The memory of the clowns was as vinegar upon his meat. He said that he would wake to-morrow to hear that Barbarino and his daughter, Nina, had gone, bag and baggage, to the mainland. And with this happy assurance to give him peace, he called to Giacomo to bring his coffee.

“You are growing deaf in your old age, Giacomo. Coffee, my friend, coffee.”

To his infinite surprise, the old man at the window did not answer a single word. Rather he stood as one petrified, now looking to the square below, now at his master. His face was contorted strangely. Some horrible apparition appeared to have so affected his visage that his eyes stood out like eyes of glass, and the veins of his forehead were full to bursting.

“Oh, my master—oh, for Heaven’s sake—what is it that I see!”

The fat Canon leant back in his chair and surveyed his servant with contempt.

“Giacomo,” he said, “how often have I told you that your stomach is too old for the red wine of Vicenza—?”

The rebuke fell upon deaf ears. The old servant remained indifferent alike to his master’s question and to his scorn. He stood at the window drunk indeed, but drunk with terror.

“How!” he cried with a terrible laugh, “two masters,—one here and one there. Oh, saints and angels defend us!”

Scavezzo raised himself with an effort from his chair.

“Giacomo,” he exclaimed, “you are certainly drunk. To-morrow you shall fast on bread and water, and then your eyesight will be better. Meanwhile, we will see

The threat was checked abruptly upon the Canon’s lips. He, too, was at the window now; he looked down upon the Piazza below; he heard the merry music; he saw the countless lights, the gay dresses, the tremendous throng of masqueraders; above all, he saw—himself!

Scavezzo rocked upon his heels as a man struck suddenly with dizziness. He wondered no longer that Giacomo had not answered him. He, the Canon of St. Mark’s Chapel; he, the great preacher; he, the admired ecclesiastic upon whom the women of Venice fawned, was he drunk also, was he in his room or out there on the Piazza; had some cunning drug in his wine made him see double? The very room seemed to swim before him. He gasped for breath and unloosed his cassock at the throat.

“I am Scavezzo,” he cried hoarsely, “who, in God’s name, then, is that other?”

Old Giacomo crossed himself devoutly.

“My master,” he exclaimed, “we are bewitched. A woman stood at the altar this morning, and she had the evil eye. That is why I see you in the square down yonder, when in reality you are at supper in this room. And look—you sit upon a golden chair, there is a fool’s cap on your head, you have a flagon in your hand, a woman—that I should say it—a woman sits upon your knee—oh, Excellency, was ever such a thing heard of since the blessed saint came to Venice.”

But it was Scavezzo’s turn to be deaf now. The ringing shouts of the masqueraders in the square moved him to a frenzy such as he had never known. One thing only was clear to him, and it was this, that out there, on the Piazza, seated upon a chair of gold, which strong arms carried, and mumming that the people might laugh, was his double, his other self, a man so like him in face and feature, and in vast unwieldy bulk, that his own father might have been perplexed to say which was which.

How the man came there, what devilry prompted him to wear the cassock and bands of a Canon of St. Mark’s, the terrified ecclesiastic dare not ask himself. He had but one idea,—he must stop the procession at any cost, he must expose an impostor, he must go out and cry to the people: “Here is the true Scavezzo; here is the Canon to whose pulpit you come!”

The idea quickened his laborious step as never it had been quickened before. Deft were the fat fingers which buttoned up his purple cape. Heavy was his breathing as he put on his great hat with the broad brim, and shuffled into the shoes with the silver buckles, and grasped his staff, and repeated to his stupefied servant the assurance that justice should be done.

“To-morrow, Giacomo, to-morrow he shall know the whip and the iron. What! to hold me up before the people with a flagon in my hand and a fool’s cap on my head! God’s law! the police shall have a word to say about that!”

Giacomo, trembling still, sought to hold him back.

“My master,” he implored, “you will not go among them to-night. Hark to those cries—they are like the cries of wild beasts. If you value your life—”

Scavezzo did not heed him. His hand shook with passion. Giacomo said afterwards that he descended his staircase with steps which made the house quake. He must stop the procession! He must pull the buffoon, who was his other self, from the throne whereon the clowns had placed him! Never must Venice be left to believe that a Canon of St. Mark’s had so disgraced himself. The mere determination gave him a nerve of iron. A man of quick temper, his mind dwelt lovingly upon the punishment to-morrow should bring upon the miscreants who had mocked him. They should be burnt with irons, he said; and so saying, he opened the door of the presbytery and passed into the great square.

For some minutes the dazzling lights, the roar of voices, the wail of fifes, the rolling of drums, made him feel as one tossed suddenly into an angry sea. Everywhere about him masqueraders were moving. Strange figures with hideous visages, pretty women on the arms of lovers, jesters, monks, sailors, priests, mingled headlong in that tremendous throng. Nevertheless, one cry prevailed loud above all others. It was the welcome of the mob to the man in the golden chair,—to the man the people believed to be Scavezzo, the Canon of St. Mark's.

"*Viva, viva!* Long life to our Father Scavezzo! Another flagon for his hand, another cap for his head. *Viva, viva!* a Canon of canons! And yon is Dorimene on his lap—oh, *viva, viva!*"

Scavezzo heard the cries, and they were as blows upon his ears. He began to hasten with all the speed he could command towards the Piazzetta, and as he ran, a man, masked in red and wearing a scarlet dress, followed close upon his steps, and at length made bold to touch him on the arm.

"What think you of this sight, my father," cried the stranger, "a holy Canon of St. Mark's masquerading like a juggler from Normandy. Was ever such a thing known in Venice?"

Scavezzo turned to the stranger eagerly.

"My friend," he said, "a very great wrong has been done this night. I am Scavezzo, the true Canon of the Ducal Chapel. Who that fellow may be, I cannot tell you. Help me, I pray, to speak to the people."

The man in the red mask, thus addressed, surveyed the trembling ecclesiastic as one who has heard a fairy story.

"The devil!" said he, "when I come to look at you, my father, there is truth in your words. You are a kinsman, perhaps, and the disgrace of your famous relative wounds you. I approve your charity. Let us go together and protest before this astounding canon, who, upon my word, is little credit to Venice."

The Canon wrung his hands; his grief was pitiable to see.

"Oh," he said, "that I should not be myself, that there should be two of us—am I going mad?"

The stranger answered him by linking arms with him and leading him deeper into the whirling throng.

"Come along, then," he cried encouragingly. "It is not you who are mad, my friend, but that dolt of a relative of yours who certainly must have lost his wits. I wonder that the police do not interfere. Hark to his jests! Did ever such words fall from the lips of a churchman before? And, as I live—he is eating a capon as big as himself. Shame on the rogue to forget his office so!"

A tremendous shout of laughter from the people bore testimony to the truth of the masked man's word. Scavezzo, as short as he was fat, made painful efforts to stand upon the tips of his toes; but so great was the press about him that he could see nothing.

"Oh," he wailed, "what an infamy—I that have a woman's appetite!"

The stranger laughed until the tears came into his merry eyes.

"Ha! ha! ha! They have handed him a second capon as big as an eagle. He is putting it in the sack at his girth. You can see him swelling, father. And now, by the barrel of Bacchus, he sits down upon his chair, the chair flies into a hundred pieces, and the Canon's heels are in the air. Oh, shame, shame,—I laugh like a girl."

Scavezzo clenched his hands until the long nails penetrated the flesh.

"My friends," he roared, seeking to make his voice heard above the tumult, "do not look at him—here is the true Scavezzo. Come and see him for yourself—come and touch him. That fellow there is an impostor. Do not hear him. Listen to me, I implore you."

He might as well have spoken to the walls of the arsenal. The mob was in a frenzy of delight now.

"*Viva, viva!*" it was screaming; "Scavezzo dances for us. Oh, the great Scavezzo! To-morrow there will be ten thousand about his pulpit. Oh, the holy man, the wonder!"

The fervid cries were drowned in the hoarse shouts of laughter with which the new performance was greeted. The false Canon of St. Mark's was dancing before the people. There was no doubt at all about it.

The thunder of his feet upon the throne which carried him was as the roll of some tremendous drum. The true Canon, obtaining a moment's glimpse of the spectacle, nearly fainted at it.

"Oh, for the love of God," he cried to the stranger at his side, "help me and save me, signorè. Who am I, where am I? Is it another that speaks to you or Scavezzo the Canon? Oh, in the name of charity!"

The stranger gripped his arm yet tighter.

"Come," he said, "this wanton exhibition has unhinged your mind, father. We will go to the police, and see if they permit such disgraceful sights in their city. A Canon dancing in a booth like a common harlequin. What an example for the people!"

He spoke with a fine assumption of anger, and Scavezzo, in his turn, permitted himself to be dragged through the outer ranks of the delighted crowd; but his cassock was torn as he went, and he groaned often.

"I have never danced in all my life," he protested piteously; "God did not make me to dance. It is true that I drank a little red wine with my meat, but a flagon like that, as big as the dome of a church, it is monstrous, it is cruel, signorè!"

The stranger dragged him on, regardless of his distress.

"Courage," he said, "we are going to the police. Trust them to right a wrong, father. To-morrow all Venice shall hear that Scavezzo, the Canon, is in the dungeons of the palace."

The Canon laughed ironically, hysterically. "I am another, then," he exclaimed; "this morning I was Scavezzo, but Scavezzo is dead. He dances on a barrel, and there is a fool's cap on his head. And to-morrow, the dungeon! God help me, the dungeon!"

The man in the mask pretended not to hear him. He had helped the fat Canon across the square, and should have turned to the right to find the offices of the police; but instead of that, he turned to the left, and plunged at once into that maze of narrow streets they call the Merceria. There, at a little wine-shop, above which was the sign of a Turk's head, he stopped as though a new idea had come to him.

"Father," he said, "I am thinking that we are in no fit state to present ourselves to the Captain of the Police just now. Enter here, where they will give us a glass of wine, and even a needle for your cassock. When the wine is drunk, we can go across to the palace and tell our tale."

Scavezzo assented willingly. He could still hear the frenzied shouts ringing across the piazza. A ribald chorus, a haunting, vulgar lilt had been taken up by the people, and its echoes floated across the sleeping lagoon, and were heard by the distant islanders.

"Oh," he said, "hark to that. The fellow is teaching them to sing a ribald song against our Lord, the Pope. I know it well, signorè."

The stranger dragged him into the shop.

"I fear your kinsman will hang, after all," he said grimly. "Drink a glass of wine, father, and then—to the police."

Scavezzo obeyed him as a child. He scarce knew who he was or where he was. The little wine-shop would have been in darkness but for the scanty rays of light emitted by an old brass lamp burning before an image. He could not see the face of the hag who came out to serve him. His hand trembled as he lifted the glass to his lips, and no sooner had he put it down than the drug

which it contained began to act, and he fell senseless into the arms of the man who had brought him to the shop.

“Quick,” said the unknown, as other masked men came to his assistance, “he must wake at Murano in the house of Michael, the wood-carver.”

III

The sun had been shining hotly upon the Island of Murano for many hours when Scavezzo, the Canon, awoke from his heavy sleep. It had been a troubled sleep, bringing him curious dreams; and chiefly a dream in which he saw himself preaching to a congregation of clowns, and must, in spite of himself, make jokes for their amusement. When he awoke at last with throbbing temples and burning face, he called loudly for Giacomo, his servant, and began to fear that he would be late for Mass.

“Giacomo, Giacomo—do you not hear me? Water, rascal, and my cassock—quick!”

Now, the Canon’s eyes were hardly opened when he said this; and what was his astonishment, a moment later, to find himself, not in his own presbytery, as he thought, but lying upon a low wooden bed in a long narrow room which he had never seen before, and whose very furniture was of a kind to awe him. Everywhere strange, inanimate figures gaped at him,—here a monster, half man, half dragon; there a figure of a centaur; here, a scene from purgatory richly carved in wood; there, a fantastic group of demons designed for the staircase of some rich merchant,—an odd assortment, in truth, which, seen in the dim light of the room, might well have startled one of stronger nerves than Scavezzo, the Canon. And to say that the Canon was merely startled would be to misrepresent his story altogether. For minutes together he glared at the hideous, grinning, voiceless things, as at an army of spectres risen from the ground before him.

“Oh,” he said, “wake up, Scavezzo; wake up. This is your dream; you are sleeping still, and that rogue of a Giacomo has forgotten to call you. You will be late for Mass, Scavezzo, and what will the Patriarch say?”

He laughed a little nervously as he spoke, and sat bolt upright in his bed. His mind was strangely confused; but gradually it began to bring back to him the mysterious doings of last night. A procession around the Piazza!—yes, he remembered that. And afterwards, supper, and a man in a scarlet mask, and a great throng of masqueraders, and someone singing ribald songs about the Pope.

Round and round in his head the strange figures of thought went, until, in a moment of quaking terror, the figures fell into line and the whole scene was played over again for him. In that instant he remembered all,—the false Scavezzo, the man on the golden chair, the fool’s cap, the flagon, the ringing cheers of the mob, his own overwhelming, imperishable disgrace.

“Great God!” he cried, “it was true, then. I did not dream it. There was another Scavezzo in the square. He did dance that the people might laugh. And now, holy patron, where am I now? What has brought me to this place? In whose house am I?”

He waddled to the door, for he had slept in his clothes; and opened it with uncertain hands. The sun’s rays streamed into the room and half blinded him; but when his eyes mastered the light, he could see a great expanse of water, and in the distance the golden domes of Venice and of his own church. He knew then that the low house stood upon the quay of some island, and that he was alone in it. It was a glorious day, and many a gondolier went by singing a merry song. One of them, resting upon his oar, spoke to the Canon, and the words were the strangest Scavezzo had ever heard.

“How! Michael, and who brought you home from carnival?” cried the man. Scavezzo drew himself up proudly.

“Impudent fellow,” he said, “do you not see to whom you are talking?”

The man roared with laughter.

“Behold!” said he, “am I not talking to Michael, the wood-carver, who came home last night with his heels where his head should have been? Shame on him for a guzzling rogue that has forgotten the name he bears.”

The Canon shook his fist at him, and turned angrily from the water’s edge. He had not thought of the clothes he wore, but now he looked at them, and perceived to his astonishment that he was arrayed no more in spotless violet cassock and shoes with the silver buckles. These had given place to a suit of coarse brown cloth, with boots such as only the common workmen buy. Moreover, a leather belt was about his waist, and in this belt a workman’s knife was sheathed. For quite a long time the Canon stood at the door of the house, shaking his head, as one who is perplexed beyond understanding.

“I wear a suit of brown clothes, and wake in a house I have never seen,” he said, continuing to nod his head mechanically. “A boatman calls me Michael, and insults me. I am upon the Island of Murano, and I can see my home across the water. Has someone robbed me of my senses, then? Do I sleep still? Am I gone mad in a night? I will believe no such thing. I will believe—“

The voices of children, who ran up suddenly to the place where he stood, cut short the expression of his will. As a rule, he was, like other fat men, benevolent and well disposed to the little ones; and when these children came up to him, he greeted them very kindly.

“My children,” he asked, “do you know whose house this is, and where the owner may be found?”

Their response was a merry shout; they went scampering away, crying to one another: “Here is old Michael, the wood-carver, drunk with wine! Oh, come and see; come and see!”

Scavezzo suppressed the evil words that came even to his lips. He looked down again at his poor brown clothes, up again at the house wherein he had slept.

“I am bewitched,” he murmured; “this is the reward of my sins—Heaven pity me! I am no longer myself; I am someone else. Scavezzo is dead. He is Michael, the woodcarver! Oh, cursed day!”

Muttering thus, with dizzy head and weak limbs, he began to stagger rather than to walk along to the quay towards the great church of the island. The priest there would know him, he thought; perchance would lend him a cassock, and find a gondolier to take him home. The possibility gave him some little hope; but he had not gone very far before the children, who had cried out upon him, came running back again, and brought with them others, shrewish women and idle men, who had come to see the unusual spectacle of a drunken woodcarver. These gave him hard words and many a push; and presently a crowd began to gather, and to jeer at him.

“Ho, ho! thou art drunk still, old Michael. Have a care, rogue, or they will put thee in the pillory.”

“Shame on him, for a lazy rascal that lets his children starve, and beats his good wife!”

“Ay, thou dost well to speak of his wife. Wait until she comes back from Torcello. A right good arm has Antonina, and well she knows how to use it.”

The suggestion was the last infamy. At the word “wife” old Scavezzo raised his arms as though to beat off the devils who tormented him.

“Wife!” he roared. “You speak to me of a wife! Do you not know, then, who I am? Do you not see that I am Scavezzo, the Canon of St. Mark’s? Scoffers, I will have you whipped—I will have you—”

Anger choked his utterance. He stumbled on blindly towards the church. The crowd increased and began to hoot him, until his ears rang with the clamour and the din.

“Oh, come and see; come and see! Here is a wood-carver whom the bottle has made a Canon! Oh, come and see!”

But above this cry was another, and it was more ominous.

“To the pillory with him, and learn there what sort of a Canon he is.”

New-comers took up the new word, and it was repeated with loud shouts of joy. Some laid hands upon the Canon’s arm, some pushed, some pulled him. His piteous appeals for mercy fell upon ears that wished to be deaf. The louder he protested that he was Scavezzo, the wilder were the cries:

“A wood-carver that has gone mad—oh, come and see!”

On they dragged him, past the church which was to have been his sanctuary, away from the water and the ships, onward to the open square of the island, even to the pillory, where ready hands strapped his arms, and readier urchins prepared their ammunition.

“A leek for thy stomach, old Michael.”

“An apple for thy head.”

“Water to wash the wine out of thee, old man.

“A stinking fish to remind thee of Lent.”

“The half of an egg to keep up thy strength.”

“A dead dog, old Michael, to whom thou mayest preach.”

So the delighted mob roared as it gathered round the pillory and began to amuse itself.

Savage cries of delight accompanied the bombardment. The square of the island was filled by a vast throng which hooted incessantly, and always invited others to come and see the wood-carver of whom good wine had made a Canon. Even in distant Venice the clamour was heard, and the report believed that Murano was in arms. As for Scavezzo himself, he had the mind neither to think nor to protest any more. The ultimate humiliation had overtaken him. Whatever the years might have in store for him, this must remain, that he, the darling Canon of the women of Venice, had stood in a pillory on the Island of Murano. He could have prayed to God that the earth would open and swallow him up.

Throughout that long afternoon, the man who had sworn to banish the clowns from Venice, was the mock and the sport of the islanders. Yet strange it was that no serious hurt befell him; and still more strange that at sunset the crowd seemed to melt away as if by magic, and he was left alone in that drunkard’s pulpit. Very hungry, weak, and bowed down with shame, he began to think that Heaven had willed his death. The darkest hour of his life seemed at hand when he heard a voice in the square below him, and opening his eyes quickly, beheld no other than Barbarino, the clown, and with him his pretty daughter, Nina.

To Scavezzo, the sight was as a vision from Heaven.

“Oh, glory to God this night!” he cried piteously; “here, at last, are those who know me.

Old Barbarino pretended to hear the voice and to be amazed at the sound of it.

“Hark!” cried he, standing suddenly before the pillory; “I could have sworn that I heard the voice of his Excellency, Scavezzo, at whose word we are to be banished from Venice to-day. Yet when I look up, I see a common rogue standing in the pillory as any drunkard of the city.”

He made as though to pass on; but the trembling Canon implored him with tears in his eyes.

“For the love of God, one moment!” he wailed; “I am not what I appear to be,—I am Scavezzo; oh, Heaven help me! I speak the truth to you. Yesterday, I was your enemy; to-day I will be your friend. I swear it on the Cross,—I ask it on my knees—”

Old Barbarino seemed to hesitate, but little Nina said,

“How can he be Scavezzo, father; and if he is, why should we help him, since there is a new Canon called Scavezzo across yonder, and he will not take our home from us?”

“A new Canon,” roared Scavezzo, “another in my place—oh, devils all, you tell me that?”

“Ay, indeed,” answered old Barbarino. “Scavezzo, the Canon, is over there all right, as every woman in Venice, who heard him preach this morning, will swear.

Scavezzo listened no more. He opened his lips—no sound came out. His head drooped forward. He had fainted.

IV

Giacomo’s eyes twinkled.

“You must ask Frà Giovanni about that,” he said; “perchance old Barbarino has a bad memory, Excellency,—a clown’s way of speaking, you understand, which implied, as I live, that you should preach to clowns.”

Scavezzo sighed.

“It is a long way to Rome, Giacomo,” he expostulated, “nevertheless—”

“Nevertheless, Venice has a longer memory, my master. The city loves her clowns,—ay, better than any Canon that ever wore the purple.”

Scavezzo shook his head sadly.

“Ay,” he said, “that is a lesson I do not need to learn, Giacomo.”

AT noon next day in his own house, whither the clowns carried him, they told Scavezzo the story of the jest.

“Ah,” said Giacomo, his servant, “nothing but a pilgrimage to Rome will blot this out, my master. To think of it, that they should dress up this wood-carver with their powders and their paints until, had he stepped into your pulpit, your own mother would not have discovered him.”

“But he did not step into my pulpit, Giacomo—oh, tell me that he did not!”