Fioraccio

By Giovanni Magherini-Graziani

Everybody called him Fioraccio, but his real name was Antonio, and he kept a little shop for bread and macaroni just there by the bridge, where the tobacconist's is now. He was a little man, short and thick, always dressed in a striped jacket and low shoes which were never tied. He never wore a hat, summer or winter; and when the sun shone on his head, that was as bare as the back of your hand, it glittered like a brand-new tin kettle. He had yellow eyes like a cat's. He always seemed to be laughing in a sneering, scoffing fashion; and when he spoke he whistled, because he had lost his teeth; in front he had only two left, one on each side. If there ever was a rascal in this world, Fioraccio was one, and one of the first; and in his own place there was more talk of him than of Barabbas in the Passion of Our Lord. I don't mean to speak ill of him, all the same; he's dead now, and long since gone to his own place. As I said, Fioraccio had a shop where he sold bread, wine, and macaroni, and kept a sort of little inn. But the real shop was behind, where the door opened into the garden; there he kept a store of all sorts of things—wood, cloth, old iron, barrels, flasks, oil-jars, grain, wine, oil—for Fioraccio was a receiver of stolen goods; and whatever was stolen sooner or later found its way to him, and in all the years that he kept up this trade the police never once got a single chance to lay hands on him. They were after him, time and again, and hundreds of times his shop was searched, but to no purpose. When they came to look the goods were safely hidden, and Fioraccio never brought them to light until all danger was over. If he bought anything he never paid for it; nobody had ever seen the color of his money; he paid in oaths. If any one went to his shop they never got full weight.

There was a saying, "At Fioraccio's some get eight, and some get nine, but nobody gets ten." There were not the inspectors then as there are now. For that matter, in his shop nobody stopped to talk, nobody ever got the right change; and if anybody made any complaints, they got nothing but abuse. For this reason nobody who was in a hurry ever went to Fioraccio, and he troubled himself very little about his customers. "I don't care if they don't come," he said, "they only give trouble." For that shop, you see, was only the cover for the other one. But if there was anything worth while going on he was ready enough to put himself out, and often stayed up the whole night long. Otherwise, he sat the whole blessed day at the door of the shop, and had something spiteful to say to every one who passed; young or old, man or woman, married or unmarried, nobody escaped his tongue. He knew neither Easter nor Lent; one day was the same as another to him, If the holy sacrament passed by his door, he didn't even take the pipe out of his mouth or get off his stool—he smoked faster than ever, to show his disrespect. He would hear nothing about Madonna or the saints; and if the priest asked him, as he was blessing the houses,

"Fioraccio, do you want the holy water?"

"I can give it myself," he would answer.

Hardly was his old father in his grave when he cleared all the pictures and crosses out of the house; and when the old woman who swept out his rooms asked him if he wasn't afraid of the judgment, he answered,

"I don't want my wall covered with rubbish."

If he'd been content with being wicked himself! But he was always making mischief, and putting other people up to evil doings. He didn't even respect innocence, and taught little boys to

lie and steal. For example, a nephew of his own, about eleven years old, whom he took to live with him—he said to the boy every morning when he sent him out,

"Now mind you don't come home empty-handed to-night."

And if he brought nothing he would give him no supper, and even beat him sometimes.

"If you want your supper you must earn it," he told him.

Near the shop of Fioraccio there was one belonging to an old aunt of his, who was nearly blind. Fioraccio used to send the boy into this shop to rob the till; and as the boy was little, and there wasn't the paper money, as there is now, he used to tell him always to bring the white money, and to take it while the old woman was at the door, but not to take too much at a time or people would find it out. And when the boy brought scudi, or other silver money, Fioraccio would give him a sou or a toy.

But one day the boy was caught, and beaten worse than a donkey. To excuse himself he told the whole story, and how he had been taught to steal, and by whom. And Fioraccio, when he heard it, beat him worse than ever, and turned him out of the house. So Fioraccio remained alone—alone in the house, and alone in the shop; and at last nobody came into the shop any more, for they didn't like to be sworn at. "Some day the earth will open under his feet," they said. They called his shop "Inferno;" and even now, if any one is heard to swear very hard, people say, "Holloa! has Fioraccio come to life?" For he had become a proverb, you know. And so he lived for many years; but at last his time came, like other people's. He began to look very old, and to get up late, and go to bed early. The shop would be open every other day; then open two days and shut three days. He grew to be a perfect skeleton, all skin and bones, and the *scaldino*[1] was never out of his hands. Everybody said, "Ah! Fioraccio isn't long for this world." And he wasn't. The shop was always shut now. Sometimes he'd come to the window in the middle of the day, when it was fine, but he looked so dreadful it was enough to frighten one. It was old age was the matter with him, and for that there's no cure. At last he took to his bed; but instead of repenting and changing for the better, he went on worse and worse. He blasphemed like a fiend. The worse he was the worse he swore. At last the old woman, who was the only creature that went near him, told him that if he didn't stop swearing she wouldn't come any more.

"Why not?" asked Fioraccio.

"Because I'm afraid that some day the devil will come and carry us both off," said the old woman.

"Oh, the devil! and the devil! If there was one really, he'd have made me a Visit long ago," said he.

The priest, when he heard how ill Fioraccio was, said to himself, "I must go to him; there's no help for it!"

And he went; but they say he made a fast that day, though it wasn't in the calendar. He knocked, and went upstairs. When Fioraccio recognized the priest's voice, be said, "What does that fellow want with me? I won't see him."

"How? you won't see him!" said the old woman. "It seems to me it is only polite of him to make you a visit."

"Oh yes, I dare say, but I don't care for such politeness; priests are like owls, birds of ill omen. And—"

But the old woman had opened the door by this time, and beckoned to the priest to come in.

The priest entered the room.

---

[1] An earthen pot with charcoal, to warm the hands and feet by.

"But I told you not to come in," howled Fioraccio.

"Good-morning, Antonio."

Fioraccio only growled.

"I heard you were ill, and—"

"It was something that they didn't say I was dead."

"And I thought I would come and see you." So he began to talk; but as soon as he tried to bring the talk round to the point he desired, Fioraccio always changed the subject. At last the priest grew desperate, and laying his hand on Fioraccio's shoulder:

"Fiore," he said, "you mustn't be angry if I speak seriously to you. You know that we haven't only the body to look after—"

"I know what you mean; but when I want to confess I'll send for you."

"But, of course, whenever you choose—"

"Pray don't trouble yourself—"

But the priest wouldn't be content without preaching a little; so he began to talk of repentance, and restitution, and such things, you know. When Fioraccio heard the word "restitution" he flew into a rage, and called out:

"Did I ever rob you of anything?"

"I don't mean that; I mean—"

"Now, listen, Mr. Rector. You and I do very well as long as we are apart, but if we meet we disagree. So, if we're to have peace, you'd better not come here any more. Do you hear?" And he turned his back, and not another word would he say.

"How goes it?" asked the old woman.

"He won't hear of it. If those above don't take it up, I don't see what is to be done. To-morrow I'll come, at all events," said the priest.

"The Lord and Our Blessed Lady grant it." But before the next day Fioraccio suddenly grew worse, and before the priest could get to him he was dead.

This happened in 1837, and there are plenty of people living now that remember the whole story, and can tell it you better than I can. Scarcely was he dead when he turned black all over, so that it was a horror to look at him. They rang the bell, carried him to church, and then into the church-yard, where they buried him.

The next morning, before day (it was hardly four o'clock), the priest was in bed, when he heard a knock at the door, and asked who was there, thinking some sick person wanted him.

"It's Cecco,"[2] said the servant.

"What Cecco?"

"Cecco from—" (Fioraccio's place).

It was the sexton.

"What, in Heaven's name, does he want at this hour?"

"Wants to see your reverence."

"Send him in; let's see what it is."

Cecco appeared at the door, hat in hand.

"What's the matter now

"Something you'll hardly believe. Didn't your reverence bury Fioraccio yesterday?"

"Of course I did. What about it?"

"He's got up again."

"What?"

---

[2] Frank.

"He's got up again."

"Impossible!"

"It's the case, all the same. I was passing by on my way to work in the field. When I was passing the burial-ground I turned round to look in, and there, just where we buried him, I saw something white. I thought I must be dreaming, and as by chance I had the key in my pocket, I went in to look. It was he—Lord keep us from lies!—but I turned short round, and came away without looking back."

"So you came here and waked me."

"Who else was I to come to? The strange thing is that the earth looks as if it hadn't been touched."

"Some one must have done it to play you a trick. You're sure the gate was locked?"

"Locked and bolted. And he wasn't very pleasant to go near, either."

"Did you bury him again?"

"Not I, indeed! And, besides, your reverence must come, for perhaps it isn't all quite natural. I mean—you know—"

"This morning I can't manage it; I have that affair at X—."

"You could come before that; the whole thing won't take more than an hour."

"No, no; mind what I tell you. Go and bury him again."

"But—"

"Only you put him deep enough, I'll promise you he won't come above-ground again."

The sexton turned his hat round and round. At last:

"Your reverence shall be obeyed," he said. "I'll go and get the tools." And he went out; but before he shut the chamber door the priest called him back.

Say nothing about this, you know."

"Your reverence may depend upon me. I won't say anything. Well," said Cecco to himself, as he drew the door to after him, "at least I shall have lived to say I've buried the same man twice."

The next morning there he was again. The priest called out:

"What now?"

"Same old story."

"What story?"

"Fioraccio."

"Above ground again?"

"Just that."

"It doesn't seem possible."

"But it's so. If you don't believe me come and see for yourself."

"I do believe you, but what can I do? You must just bury him again. Some one must have—"

"If you saw the state he's in you wouldn't think anybody 'd be likely to want to meddle with him."

"I don't know. Sometimes—"

"Well, I'll bury him this time, and then we'll see."

That same day—I remember it as if it were yesterday—I was taking some tools to the smith to be mended, when I came upon Cecco coming away from the burial-ground with the spade in his hand.

"Been putting somebody to bed?" I asked.

"If you knew!" said he.

"What?"

"I've just buried Fioraccio."

"Only now. What did you keep him above-ground so long for? Wanted to be quite sure he was dead?"

"I've buried him over again—twice." And he tells me the whole story.

I wouldn't believe him, and I remember saying: "I'm sure somebody helps him to get above-ground."

"Somebody does, you may be sure, and it's easy to guess who."

"I know what you mean. Somebody who has no need of a spade. Look here," I went on. "Let's you and I come and watch here to-night, and see who comes. Are you afraid?"

"No!" he answered; "not with you. I wouldn't stay alone, though."

"Say nothing to anybody, and at nine o'clock to-night I'll come for you, and we'll see if I'm right."

That night at nine o'clock there I was.

"Shall we go?"

"Come along; but we'll take something in our hands, in case it should be anybody."

So we each took a thick stick, and started for the cemetery. It was an ugly black night, promising rain. Outside we couldn't stay; we should have been seen.

"Where can we go?"

"Let's go in."

Cecco opened the gate, and we went in; but we could not shut the gate when we were inside.

"Leave it ajar," said I, "if any one comes it won't be by the gate, but over the wall."

"But here we shall be seen."

"Where's he buried?"

"There, by the dead-house."

"Let's go in there, then."

"In the dead-house?"

"Where else? There's no other place."

There was a bench, and we sat down. I began to light my pipe.

"What are you doing?" asked Cecco; "if they see the light they'll know there's some one here."

"Oh yes, as if I was going to stay here all night without even smoking; I should go to sleep."

We said very little more; neither he nor I had any wish to talk. We heard nothing but the bats, which kept flying in and out; now and then a dog barked.

The clock struck eleven. I thought I heard steps on the road, but they passed by.

"It's Faustino," said Cecco. "I know his whistle"—for he had begun to whistle as he passed the gate, as people do when they feel a little timid. About half an hour later an owl flew close by my face, and gave me a great start; but she was afraid of us, and flew off, and we heard her hoot outside.

"It must be nearly midnight."

"We might go now. Nothing is likely to happen to-night," said I.

"Wait till the clock strikes."

"Very well, we'll wait."

"Listen, there's the clock. One, two three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven—twelve."

I felt him catch me by the arm.

"Look, look there!"

There, where Fioraccio was buried, the earth began to heave and roll, rising slowly, slowly, as if it were pushed up from below, and we saw him rise out of it upright, he remained so for a moment, and then fell at full length on the grave. Cecco said not a word, but strode off across the cemetery and went out, and I after him. I wanted to turn back and look if it were really he, but I hadn't the courage; I passed close by him, but I didn't look. I tell it you as it happened. Cecco was trembling from head to foot; I knew by his voice.

"Did you see?" he said.

"I saw it. Won't you shut the gate?"

"I won't touch anything. The rector must come to-morrow and see for himself—he wouldn't believe me. I'll go straight to him now, and you must go with me."

"But we can't go at this hour," said I; "to-morrow morning early, rather. I'll go home with you to sleep. I told them at home that I should be out all night."

In the morning early we went to the priest, and told him all that happened.

"And what are we to do?" he asked.

"If your reverence doesn't know who should?" asked Cecco.

"If you tried—"

"Tried what? Burying him again? You see it's of no use."

"Certainly it is no use," said I; "in holy ground he won't stay, that's quite plain—such a rascal as he was."

"Hush!" said the priest. "Don't tell any one of this—I lay it on your consciences; and, besides, we have no right to judge the dead. You, Cecco, go and put him once more underground."

"Your reverence may command me in everything, but, saving your presence, I can't and I won't go back to the cemetery again; here's the key, but go I won't—that's flat."

"Never mind, I'll send some one with you, if you're frightened. And you (to me) go to the convent of—, with a note for the father superior."

In fact he wrote a note, and I took it to the convent. The superior read it, and said to me: "I understand; tell the rector that everything shall be done as he asks."

I took back the answer to the priest. "Have you got him underground?" I asked.

"Yes, but I thought we never should manage it, I assure you."

"Do you want anything more of me?"

"Not now; to-night, perhaps. If I want you I'll send for you."

"You will find me at home; I'll come directly."

All the while I was at work I was wondering what the priest could want of me, but I thought it must have something to do with Fioraccio. Just after sunset the priest's nephew came to tell me I was to go to the parsonage. I went, and found there two Capuchin friars, who had come to exorcise Fioraccio. The priest wanted me to come with him.

"When?" I asked.

"To-night."

"Then I must go and tell my wife."

"What in the world are you doing always out at night?" asked she.

I told her some story or other, and after supper I went off to the priest. He would have it that I should sup again with him. The friars would neither eat nor drink, and we heard them praying aloud in the next room, and reciting the office. Just before midnight one of the friars put his head in at the door and said:

"It is time now. Let us go."

The priest turned pale, but he was forced to make a virtue of necessity and to come with us. We took a lantern, and went out of the house by the garden door. There were five of us—the priest, the two friars, Cecco, and I, all as silent as the grave; in the dark, that way, we seemed like conspirators. I was in front with the Capuchins; Cecco and the priest came behind. When we came to the gate I lit the lantern; plenty of trouble it gave me, too; I thought it would never light, but at last I found a match that would kindle. The priest was the first to enter the cemetery.

"What did I tell you?" whispered Cecco; "there he is again!"

I was in front. The light fell full on the face of Fioraccio. But why do I call it a face? It was black as charcoal, with open mouth and those two yellow teeth, and the yellow eyes wide open, shining in the darkness. I turned sick and stopped short.

"Heavens! how ugly he is!" I cried.

"Hush!" said the friar who was nearest me.

Then they put on their stoles, opened their books, sprinkled the dead with holy water, and recited the service of exorcism. I held the light, the priest clung to my sleeve, and I felt him tremble; indeed, from time to time, he gave such convulsive starts that the lantern shook in my hand, and the friars could not see to read. "Antonio! Antonio!" called out the friar, "Antonio! answer, in God's name."

Not a word did he say.

"Try calling him Fioraccio; perhaps he won't answer to his Christian name." This I whispered into the friar's ear.

The Capuchin sprinkled the corpse once more with holy water, then began calling,

"Fioraccio, answer, answer!"

There came a deep voice, hollow-sounding, and far away, as if from fathoms underground.

"Who calls me? What do you want?"

It was the devil, who answered for him.

"Why do you not stay where you have been laid. What is the reason you do not rest?"

"Because I cannot."

"Why can you not rest?"

"Because—" And he began to tell us why. Such things! such things! that he had done in life. The priest put it all under the seal of confession with us afterwards. He said "that he was damned body and soul." And saying this, he swore a fearful oath. And then he said:

"Take me away from here."

"Where do you want to go?"

"To the Arno. Under water twenty braccios[3] deep. There, where I can hear no bells."

"You shall have three braccios." We heard another oath, always in that voice underground, for Fioraccio's mouth never stirred. And the friars sprinkled him again with holy water.

"For the last time; how much water must you have?"

"Five braccios."

"You shall have three, and no more."

He went on swearing. At last he said:

"Well, if I must I must, but not in too much of a hurry."

And at that moment we saw something, dressed all in red, fly up over the wall.

"We must come back to-morrow," said the friar. "God have us all in his holy keeping!"

We left the cemetery; you should have seen the priest how he trembled. The next day he sent for me and told me: "We must take him away to-night, and you must make a coffin for him."

---

[3] Braccio, a measure used formerly in central Italy—a little more than half a metre long.

"But I never made a coffin in my life."

"You can manage it somehow. You can generally get to the end of what you undertake. And it needn't be such a fine piece of work, you know, so long as it holds together."

"Well," said I, "I'll do my best." I went home, and looked up some chestnut planks I had, and made the coffin. Then I went to the parsonage, where I found the Capuchin friars and the priest talking together.

"The coffin is done," I said. "Shall I bring it here?"

"What are you thinking of? To night, after dark, you must take it to the cemetery and put him into it; you can call Cecco, if he will go with—you, in short, do the best you can; only get him into the coffin. Then he must be carried—somehow—"

"I understand," said I; "I am to look after the whole business. Very well, I'll see what I can do. Cecco wouldn't hear of carrying him; we had better ask some of the Brotherhood."

"No; because we must keep it as quiet as we can."

"As quiet as you like. But it is a long way to the Arno, and that coffin is made of chestnut. It is heavy, I can tell you."

"Can't you find a cart?"

It was settled that I should borrow my cousin s cart, and the priest should find some more men. Then I went for Cecco, who made no end of difficulty about coming, and after dark we carried the coffin to the cemetery. There he was again, uglier than ever. One could see that he was damned only to look at him.

"Here, Cecco," said I, "help me to lift him." I turned round. No Cecco. I ran out of the gate, and found him in the road.

"Look here," said he, "if you can't manage it by yourself, you must get somebody else, for you've seen the last of me in there."

I went back. I had a great mind to run away, too, but I had promised his reverence, and, besides, it wouldn't have done to make a scandal. So I set the coffin on its side, and rolled him into it. Blessed Virgin! it almost made me faint away. Then I had nothing better to do than to turn round and look at him. It was the light, perhaps, but he looked just as if he was grinning as he used to when he was alive. I threw the cover on, anyhow, and bolted—I must say I bolted—as hard as I could go. The priest told me to harness the cart towards ten o'clock at night, when there would be no one about, and bring it to the cemetery. I found waiting for me at the gate the priest, the two friars, Cecco, a brother of Cecco's, and three others whom the priest had sent for. We took up the coffin in silence, and put it in the cart; then I took the donkey by the bridle, and we set off. It was a dark, close night, when one could hardly breathe or see where one was going, though we had two lanterns. What we went through on that road God only knows—now we were on this side of the road, now on that, now among the trees, never ten paces straight ahead; and the poor donkey tugged and tugged, as if the coffin had been made of lead. Every minute one or the other of the lanterns went out. From time to time we passed through a thick fog, so thick that we lost sight of each other, of the east, of everything. The friars went on muttering prayers and sprinkling holy water, and we recommended ourselves to God and to the Madonna. Even I lost courage altogether. As for the poor priest, we had to leave him at a farm-house on the road, for he could go no farther. But that was nothing to what followed. Just as we passed the turning at the mill of a hurricane burst over us that uprooted trees, carried off haystacks, tiles off the roofs, all sorts of things. We were surrounded by a cloud of leaves, twigs, straw, and dust. I never remember such a whirlwind. Two hay-stacks flew off into the air as if they had been locks of tow; a big pine-tree that two men couldn't clasp round went rolling over the plain like a twig;

and along the banks of the Arno oaks uprooted, willows twisted together like yarn. Nothing to be seen of the cart or of the beast—nothing; we could not tell which way they had gone. We commended our souls to Heaven, and went on. I don't know how we found our way to the bank of the Arno, just there where it is deepest. We could hardly recognize the place. We found the donkey standing there, quite still.

"Here," said the friar.

"No," said the same voice we had heard in the cemetery. "More water—more water!" And then oaths, to make one's hair stand on end with fright.

"No; there's enough here."

Then more oaths, and more oaths.

"Here," said the friar, "I command you, in the name of God!"

All of a sudden there was a great rush and sputter of flame, as if one had thrown sulphur on a fire, and we saw a figure like a galley-slave, all in red, and heard a splash and a gurgle, and when we looked at the cart it was empty. I went home, put the beast in the stall, and turned to go to the house.

"Who's that?" cried my wife. "Wait; I'll get up."

I didn't answer; it didn't seem as if it was me she was speaking to.

"Will you have something to eat?" she said. "You had no supper yesterday. I'll make a fire and cook this bit of beef; it will only take a minute." So saying, she began to kindle the fire.

I looked on while my wife put a fagot on the coals, which began to sputter and send out sparks, and I said, without thinking,

"Just like him."

"Just like *who?*" said she.

I perceived that I had said too much, and wanted not to say anything more; but it was of no use, she had it all out of me. I tried to eat, but couldn't swallow a mouthful. I went to bed. When I was nearly asleep I heard the house door open. I listened, and heard a noise as if the kettle and the bucket were rolling over the floor.

"There's somebody there," said my wife.

"Hush," said I, "I hear them," for the noise began again.

"Getup; there's some one there."

I got up and went into the kitchen. Nobody there—the bucket and the kettle each in its place, the door shut and bolted. I went back to bed, but couldn't close an eye until morning. The noise kept on all night in the kitchen. The next morning, when I went out, I met the old woman who had taken care of Fioraccio. She stopped me and asked me about what had happened in the night, of which she had heard something. When I told her about the noise in the kitchen, she said: " 'At that same hour I could not sleep, and I took up my rosary meaning to say it for him. Hardly had I begun when I saw him appear, all dressed in red, and he said to me:

" 'No need to say it for me; it's of no use. I'm damned—damned for all eternity.' "