

FRANCO'S LUCKY PENNY

By Frederic Taber Cooper

SUNBURNT, rain-beaten, weather-seasoned by the exposure of sixty summers, Franco stood in the doorway of his shack, brooding stonily. The slant rays of the afternoon sun threw into sharp relief the graven furrows of a face as rugged as some ancient bronze. The freshening breeze stirred fitfully the crisp, gray curls of his coarse, vigorous hair. His stubby black pipe hung dejectedly from the corner of grim lips. His vague, inscrutable gaze was turned upon an ominous bank of clouds swiftly piling up in the east, beyond the sun-lit waters of the Sound. Three sail-boats, slowly tacking their way seaward, passed successively into shadow, the snowy gleam of their canvas changing to a leaden hue.

With the subconscious working of a primitive mind, Franco absorbed the signs of a coming storm. But he did not actively heed them. His own thoughts were blacker and more sinister than any storm clouds. Ever since the hour, two weeks ago, when a jury's verdict had condemned his son to life imprisonment for murder, two images had haunted him with the persistence of a waking nightmare. One was his handsome, stalwart son, going stolidly to his living death in a prison cell; the other, the vicious beauty of the woman, unscathed, unpunished, triumphant, whose crafty testimony had placed him there. What devil's justice was it, to bury a man alive for striking to protect his honor—on the strength of the words of a faithless wife, lying to avenge her lover's death? Out of the chaos of his impotent grief and anger there had come to Franco

the ominous calm of a solemn purpose, the fixed idea of a methodical revenge. "I keela you for thees!" he had muttered in the ear of his daughter-in-law, after the rendering of the verdict; and his whole soul had laughed silently within him, to see how she shrank and whitened. He had since found comfort in frequent inward repetitions of the threat; he had sworn it softly, in the name of many saints; gradually it had taken on the consecration of a vow.

Today had been one of those rare and perfect beach days that sometimes come in early June. A rush of town-folk, men, women and children, from their homes three miles inland, had taxed the trolley cars to their full capacity. The Winter chill still lingered in the waves, discouraging swimmers from the main beach. But already a group of adventurous spirits, the first bathers of the season, were tumbling, diving, sporting in the tempered waters of the swimming pool, just above the outlet of the cove. Into this narrow channel the tides from the ocean swept, twice in every twenty-four hours, with the headlong energy of a mill race; then, checked in mid-course, turned and swept out again, a tireless symbol of mutability. Across the cove, which formed the boundary line between two townships, old Franco plied a ferry, reaping on prosperous days an ample harvest of nickels from the patrons of the golf-links beyond the salt marshes.

This was a day when money had come in a silver shower—dimes and quarters, and once a big, round dollar that even now sagged sensibly in the

pocket of his much-patched corduroy trousers. But the memory of his heavy indebtedness to the lawyer whose zeal had failed to save Vanni from his fate dampened the satisfaction of this unwonted rush of business. Of Franco's five boats, three had been in constant demand, all day long, for pleasure trips up the cove, or out to the rocky islands of the Sound. Two of these boats were even now waiting for the turn of the tide to help them up the channel. Franco's practiced eye noted mechanically the floating patches of sun-baked sand which showed that, although the current still ran sluggishly seaward, the tide had begun to rise. These boats were needed for ferry service, since of the remaining two, the one propelled by the sturdy arms of his small grandson, Tino, could not properly handle the sudden rush of homeward-bound golfers. The fifth boat, turned keel upward on the sand, flaunted in the sunshine its gleaming coat of fresh green paint. Franco scowled blackly at it, lying there in thankless idleness. Neither pride nor affection prompted him to squander good green paint—paint that "costa da mon"—upon the oldest, clumsiest, least profitable craft of all his small fleet. Through all the successive coats, applied with morbid energy, he still fancied at times that he could see, along the gunwale and down the side, an ominous stain where blood had splashed and trickled.

Impatient shouts from waiting passengers across the cove awoke the brooding figure from his reverie. With painful activity he bestirred his stiff limbs and bare, gnarled feet in crab-like motion to the water's edge, and stood there shouting vociferous threats at the small lad in mid-stream, who was valiantly toiling at the task of a man.

"Eh, you Tino, you golla darna loafo! You maka more queek, or I geeva you a leeking!" The threats exploded harmlessly, the boy giving them no heed beyond one swift glance over his shoulder, as he swung the boat around a projecting sand bank.

and ran it skilfully upon the beach. Franco waded out, to hold it steady, while the passengers stepped ashore. As he did so, the cloud of gloom lifted from his face, before the light of pleased recognition. They were Mr. Lockwood, his wife and daughter, who had that morning opened their cottage for the Summer. In past seasons this family had taken a kindly interest in the old Sicilian, for which he in return had sought to show his gratitude by the voluntary rendering of many little services. In Mr. Lockwood, he was always sure of a sympathetic listener.

"Well, Franco, glad to see you back at the old stand. The cove wouldn't seem natural without you. How goes it?"

The old man shook hands gravely. "I tanka you, Misser Lockawood, but 'e goa bad. Plenta trou' alla time. My poora son—you no 'ear about?"

Lockwood seated himself on the sandy ledge beside the board walk, tacitly inviting a lengthy narrative. The rest of the family had passed on, into their cottage. "Yes, I read something of the trial in the papers, but I didn't quite get at the facts. Your son Vanni always seemed to me a quiet, level-headed sort of man. How did he get into such a mess? Jealous of his wife, wasn't he?"

A fierce gleam lighted up the seamed old face at this reference to his son's wife. "I tella you, I tella you da trut', Misser Lockawood, or Godda, 'e strika me daid righta 'ere!—dat Grazia, she one mucha badda wooman, alla time she make da 'ell!"

A burst of ungovernable rage rendered the old boatman for the moment inarticulate. Lockwood merely nodded in reply, avoiding the interruption of a spoken answer. He remembered vividly the rather insolent beauty of Vanni's wife, whom he had often seen on Sunday afternoons, ostentatiously coquetting with two or three men at once, on the door-sill of Franco's shack, or drifting with them idly up the cove in one of Franco's boats.

From first to last, the salient feature of the old man's narrative was his smoldering hatred of this Grazia, whose evidence at the trial had robbed Vanni of his only chance. At each recurrence of her name, his voice would trail off into raucous mutterings, half English, half Sicilian, which Lockwood found frankly incomprehensible. She was a thing of evil, Vanni's woman, a malediction of heaven, a chastisement of God! But excepting for these outbursts, he spoke slowly and with a certain impressive simplicity that rendered his distorted speech easier than usual to follow, so that the groundwork of the tragedy lay clear before his hearer. The name of Jeff Peters, the murdered man, had meant nothing when Lockwood read it in the paper. But a chance phrase of Franco's brought graphically before him the red-cheeked, curly-headed young fellow, sailor, ship's carpenter and Jack-of-all-trades, who had done odd jobs at half the cottages on the beach, and whose reckless gallantry was well calculated to stir the swift resentment of Sicilian jealousy. In Franco's tense utterance, his very name took on the value of an imprecation. In monosyllables of startling crudeness, the old man told the things that he had seen, and labeled the shame that had come to Vanni's house. Vanni had been too blind, too patient, too slow to believe; and the woman, in insolent security, had mocked contemptuously at Franco's interference. Then had come the tenth of September, the day of the volunteer firemen's picnic, the day of the tragedy.

"Dat Jaiff, 'e com' an' say, 'Franco, I wanta you' boat; I taka you' Grazia up a peecneec!' An' I say, 'No, you no can 'ava my boat. You no paya my boat lasta time.' An' Jaiff, 'e laugh an' say, 'You no wanta me taka you' son's wooman up a peecneec? It no you' golla darna biz' w'at I do to you' son's wooman!'" The old man straightened his bent figure, in dramatic mimicry of the mocking Jeff, pitching his voice to a grotesque parody of his taunting speech. "An' I

say, 'I tole you one time you no can 'ava my boat, you one beeg loaafa!' An' Jaiff, 'e jump ina da boat an' pusha off; an' 'e say, 'You goa to 'ell, you olda Guin',—'e calla me lika dat, me olda man! An' my son's wooman, she jumpa in too, an' dey botha laugh; an' I say, 'If my son Vanni 'ere now, 'e keela you for dees!' An' Jaiff, 'e put 'is 'and ina da pock', an' t'rowa me a piece-a da mon'. 'Ere, you olda Guin', 'e say, 'ere youa mon'. I bringa backa you' boat, w'en I getta t'rough.'" A gleam of malignant satisfaction kindled in the somber old eyes, as he added reminiscently, "Waiil, 'e bringa backa da boat—w'en 'e getta t'rough!"

"I don't understand," said Lockwood. "I thought the man was killed at the picnic grounds."

"Leesten, I tella you." Franco laid his horny hand on the other's arm. "I wait datta night, seex o'clock, an' noa boat; saiv'n o'clock, eight o'clock, an' noa boat. I goa 'ome. Da nexta day, w'en I coma down, da tide, 'e goa out. An' down with da tide, slow, slow, rounda da corn', coma my boat, an' ina da boat lay dat Jaiff, all over blood! 'E bringa backa da boat, w'en 'e getta t'rough, but 'e daid."

As he spoke with the calmness of tense repression, the old man's outstretched finger had swept, in a slow, impressive curve, following the channel of the cove. It halted, pointing to the upturned boat upon the sand, flaunting the glory of its fresh green paint, in the light of the setting sun. Self-hypnotized, he kept his pose for a full minute, dreaming over the memory he had conjured up. He could see again before him the boat with its freight of death, helplessly rocking itself seaward. The rigid figure, bent backward over the middle seat; the dark stain along the gunwale and down the side; and the long, slim knife, of which he made no mention—Vanni's knife, lying in the puddled crimson at the bottom of the boat. Only Franco and the fishes knew where that knife now lay, many fathoms deep, far out in the waters of the Sound.

Of the actual tragedy, Franco had only hearsay knowledge. Aside from Vanni, who testified in his own behalf, Grazia had been the sole witness of the quarrel. Many had seen her with Jeff Peters at the picnic grounds; others remembered seeing Vanni there. But none could be found who had seen the three together. Vanni told a frank, straightforward story, which if uncontradicted ought to win credence from a jury. His lawyer had counted upon it to save him. But Franco from the first had feared the treachery of Grazia's evidence. For weeks after the murder the girl had shown a frenzied grief which had won her much sympathy. Only Franco had realized that her sorrow and remorse were all feigned, and that the only tears she had to shed were for the dead lover and not for the wronged husband in his prison cell. As the day of the trial drew near he had dreaded more and more the malice of her vengeful tongue. He had warned her more than once, with savage threats, to be careful not to remember too much when called to the stand as a witness.

"And did she remember too much?" Lockwood questioned.

The old man's vague gesture expressed the impotence of wrath. "She no remember too much. She forgetta too much. She forgetta alla t'ing dat maka good for my poora son."

At the trial Vanni told the jury that he believed he had cause for jealousy of Jeff Peters, and had forbidden his wife to go around with the man any more. He had forbidden her explicitly to go with him to the firemen's picnic. Later in the day he had missed her, had become suspicious, and followed her there. He had found her practically in Jeff's arms, and in a rage had struck Jeff savagely in the face. He had dealt the first blow, that he admitted frankly. But the other had then drawn a revolver, and fired at him twice, deliberately, but missed both times. Then in self-defense Vanni had drawn his knife and grappled for possession of the revolver. The death

blow had been struck during the struggle which followed.

Grazia, when first called by the prosecution, had made a bad impression as an unwilling witness, remembering nothing, and plainly trying to conceal the truth. Later, when recalled in rebuttal of Vanni's testimony, in five minutes she had done irremediable harm. Her memory had now partly awakened. She recalled Vanni's jealousy of Jeff, his frequent threats, his command to her to stay away from the picnic. She corroborated Vanni's every word, down to his arrival at the picnic grounds, his discovery of them together, and the blow that he had given Jeff. But here her fatal forgetfulness returned. She remembered nothing of the drawn pistol, the two shots, the vital details that made all the difference between self-defense and murder. Her pathetic cry, "I cannot remember the pistol, I wish I could!" was good acting which carried weight with the jury.

Vanni, who had listened to her in a daze, comprehension dawning slowly upon him, hurt his case still more by springing up in his prisoner's box and cursing her aloud as a false wife and a perjurer. The jury of well-meaning shopkeepers and farmers, unimaginative men who could not conceive of a wife lying away her husband's liberty, thought that they saw their duty clear before them. Two shots, a smoking pistol, the reverberation in one's ear, were not things which a woman could forget. They promptly found the defendant guilty. No pistol had been offered in evidence, for none had been found. Franco silently wondered whether Grazia had dealt with it as he had with Vanni's knife.

The wind had freshened to an incipient gale, and big drops of rain had splashed a sudden pattern of close polka dots upon the weather-grayed wood of the board walk. Mr. Lockwood's daughter stepped from the cottage door. "Father, you are keeping Franco standing in the rain; you

will both be drenched in another minute. And I think you have forgotten to pay for the ferry."

As Franco drew out his money to make change for a dollar bill an odd-looking coin showed black against the dimes and nickels. As he bent to examine it Mr. Lockwood saw that it was of Eastern coinage, Turkish or Persian—silver undoubtedly, but so oxidized by exposure or acid that it looked at first sight like a big English penny. "Datta mon', Jaiff, 'e giva me," commented Franco, "badda mon', I no can spend. Keepa for ricordo of Jaiff."

"What is that?" queried Miss Lockwood. "Is that your lucky penny, Franco?"

"W'at you meana, ma'am? W'at you calla luckada pen'?"

"Why, didn't you ever hear of a lucky penny, a penny that you keep in your pocket to bring luck?"

Franco nodded with grave comprehension, as he returned the blackened coin to his pocket. "Gooda t'ing to 'ava da luck. If you 'ava da luck, never noa time troub'; if you no 'ava da luck, plenta troub' alla time. Waill, me an' my Vanni, we no 'ava da luck."

Five minutes later, his boats drawn high on the beach and secured for the night, Franco and his small grandson were trudging stolidly home, three long miles through a drenching rain, each laden with a heavy bundle of driftwood that was to cook their evening meal. Franco cast one last scowling glance backward at the upturned boat, its new paint blistering under the bombardment of heavy drops. He continued to scowl as his gaze fell upon the small lad toiling patiently beside him. Tino was Vanni's son, but Franco almost forgot this when the boy looked up at him with the bold, handsome eyes of Grazia.

It was already dark when they climbed the rickety stairs of the two-story wooden building where they lived, above the fruit store of Cousin Toni. An acrid odor of crated fruit, stale vegetables and pungent cheeses penetrated to the stairway and perme-

ated the hall above. A rank savor of fish simmering in oil and garlic greeted their nostrils as they entered. But Franco's thoughts were elsewhere than on food. With scant greeting to his "olda wooman," who was chopping up barrel-staves in a corner, he stretched himself to turn lower the one flickering gas-light in the general living-room. Of the many standing quarrels that Franco had with the world at large, none had rankled more persistently than that of the monthly gas bill. Gas they must have, on account of Toni's fruit store, whose two mantle burners shed a beacon light down the dingy street on Saturday nights. But never, in Franco's mind, had they burned one tithe of the gas for which they paid. It was an extortion, a robbery, a scandal in the sight of heaven. And soon the quarrel was taken up by the entire house. Every month when the collector came he was greeted with a flood of crude English and cruder Italian, that poured upon him from the landing above like a pail of dirty dish-water. The gas company had finally complained, threatening to discontinue the service. In the end they had compromised by putting in a quarter meter. That was six months ago. Since then the high explosives of insults, which had formerly been kept for defense against a common enemy, were now used in civil strife within the household. So surely as the hour came when the gas began to flicker and grow dim, the old quarrel flamed up with renewed violence. The quarter had gone too soon again; it should have lasted another night at least. Gone in three days, and the store not open after eight o'clock! Who had wasted it? Who had turned it on in the daytime and burned it for the sheer pleasure of seeing it eat up the money? So they wrangled, volubly, acrimoniously, fruitlessly.

But since the trial there had been no quarrel about the gas. Twice without question or demur, Grazia had contributed the needed coin. Franco, watching her, lynx-like, from under shaggy brows, was slow to understand.

Although drawing a good salary as bookkeeper in Toni's store, she spent most of it on stockings, ribbons and cheap finery. Suddenly he solved the mystery. The girl was living in a constant panic of fear. Although trying to brazen it out by staying under his roof; posing as the repentant, heart-broken wife, she was day and night enduring the martyrdom of a mouse between the paws of the cat that plays with it. Franco had threatened to kill her if she betrayed Vanni; and every hour in the twenty-four she shrank from the expected knife-thrust. He could read this in her haggard face, her handsome eyes, which had lost their boldness, her whole demeanor of a furtive, hunted creature. Above all, she was afraid of the dark. Night after night Franco had crept down the hallway, at one, at two, at three o'clock and had seen through the crack in her door the gas-light streaming up in criminal wastefulness. And this habit, which she had adopted as a measure of self-preservation, suggested to Franco the means of his revenge.

Patiently he had waited for the ripening of conditions. It was now three days since a quarter had been put in the meter. Today was Saturday; there would be scant gas left in the meter when Toni closed his store for the night. The storm without continued unabated, compelling the close fastening of every window. The air in the rooms upstairs, stale with the blending of many odors, hung heavy and tangible as a pall. Brooding over his fixed idea, Franco paid scant attention to what passed around him, either during the evening meal, or later, when, squatted in a corner, he mended a crab-net and puffed at his stubby pipe, adding cheap tobacco to the lingering fumes of frying oil. Only once did he raise his eyes to Grazia, as she passed him furtively, and then only to curse her softly, purring over the oaths, like some great feline over a bone.

Gradually a hush had fallen upon the noisy old street, down by the wharves. The bustle and turmoil of

Saturday night was well-nigh over. Awnings had been drawn up, shutters closed; even the saloons, one after another, had put out their lights. A woman, with a pail of beer half-hidden under her shawl, was vanishing up a side alley. Three drunken sailors, on a dark street corner, were hilariously helping each other to keep their feet. Toni's store had ceased to do business more than an hour ago. Upstairs, in the dark chamber which he shared with Tino, Franco, silent and inscrutable, kept vigil. Heavy claps of thunder made the boy turn restlessly, but did not break the sound sleep of childhood.

It was one o'clock when Franco crept stealthily down the narrow, rickety hallway, to Grazia's door, his bare, gnarled feet padding softly on the warped boards of the pine flooring. Furtively he struck a match, gnashing his sparse old teeth at the noise and sputter that it made. The hall burner, though turned on full, responded with only a feeble flicker. Franco felt, at the sight, the grim contentment of a headsman at the tempered edge of a well-ground axe. But he still had some minutes to wait. The gas burned lower and lower, a mere thread of light, a pinhead, a vanishing spark. In Grazia's room, it was so low that not a ray came through crack or keyhole. Would the unaccustomed darkness waken her? That was the question upon which the whole success of Franco's plan now hung. With bated breath, he kept his self-appointed death-watch in the hall, until with a final puff the last needle point of light went out. Ten minutes later—it had seemed an hour—he ventured to move. Shading a guttering candle with his bent, misshapen fingers, he crept painfully, snail-like, down the stairs that threatened at every step to betray him noisily, through the lower hall, and then down the second flight, a mere ladder with the lower rung missing, that led to the shallow cellar where the meter was placed.

Empty boxes, barrels, baskets, exhaling a musty smell, a suggestion of

decomposing fruit, cumbered the cellar on every side, rising in tottering walls, between which Franco crept, as through a narrow lane. The guttering candle, shining feebly through the slats of empty crates, cast weird shadows before him and behind—ominous, symbolic, suggestive of the bars of subterranean prisons. Reaching his goal, Franco stuck his candle in a blob of melted wax, upon the bottom of an upturned strawberry box, and felt in his pocket for the twenty-five cent piece which was to set the meter once more in operation, and send the deadly stream of gas flowing through the open cock into Grazia's room. But in the handful of small change which he brought forth, there was no coin of the required denomination. Pennies there were in plenty, nickels more than a score, a dollar or two in dimes, but not a single quarter. He remembered now, he must have given his last quarter to Mr. Lockwood, in making change. For the first time, Franco's iron nerve was shaken. It was not alone the disappointment of a vengeance deferred, but a superstitious fear that fate was against him, that shook the old man as with a sudden ague. Once again it was borne in upon him that he "no 'ada da luck."

But as he returned the money to his pocket, one piece slipped from his hand, spun round and rolled in the direction of the meter. As his tremulous fingers closed over it again, he recognized it as his "luckada pen'," the worthless coin that the dead Jeff had tauntingly flung at him. He measured it thoughtfully with his eye; then, hoping against hope, opened the slot in the meter, dropped in the coin, and tentatively pushed forward the lever. It slid over as though oiled; there was the reassuring jingle of the coin dropping into the box below, among its fellows. The gas was once more free to flow. If anything had

been needed to round out the sum of Franco's vengeance, to fill his cup of grim content to overflowing, it was this added irony of making the coin of her dead lover the instrument of the woman's punishment.

During his snail-like progress up the stairs, Franco paused to open methodically the windows in both hallways, lest the smell of gas, leaking through the cracks of Grazia's door, should draw attention before its appointed work was done. Then he stretched himself on his narrow couch, in the full contentment of a weighty duty faithfully performed. No foreshadowing of remorse troubled his serene consciousness of having performed an act of simple justice. In a land where juries blundered, and where the police interfered strangely in what, according to his simple ethics, were strictly family affairs, he had executed judgment, he had avenged the honor of his house. After many weeks, he felt that he could sleep in peace.

The afternoon of the coroner's inquest, which had resulted not unnaturally in a verdict of suicide against the convict's unhappy wife, the gas collector stopped as he was leaving the house and spoke with unwonted civility to old Franco, smoking in the doorway.

"I guess you dagoes have had your share of trouble lately, but for all that I can't turn in bad quarters, at the office. You will have to give me something better than this." As he spoke, he reached forth the tarnished Oriental coin that the dead Jeff had received—through what circuitous chain of sailor folk no one would ever know.

Old Franco took it serenely, with an enigmatic smile. "I tanka you," he said, with his inscrutable gaze fixed upon the coin. "Dat my pocka' piece, my luckada pen'. It a fina t'ing to 'ava da luck."



A TALE OF HARLEM

By Ethel M. Kelley

SHE was a love-lorn maid who dwelt
In Harlem (see Manhattan);
She had a figure lithe and svelt—
Her skirts drooped down below her belt,
She liked describing what she felt
And quoting Greek and Latin.

She wrote for Sunday magazines
A column culinary:
—“The Nutriment You Find in Beans,”
On women in the Philippines,
And “How to Live Within Your Means,”
If you desire to marry.

A chamber dark she dwelt within—
(For this, each week, three dollars.
'Twas like herself, both long and thin);
She, in a bath-tub lined with tin,
Was privileged to wash her skin,
Her handkerchiefs and collars.

There're many readings of the phrase,
“To live in New York City.”
'Tis done in several thousand ways
That would but fill us with amaze,
Yet who to judge which most to praise
And which the most to pity?

Some dwell upon the Avenue
And flunkies line their hall-way.
(But these are not exempt, 'tis true,
From ills that fall on me and you);
Some in a single chamber do
Housekeeping in a small way.

Yet who shall draw the line between
Real life and mere existence?
Each seeks the highest he has seen,
And strives to keep his conduct clean
Or seeks a moral that will screen
The line of least resistance.