WHAT I REMEMBER.

CHAPTER I.

WHEN my first wife—*nata* Theodosia Garrow—died on the thirteenth of April, 1865, I was fifty-five years old. I felt then, as most men similarly circumstanced have felt, that life was over for me. And in accordance with what had been my feeling at the time, I brought to an end at that point the two volumes of *Reminiscences*, which the reading public have received with much kindly indulgence. But I was then writing more than twenty years after that time! An entire lifetime for many a man, who has yet not lived in vain, or failed to make his mark in the world, and in his generation.

Marvellous among all the marvellous phenomena in us and around us is the recuperative force, moral as well as physical, which is in all healthy men and women and things. No conviction could be more complete or genuine than that which crushed me in those days with the belief that there was no future of happiness, of contentment, of interest in life

possible for me, no outlook into the world either of nature or of my fellow-creatures, which could make the years of living which might remain to me other than a dreary and barren sequence of days to be passed each from sunrise to sunset in awaiting the last of them!

But, as I wrote some two years ago, in the last pages of the volumes I then published, "in truth it was very far otherwise. I was fifty-five; but I was in good health, young for my years, strong and vigorous in constitution; and before a year had passed, it began to seem to me that a future, and life and its prospects, might open to me afresh; that the curtain might be dropped on the drama that was passed, and a new phase of life begun. I had had, and vividly enjoyed, an entire life, as it is meted out to many, perhaps I may say to most, men. But I felt myself ready for another! And—thanks also this time to a woman—I have had another, in no wise less happy, in some respects, as less chequered by sorrows, more happy than the first! I am in better health too, having outgrown apparently several of the maladies to which young people are subject. Of this second life I am not now going to tell my readers anything."

Then I went on to say jestingly—yes, really quite jestingly, without any thought in my head save of the patent absurdity of an almost octogenarian talking about things to be done ten years hence—"Ten years hence, perhaps, ('Please God the Public lives!' as a speculative showman said)

I may tell the reader, if he cares to hear it, the story of my second life." But the Public has seemed to doubt whether it would live ten years—or at all events, more reasonably, whether *my* public—the public which has indulgently received the two volumes of old man's chatter which I have given it—would survive ten years. For, by a tolerably general consensus of its accredited organs, it has said, "No! not ten years hence! Now!" And where is the scribbler, young or old, who ever failed to respond to such a call? So here I am antedating the performance of my promise by eight years!

It can hardly be that any mortal has ever lived on this earth for all but eighty years, however generally prosperous and happy his life may have been, without having passed through more than one period of sorrow, trouble, depression and discouragement—of minutes, hours, weeks or years, as the cases may have been. I have known but very few such—few men of my age in all probability have known so few—and fewer still that have knocked me down even momentarily. But assuredly that April morning, with its brilliant Tuscan sunshine mocking me with its gilding and call to universal happiness, was the worst day I have ever known! Truly my house was left unto me desolate! All who had made the composite family that had inhabited it, had one after the other gone forth from it to take their places side by side in the beautiful

little Protestant cemetery which is still exceptionally permitted, though in contravention of the law, to exist and be used within the circuit of the city walls of Florence.

Especially my immediate surroundings, the house in the Piazza dell' Independenza, which for most of the seventeen years of my past married life had been so happy a home, became odious to me. I—we—had done much, not merely to make it a comfortable house, but to adapt it to our own special needs and tastes. It had come into my hands when the walls had only begun to rise from the foundations. No doubt I could have done better had I had it earlier still;—had the planning from the foundations been my own work also. As it was, I transmogrified it until it resembled in the interior no other house. And there were several points of especial prettiness about it;—a colonnade around the first floor of the staircase, and very large terraces and colonnades on the garden front. And all this had now become hateful to me!

It will be understood I think—at least by some readers—that it would have been far less intolerable to me to continue to inhabit the place, if there had been no specialty or peculiarity about it;—if it had been simply a comfortable house such as any builder and upholsterer could have prepared. No portion of one's own soul would in that case have been incorporated into each wall and doorway, into each column and window. But in the case of that house of mine it was far otherwise. Not an inch of the

plan of it, not the proportions of a room of it, or an effect of the various combination, but had been matter of consideration and long talks with her who had gone.

I *could* not continue to live there! The presence of my poor little girl, my Bice, as desolate, as wretched, as miserably wandering in those rooms as myself, made the matter worse and not better. She was now twelve years old. She was an only child, and her mother had been absolutely and literally all in all to her. Despite the strong instinct of *morning*, of opening life, and the coming spring-time of existence, with which Nature has almost indefeasibly endowed that period of life, she appeared to be as much depressed, as hopeless of the future, as I was myself. It was impossible for the pair of us to face the future before us in that house, with all its memories and associations.

But my financial position did not permit of my simply betaking myself to some other habitation and leaving that one to take its chance. And the getting rid of it, even at a very large sacrifice of money, was by no means an easy matter. Of course all that had made the house charming and dear to me, made it unadaptable to the general market, and more difficult to find a purchaser for. Of course a man cannot find a purchaser for his old gloves, not only or so much because they are old, as because they are *his*;—fitted exactly to his hand, and not to that of another. And so it was with my house. The perfection of its adaptation to me and my

requirements was the exact measure of its unfitness for the "general public." In some respects, however, it was a tempting purchase for a speculative buyer. The adjoining house, a larger one than mine, also belonged to me, and the two together formed the entirety of one side of the short street called the "Via del Podere." Behind these two houses was an exceptionally large garden, the whole of which was in my occupation, extending to the city walls, or to speak more accurately, to the road which ran immediately within the wall. And all around this garden, with its back to the city wall, and its glazed front to the south, was what Florentines call a *stanzone*, a huge greenhouse, that is to say, for the winter housing of orange and lemon trees. Such another stanzone, and such another collection of orange and lemon trees, as I had with much assiduity and expense got together, did not exist in Florence. In front of this stanzone was a pathway some twenty-five feet wide or more, on either side of which the oranges and lemons in their huge terra cotta pots (each far more than any man could lift when empty) were ranged on stone pedestals when brought out from their winter quarters, forming a grove of matchless beauty and fragrance, for walking when summer days were ending in moonlight nights.

How often! how often, have I there paced by the hour together with her who had gone, while the little one would collect the scattered petals of the orange blossoms, or make treasure of the fallen fruit!

It is—or at least was then—a quiet part of the

city. Little or nothing of town noise disturbed the tranquillity of that garden. The occasional voice of a bell, booming from Giotto's tower, served but to remind one pleasantly of the pleasantest portion of the immediate surroundings.

It was a pleasant place. But now it had become, all the more for every element of its pleasantness, odious to me. So odious, so intolerable, that despite every prudential consideration, I was driven to quit it at once. It so chanced that I heard of a small farm, or *podere*, as the Italian phrase is, with an old villa upon it, at a little distance from the city, outside the Porta S. Niccolò, which is the gate of the "Oltrarno," or southern side of the Arno, looking up the stream. Small as it was, the little estate had formerly consisted of two *poderi;* but it having been found, I presume, that these little bits of farms were each of them insufficient for the support of the family of a "contadino," or peasant, they had at no very distant period been thrown together. And at the time when I first visited the place there was on the property, besides the villa, one very good "casa colonica," or peasant's house, and a second one, which had been suffered to remain unoccupied, and had half gone to ruin. The "contadino" who occupied the land and lived in the larger "casa colonica," consisted of a father and mother—a remarkably handsome old couple—and three or four stalwart sons, all of them fine young men. A Tuscan peasant could hardly find himself more favourably situated than at the head of such a family—four—I

think there were four—adult and strapping sons, and no daughters. For in those happy days a peasant's sons were his wealth—the more the better. The "contadino" on the little Ricorboli farm—that was the name of the hamlet—was thus able to cultivate, and cultivate well, his land, without having recourse to hired labour.

This little property was for sale at what appeared to me a moderate price, and finally I bought it—before I had secured a purchaser for my house in Florence. It was a very imprudent thing to do, but I think I should not have continued to live at all if I had attempted to do so in that widowed and desolate Florence home.

As far as I can remember, no papers or documents of any sort passed between me and the "contadino" whom I found on the land. It all seemed to pass as much a matter of course as if I had bought him and his family with the farm. The terms of his holding were that he was to give me half the net produce of the land. These were, and I suppose are, the terms universally prevalent around Florence, and very generally, but not entirely, throughout Tuscany. There are poor lands in the hill districts where the "contadino" engages to give the landlord only a third of the produce of the land, and I believe a few of the larger estates in the remoter parts of Tuscany where the land is leased for a money rent. But the "mezzaria," as the half-and-half system is called, is universal in the neighbourhood of Florence. And it is a most happy and favourable system for the

tillers of the soil, and indeed for the owners of it also, although it may well be that the latter for many generations, from father to son, have never got from their property all that it might have produced to them if rack-rented. It is essentially a patriarchal and easy-going system; not perhaps calculated to promote a rapid rate of advance in agricultural improvement, but eminently well calculated to produce a happy, prosperous, and contented peasantry, and to generate pleasant and kindly relations between landlord and tenant.

Of course the land-owner did not get absolutely the half of the net produce of the land. There was a vast amount of easy-going give and take between the parties, and very naturally the net result of this had a tendency to be to the advantage of the tenant. Did I require at any moment of my residence in the villa the assistance of a strong hand for any purpose, the sinews and the good will of the entire family at the "casa colonica" was at my service without a thought of so much remuneration as a glass of wine. Upon one occasion I remember that certain circumstances had led to the suspicion (an altogether vain one, I believe) that a burglarious attempt might be made on a part of the house where some works of reparation and reconstruction seemed to offer facilities for such an enterprise. Immediately on the thing being spoken of, two or three of the young men proposed to sit up in the house, and seemed to think it quite a matter of course that they should do so, and that without the thought of any reward

whatever. When the grapes were ripe, I, and any of those in the villa, would stroll among the vines and pick and eat our fill of grapes, though of course every second grape was in strictness the property of the "contadino."

On the other hand, the farm-yard around the "casa colonica" was always alive with numerous broods of chickens and turkeys. But it would have been thought very sharp practice on the part of the landlord if he inquired too narrowly into the question whether this produce of the farm had been duly brought to account and the half handed to him. At Christmas and Easter the peasant's wife would probably bring some poultry as a free-will offering to the villa kitchen, and more frequently, probably, a basket of eggs. If the year was a bad one, it was perfectly well understood that the money brought by the "contadino" would be diminished by somewhat more than the accurate half of the falling off in produce, because it was universally accepted that the first claim on the produce of the land was to feed the peasant. It was rarely indeed that his share, fairly calculated, failed to do this abundantly, but if it did, why of course he must live.

If the lot and position in life of these Tuscan husbandmen be compared with the tillers of English soil, the differences between the two will not be found to be wholly to the advantage of the Englishman. It must be borne in mind that the Tuscan "contadino" must not be compared with the farmer, who employs hired labour, and whose work is