

SAMPIETRO'S MOTHER.

IN COMMENT ON KARMA.

BY THE EDITOR.

IT is not easy to analyze an artistic composition, whether it be a poem, a story or a melody, that has grown not after a pre-meditated plan, but by inspiration, for in a subconscious process many phases remain concealed in the recesses of unconscious mentality. The story *Karma* is of such a nature, and the little tale of the spider's web is an echo of an ancient fairy tale about a carrot that might have saved a sour-tempered old woman from the pains of hell, had she not forfeited salvation in her meanness and envy by her desire to keep to herself the benefit of the miraculous means of escape. I have never seen the story in print, but knew only of it from hearsay.

Lately I have been so fortunate as to find a story which is practically the same except that for the carrot an onion top is substituted. It is told of the "mamma of Sampietro" and has been published in a collection of six tales printed in *The Yellow Book* in 1895 and reprinted in Frederick Baron Corvo's *In his own Image*.* There we are told that the mother of St. Peter (in the story always called by the popular form of his Italian name "Sampietro") was "the meanest woman that even lived" who when she died, "was not allowed to come into paradise. Sampietro did not like this at all, and when some of the other gods (*sic!*) chaffed him about it he would grow angry." At last he went to the Padre Eterno to plead

* London: John Lane, 1901.

for his mother, claiming that her case had been too hurriedly decided. Then the Padre Eterno ordered her guardian angel to bring the book in which all her good and bad deeds had been written down, whereupon the story continues:

"'Now,' said the Padre Eterno, 'We carefully will go through

this book, and if We can find only one good deed that she has done. We will add to that one good deed the merits of Our Son and of hers, so that she may be delivered from eternal torments.

“Then the angel read out of the book; and it was found that, in the whole of her life, she had only done one good deed; for a poor starving beggar-woman had once prayed her, per l'Amor di Dio, to give her some food; and she had thrown her the green top of an onion which she chanced to be peeling for her own supper.

“And the Padre Eterno instructed the angel-guardian of Sampietro's mamma to take that identical onion-top from the Treasury of Virtuous Deeds, if indeed he could find so insignificant a thing; and to go and hold it over the pit of hell; so that if by chance, she should boil up with the other damned souls to the top of that stew, then she might grasp the onion-top and by it be dragged up to heaven.

“The angel-guardian did as he had been commanded. He hovered in the air over the pit of hell. He held out the onion-top with his right hand. The furnace flamed. The burning souls boiled and writhed like pasta in a copper pot, and presently Sampietro's mamma came up thrusting out her hands in anguish. And when she saw the onion-top she gripped it, for she was a very covetous woman; and the angel-guardian began to soar into the air, carrying her up to heaven.

“Now when the other damned souls saw that Sampietro's mamma was leaving them, they also desired to escape; and, clutching of the skirts of her gown, they hung thereon, hoping to be delivered from their pain. And still the angel-guardian rose, and Sampietro's mother held the onion-top, and many tortured souls held her skirts, and others held the feet and skirts of those, and again others held the last, and you surely would have thought that hell was about to be emptied straight away. And still the angel-guardian rose higher, and the long string of people all hanging to the onion-top rose too, nor was the onion-top too weak to bear the strain: so great is the virtue of one good deed,—of but one small good deed! But when Sampietro's mamma became aware of what was going on, and of what a perfect godsend she was becoming to the numbers who were escaping from hell along with her, she was annoyed: and, because she was a nasty selfish and cantankerous woman, she kicked and struggled, and even took the onion-top in her teeth, so that she might use her hands to beat off those who were hanging to her skirts. And she fought so violently that she bit through the onion-top, and tumbled back once more into hell flame.

“So you see, sir, that it is sure to be to your own advantage if you are kind to other people and let them have their own way, always supposing that they will not interfere with you.”

I could not call this tale the source of the spider narrative, but I consider it a parallel; and the reader can easily see how an echo of a similar story has been here transformed under the influence of the Buddhist conception of the ego and the notion of “mine” resulting in selfishness. It seems to me, however, that the story is essentially Buddhistic and probably belongs to that class of folk tales which together with the story of “Barlaam and Josaphat,” “Everyman,” etc., have traveled west and have been changed to suit Western conditions.

In the adaptation to Christian doctrines, the original sense of these stories has sometimes been obliterated or turned into an opposite meaning. For instance, the moral of “Everyman” clearly points out that only good deeds can save, that the ecclesiastical Brahman methods of sacrifice, of prayer, of ritual, etc., have no saving power, and yet in the well-known Christian mystery play the sacraments of the Church are reintroduced as helpful and even indispensable means of salvation. In like manner, I should not wonder at all if a Buddhist story should sometime be found to which my tale of the spider’s web, in the reconstruction which it has received in the story “Karma,” would be of closer kin than the stories of the carrot and the onion top; for I deem my version to be not an improvement, but an actual reconstruction which particularly brings out the underlying sense that must have constituted the original meaning.