Voyages

Moodie, Susanna, Thurston, John

Published by University of Ottawa Press

Moodie, Susanna and John Thurston.
Voyages: Short Narratives of Susanna Moodie. 

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/6619
THE POPE'S PROMISE

It was St. John's Eve: the summer sun was sinking behind the distant hills, while his last beams glittered on the lofty spires and towers of Marcerata, one of the oldest towns in Italy, and formerly the metropolis of Ancona. The uncommon beauty of the evening had tempted forth most of its younger inhabitants, who were seen in detached groups along the high road, or in the fields, enjoying the fresh air. The wealthier females rode forth, attended by cavaliers well dressed and gallantly mounted, while the happier peasants were dancing on the level plains without the town, to the merry notes of the pipe and tabor. The streets were deserted, the sounds of labour had ceased, and the voice of joy alone mingled with the chiming of the convent bells, which announced the hour of evening prayer. Yet Pietro Ariano was still hard at work at his stall — Pietro, who was reckoned the best singer and the best dancer in Marcerata, and who was withal, though only a poor shoemaker, as handsome and as well grown a young man as any in the Pope's dominions.

Pietro's little domicile stood just without the town, by the road side, and his stall fronted a long low latticed window that commanded a fine view of the adjacent country, and within the shade of which the young follower of St. Crispin was seated, busily plying his awl. His present fit of industry appeared more like an act of imperative duty than choice: his bent brow expressed both impatience and fatigue, and he flung his various implements from side to side with a sullen and dissatisfied air, glancing wistfully from time to time towards the open plains, and muttering
imprecations against every fresh party of pleasure that passed his stall.

His wife, a lovely dark-eyed young woman, was earnestly engaged in binding the fellow shoe to that which Ariano held half finished in his hand; and she beguiled the lingering hours by singing, in a sweet voice, an old ditty, to amuse the infant that smiled upon her knee; while from under her long dark eyelashes she watched the perturbed countenance of her husband. As the sun gradually declined in the horizon, Pietro’s patience sank with it, and before the glorious luminary had totally disappeared, its last remaining spark was utterly extinguished; and, casting down his implements of labour, he exclaimed, in a hasty tone — “Now, by the mass! not another stitch will I set in slipper or shoe to-night were it to please the Pope! — Ha! ’tis a beautiful evening; and the merry tinkling of that guitar has called forth all my dancing wishes, and my legs, in idea, have been in motion for the last two hours. What say you, my pretty little Francesca,” he continued, unconsciously assuming a gayer tone, and slapping his wife briskly on the shoulder, “will you put your boy to bed, and join with me the merry group yonder?”

The young woman shook her head, and looked up into his face with an arch smile — “No, no, Pietro! not till you have performed the promise you made to the handsome young friar last night.” — Ariano sullenly resumed his work.

“Ay, keep my promise, forsooth, and be repaid by promises for my labour! Oh, these monks are liberal patrons, who are too spiritual to attend to any temporal wants but their own. To convert neats’ leather into shoes and sandals, for their accommodation, is as difficult a task as bringing over so many Turks and heretics to the true faith; and they are more nice to fit withal, than the vainest damsel that ever sported a smart foot and ankle. They live on the general contributions of the public, and take good care to want for nothing that can be obtained by way of extortion. O, ’tis a dainty life!” he continued, plying his awl, in despite of his recent vow, with increasing energy,
whilst inveighing against his principal employers, a rich community of Franciscan monks, who belonged to the noble monastery whose august towers formed the leading feature in the beautiful landscape before him, "O, 'tis a dainty life! whose very motto is 'laziness.' They are the hooded locusts that devour the substance of the land, and receive a patent from the Pope, heaven bless him! to live in idleness. Would that my father had made me a member of this holy community, instead of binding me to his own unprofitable trade!"

"If that had been the case, Pietro, I should never have shared your poverty and your labours," said Francesca, with a glance of reproachful tenderness.

"Il Diavolo!" exclaimed Pietro, laughing; "you would have been much better off. *A monk's mistress*, let me tell you, ever carries her head higher than an honest man's wife."

"Hush! hush! Pietro, is it right for a Christian man to utter such impious invectives against these holy monks?"

"Now, by all the saints and angels whom they pretend to worship!" returned Ariano, "if I live and flourish, the boy you hold upon your knee shall be one of these sleek hypocrites. Who knows what preferment he may arrive at? Several bishops have risen from no higher origin. Ha! what say you to that, my little advocate for celibacy? Have I not well provided for your son?"

"You are very profane to-night, Pietro, and speak more like a swaggering man-at-arms than a poor artizan. Besides, I am sure the handsome young padre is no hypocrite. I never saw such a bright eye glance from beneath a monk's cowl."

"Ha! art thou again thinking of him, Francesca? He is a stranger in Marcerata, but I warrant him a very wolf in lamb's clothing."

The colour mounted to Francesca's brow, and she called out in a hasty voice — "Stint in thy foolish prate, Pietro! the young friar is even now before us!"

Ariano was utterly confounded when he beheld the padre leaning against the stall; and he felt not a doubt that
the stranger had heard the whole of his intemperate conversation with his wife: nor was he wrong in his conjecture. The handsome young man, whose noble deportment and graceful figure set off his monastic habit, and whose bright, laughter-loving dark eyes ill accorded with a monk's cowl, had been for some time a silent spectator of the scene. Felix Peretti was highly amused with the abuse that Ariano had so unceremoniously levelled against his holy order, for which he felt little respect himself, and as a child of fortune, from his youth upwards, considered only as a step towards further advancement.

“How now, Signor Scarpettaro! is it your ordinary custom to close the labours of the day by abusing your betters? Are the shoes which you promised should be completed for my journey to Loretto, finished?”

“No,” returned Pietro; “they yet want a full hour's work for their completion, and I have just made a vow never to pursue my handicraft by candle-light to please any man. So you must e'en perform the journey, reverend padre, as many better and holier men have done before you, barefooted.”

“No, you make it a point of conscience, Ariano, to fulfill one promise by breaking another? I cannot commence a long and fatiguing pilgrimage without the aid of the Apostle's horses. Oblige me in this instance, Pietro, and I will put up a private mass for the repose of your evil temper, and the restoration of that goodly virtue in man, patience!”

“As to my temper!” returned the Scarpettaro fiercely, “no one has any right to complain of that but my wife, and if she speaks truly, she will inform you, father, that, when I am not fatigued with working over hours for monks and friars, I am the best tempered fellow in Marcerata.”

The padre cast a sly glance at the dark eyed Francesca, from beneath his cowl, and something like a provoking smile sat ready to break forth into a hearty laugh, upon his rosy lips. — “Well, friend Pietro, far be it from me, sworn as I am to peace, to rouse the evil spirit into action. 'Resist the devil,' says holy writ, 'and he will
flee from you!' But a truce to all further colloquy, I see you are putting the finishing stroke to the disputed articles: tell me how much I stand indebted to you for them?"

"You cannot stand my debtor," said Ariano, recovering his good humour, when he found he had completed his job, "till you have tried on the shoes, and then I fancy you will stand in my debt." Father Felix laughed heartily at this sally; and, seating himself carelessly on the edge of the stall, with a very dégagée air, proceeded to draw on the shoes.

"By our Lady of Loretto!" said Francesca, who was earnestly watching all his movements, "it were a thousand pities that such a white and well shapen foot should have to contend with the sharp flints and briars."

Pietro's brow contracted into a frown, and, turning abruptly to the padre, he asked him how the shoes fitted him?

"My feet, much better than the price will my purse. What am I to pay you for them?"

"Three testoons. And the cheapest pair of shoes that ever was made for the money."

Father Felix shook his head thoughtfully, and drawing forth a leathern purse from the folds of his monastic gown, calmly took it by one of the tassels of divers colours by which it was ornamented at each end, and emptied the contents on to the board. A few pieces of money rolled, one after the other, on to the stall; and the hollow sound emitted by their coming thus unceremoniously in contact with each other, spoke the very language of poverty. The young friar counted them deliberately over; then, turning to Ariano, without the least embarrassment, explained the state of his finances — "Signor Scarpettaro, in these few pieces of money, you behold all my worldly riches: I want one julio to make up the sum you demand for the shoes, which luckily will give you an opportunity of performing a good work at a very small expence; for, you perceive, I have not wherewithal to satisfy your exorbitant charge."

"Exorbitant charge!" reiterated Pietro. "Now by S. Crispin! may I suffer the pains of purgatory if I take one quartrini less. What! after having worked so many hours
over my usual time, to be beaten down in the price of the article. Give me the shoes, thou false friar! and pursue thy way barefooted. A monk! and moneyless, quotha. You have doubtless emptied that capacious pouch at some godless debauch, or poured its contents into a wanton's lap."

"Now, out upon you for a profligate reprobate, and vile Scarpettaro!" returned the monk. "Do you think it so difficult a task for a priest to keep his vows? Or do you imagine that we cheat our consciences as easily as you do your customers? My purse contains only eight Julios, how then can you reasonably expect me to pay you nine? I must, therefore, remain your debtor for the odd coin."

"And when do you propose to pay me?"

"When I am Pope," returned Peretti, laughing, "I will pay you both principal and interest."

"God save your Holiness!" said Pietro. "If I wait for my money till that period arrives, the debt will still be owing at the day of judgment. Or, stop — I will bequeath it to my children of the tenth generation, to buy them an estate in the moon. A Pope! Young father, you must shroud those roguish eyes under a deeper cowl, and assume a more sanctified visage, and carry a heavier purse withal, before you can hope to obtain the Papal Crown!"

"When I stoop, Ariano, to pick up St. Peter's keys, I shall not forget to pay my old debts. So fare thee well, thou second Thomas à Didimus, and God be with thee, and with thee, pretty Francesca; and may he render the burthen thou bearest in thy arms the blessing and support of thy future years."

So saying, he stooped, and, pretending to salute the sleeping infant, contrived to imprint a kiss upon the white hand that held him. Francesca blushed all over; and Pietro, bidding his Holiness remember his promise, called Francesca to him, and bade the friar good night. His wife obeyed the summons, but she looked after the handsome Felix till a turning in the road hid him from her sight.

Years glided on in their silent course, and the name of the young friar, and his visit to Marcerata, were forgotten by Pietro Ariano and his wife. Poverty, and the increasing
cares of a large family, tamed the vivacity of the Scarpettaro's spirits: he no longer led the dance, or joined in the song, but was forced, by hard necessity, to work both by night and day at his trade, to supply his numerous offspring with bread. Francesca's smooth brow was furrowed by the hand of time, and she had long yielded the palm of beauty to other and younger females. Her son, on whom Father Felix had bestowed his blessing, was early dedicated to a monastic life, and had risen, by transcendent abilities, from the rank of under assistant to the sacristan, to be one of the head members of the monastery of St. Francis. The young Antonio possessed ambition, which made him aspire to the highest ecclesiastical honours; but he had no friends among his wealthier brethren, who beheld in the son of the poor Scarpettaro of Marcerata an object of fear and envy. However, he was the pride and delight of his parents, whose poverty he greatly alleviated, but could not wholly remove. One morning, while Pietro was taking the measurement of the smartest little foot in Marcerata, and the pretty village beauty was cautioning him not to make her slippers too large, a sudden exclamation from his wife made him raise his head, as a dignified ecclesiastic entered the house, and demanded if his name were Pietro Ariano? The Scarpettaro answered in the affirmative.

"Then, you are the man I seek. Pietro Ariano, I command you, in the name of the Pope, the pious and blessed Sixtus the Fifth, to repair instantly to Rome, and attend his pleasure at the palace of the Vatican."

Pietro was petrified with terror. The implements he had just been using fell from his nerveless grasp, and his limbs were assailed by a universal shivering fit, as if under the influence of an ague. "Alas!" he exclaimed, "what is the nature of my crime?"

"That is best known to your own conscience," returned the stranger.

"Then, the Lord have mercy upon me! I am a sinner, and, what is still worse, a dead man! Like Daniel, I am cast into the lion's den, and there is none to deliver me. Ah, wretch that I am! Why did I live to witness this day?"
“Oh, Pietro! my unhappy husband!” said Francesca, hiding her face in her garments, and weeping bitterly: “I knew long ago into what trouble your intemperate speeches would bring you. Are you not now convinced of the folly of meddling with matters that did not concern you? Did I not tell you, when you would rail at the holy monks, you were casting yourself upon a two-edged sword? You will be sent to the Inquisition, and burnt for a heretic, and I shall lose you for ever!”

“Peace, woman! peace!” returned the tortured Ariano; “reproaches avail not; they cannot save me from the fate which in all probability awaits me. Farewell, my wife — my children!” he cried, alternately taking them in his arms; “cease not to petition heaven to restore me to you!”

The voice of weeping was audible on every side; but Pietro tore himself away, and commenced his long journey on foot to Rome. On the evening of the third day, he arrived at the magnificent city; but his thoughts were too much occupied by his own cares, and his body too much bowed down by fatigue, to notice any of the grand objects which saluted him on every side. He entered Rome as a criminal enters the condemned cell that he never more expects to leave, till the hour which fulfills his sentence. Seeking a small hostelry in the suburbs of the city, he partook of a scanty supper, and retired to bed, dreading, yet anxiously expecting, the ensuing day. In the morning, he learned from his host that the Pope held a public levee in the great hall of the Vatican, to receive the French and German ambassadors; and that if he repaired thither early, and waited patiently till the crowd dispersed, he would be more likely to gain the speech of his Holiness. Unacquainted with the public edifices in Rome, poor Ariano wandered about for some time like a fool in a fair, bewildered in contemplating the august palaces which rose on every side, and imagining each in its turn a fit residence for a king; but, whilst he paused, irresolute how to act, a strange fancy entered his head, and he imagined that the Pope, who was Christ's viceregent on earth, must reside in the grandest church in the city. Accordingly, he stopped on
the steps leading to St. Peter's Church, and demanded of an ecclesiastic, who, like himself, seemed bound thither, "If that noble building were the Pope's palace?"

"You must indeed be a stranger in Rome, my friend," returned the priest, with a good-natured smile, "not to know the difference between St. Peter's Church and the Vatican. — What is your name?"

"Pietro Ariano, a poor shoemaker, of Marcerata."

"And your business with his Holiness, the Pope?"

"Alas! reverend padre, with that I am at present unacquainted: his business, it should seem, is with me. I have none with him, unless it be to ask pardon for crimes unintentionally committed."

"Aha!" returned the priest, "you are the very man whom his Holiness wishes to see. He calls himself your debtor; and you will soon know in what coin he means to pay you. But, take heart of grace, Signor Scarpettaro; I will introduce you to the Pope."

Trembling from head to foot, Pietro followed his conductor into the great hall of audience. Sixtus was already in his chair, and the ambassadors of various nations were making their obeisance before him; but the splendour of the scene could not induce the terror-stricken Ariano to raise his eyes, and he stood shivering behind the priest, with his head bent down, and his arms folded dejectedly across his breast. At length the crowd gradually dispersed, and the Pope called out to the ecclesiastic, in a facetious tone, very different from the solemnity of manner with which he had addressed the ambassadors — "How now, Father Valentinian! Whom have you got there?"

"Please your Holiness," returned the priest, striving to impel Pietro forward, "the poor shoemaker of Marcerata."

At these words, Pietro uttered a loud groan, and fell prostrate at the feet of the Pope, who, after indulging in a long and hearty laugh, said, in a jocular tone, "Raise thy head, Ariano, that I may be sure of thy identity. By St. Peter! time has nearly worn out thy upper leathers, if it has spared thy sole. Is this panic-stricken craven the man who
talked so largely, and uttered such bitter invectives against holy mother church? By the mass! I fancy the pains of purgatory will be light when compared with the pangs he now endures!"

"Most holy, most blessed, most incomparable Pope!" groaned forth the prostrate Scarpettaro, "I was mad and drunk when I uttered such foul calumnies against your Holiness's brethren. Heaven has justly punished me for my impiety, by revealing my rash speeches to your Excellency."

"It needed no miraculous interposition of saints and angels, Pietro, to inform me of your iniquity; for I heard you with my own ears. But, stand up, man. It was not to call you to an account for your sins, which doubtless are many, that I sent for you hither, but to pay you the debt I owe you. Look me in the face, Signor Ariano. Hast thou forgotten St. John's Eve, and the young friar who called at your stall in his pilgrimage from Ascoli to Loreto?"

For the first time, Pietro ventured to raise his head, when he encountered the glance of the bright dark eyes, whose amorous expression he had so unceremoniously reprobated three-and-twenty years before. That face, once seen, could never be forgotten. Time had given to Felix Peretti a stern and haughty expression; and the eye that, in the heyday of youth, seemed lighted only by the fire of passion, now possessed the glance of an eagle, before which the monarchs of the earth trembled, when it flashed in wrath from beneath a brow that appeared formed to rule the world. "Ha! Ariano, I perceive you recognise the face of an old friend. Have you forgotten the promise I made you, on that memorable night when I prophesied my own future grandeur? What was it, Pietro?"

"Please your Holiness," said Pietro, his eye brightening, and his hopes increasing in proportion as his fears diminished, "whatever you may think fit to give me."

"Come! Come to the point, Signor Scarpettaro," returned Sixtus, in a stern voice, "I will have no interpolations; what is the actual amount of the debt I owe you?"

"One Julio, please your sublime Excellency; the principal and interest of the said sum, if ever you should
come to be Pope, which, God forgive my wickedness for doubting!"

"Amen!" ejaculated Father Valentinian.

"Right, Pietro; the sum shall be faithfully paid," returned Sixtus, drawing a paper from his bosom, on which he had spent some hours the preceding day in calculating the interest of one *julio* for three-and-twenty years. What the sum amounted to, the chronicler of this anecdote does not condescend to inform us, but it was small enough to annihilate all Pietro Ariano's new and highly-raised expectations, and his golden visions melted into air. He received it from the Pope with a vacant stare, and still held open his hand, which disdained to close over so paltry a prize.

"Is not the sum correct?" demanded Sixtus.

Ariano remained immovable.

"Count it over again, my friend; and if one *quartrini* is wanting, it shall be faithfully paid. What, art thou moonstruck? Hast thou not received that which I owed thee?"

"No," returned Pietro, gathering courage from disappointment; "your Holiness is still my debtor."

"Prove your words," said Sixtus, while a slight flush of anger suffused his face.

"The *julio* I gave your Holiness credit for three-and-twenty years ago, when thou wast only a poor barefooted friar, I should never have walked to Rome to demand at thy hands. — The sum has been faithfully paid, but you have not remunerated me for loss of time — for the expenses I incurred, and the fatigue I suffered, at my years, in undertaking, at your command, so long a journey. The tears my wife and children have shed, and the anguish of mind I have endured, to make sport for your Holiness, are debts of conscience you have still to pay; and, to shew you that a poor shoemaker of Marcerata can exceed the mighty Sixtus in liberality, I absolve the Pope of his promise!"

Here Pietro made a low reverence, laid the money at the Pope's feet, and was about to depart, when Sixtus called out in a lively tone — "How, Signor *Scarpettaro*! have you the presumption to rival a pope in munificence? Pride has urged you, though a necessitous man, to reject the only
sum which you were justly entitled to receive. — It is not for me, as viceregent for heaven, to reward a man for exhibiting to my face one of the seven deadly sins. I therefore transfer my bounty to more deserving objects; give this purse of gold,” he continued, “to thy wife, Francesca, and make glad her heart by informing her that her son, Antonio, is Bishop of Marcerata.”

Overcome by this unexpected change of fortune, Pietro prostrated himself before his munificent benefactor, and, embracing his feet, called out in an extacy of joy — “Ah, your Holiness! — I am your debtor for life!”