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THEOBALD;

OR, THE TRIUMPH OF CHARITY.

(Written by Madame la Comtesse de la Rochere, and published under the auspices of the Archbishop of Tours.)

CHAPTER IV.—THE RETURN HOME.

(Continued.)

Theobald bent his head under the hand of his venerable relative, then taking the one she offered him, he kissed it respectfully.

The old lady's eyes became full of tears. Clarita approached her, and showing Theobald, 'My brother is one more to love you?' she whispered. 'Oh, thank Heaven for this happy day.'

'Who says this is a happy day?' asked the old woman, already wandering. 'Was not the Mass for the dead celebrated this morning?—Yes, to-day is the fiftieth anniversary of that horrible catastrophe. My son, you should have returned either before, or after this day, for it is a day of blood and woe; it is unlucky.'

'Oh! do not talk in this manner, good mother,' said Clarita, in tears. 'But why, my brother, why did you not return last week, as we all three hoped and expected?'

'You know it was out of my power to do so; but pray my dearest Clarita, do not be so superstitious.'

'I am wrong, no doubt,' said the young girl trying to smile through her tears. 'I can only love; I have no strength of mind.'

'You must endeavor to acquire it,' said her brother, desirous of immediately commencing his part of instruction. 'I know that a great number of Corsican women believe in the influence of lucky and unlucky days, in fascination, in the evil eye, and in many similar things; all this is absurd, and condemned by the church, as well as by reason.'

'I will try to correct myself,' said Clarita, with charming docility; then leaning towards her great-grandmother, she expressed her, in order to dissipate the painful impression still visible on her features. She soon succeeded in her pious task, and the good old lady, quite consoled, smiled on the young girl. Theobald admired this scene in silence, and asked himself if all the science with which he proposed to endow his sister could be compared to the modesty and tenderness which already made her so attractive. At this time, Annunziata entered the dining-room, for the purpose of laying the cloth for dinner, and Clarita immediately rose to assist her aunt. She then gave her arm to the old lady, and conducted her to her usual seat, sitting next to her, and was entirely engrossed in paying those attentions which her grandmother's infirmities required. Theobald was compelled to occupy the seat of honor, which his aunt pointed out to him. As to her, she came and went, assisting the servants in changing the plates, and only sat down at intervals at the further end of the table. In vain, Theobald, accustomed to French manners, cried out against the barbarism of those of Corsica; nothing on earth would induce Annunziata to change hers.

'My mother, my grandmother, and their mothers before them, waited on the head of the family while at table, and I will do the same,' was her invariable reply to all the observations and entreaties of her nephew. The repast was plain and simple, as is the usual fare in Corsica, and consisted, first, of *polenta*, to which was added *ripiatoles* (a kind of Italian ragout) with a small wild kind roasted. At the desert, Clarita rose to fetch the *broccio*, (cheese) and the *gallettas* which she had prepared herself. A bottle of good old wine circulated, and conversation commenced. Theobald had much to relate, and the three women listened with the deepest interest. At length, nine o'clock struck by a large wooden clock which stood in a corner of the room. Clarita instantly rose and wishing her brother good night, presented her arm to Madame Loncini, and led her to her apartment.

'My grandmother always retires at nine o'clock,' said Annunziata, 'and your sister does not leave her during the whole night. We are, then, certain of being alone, and I will take advantage of the circumstance to speak on a subject which interests us all, but which regards you more particularly. Clarita has already passed her sixteenth year some months, it is therefore time to think of marrying her.'

'It appears to me very early for her to take so serious a step,' hazarded Theobald. 'It is not considered too soon in our country,' pursued Annunziata, 'particularly when we consider that you are in a great want of some useful alliance. I have long been occupied on this matter, but there is no suitable match for her in Piovola. Our family being descended from the Caporali, and being one of the oldest on the island, we cannot lower ourselves. I have, then, been compelled to search in the neighborhood. Signor Peroncelli, of whom you have, of course, heard, descends from a second-rate nobility. He has three sons, the eldest being now

twenty-three years of age. You will find him I venture to say, exactly what we wish; for, without speaking of his brother, who will soon be men, he has a sister married to a captain in the Corsican voltigeurs, which of itself would be an immense advantage to you in case of need; besides four cousins—all fighting men—three uncles on the father's side, and at least two dozen cousins from the first cousins, of whom the greater portion are already men.'

'But, my dear aunt,' interrupted the young man, 'I really do not see how this multitude of uncles and cousins, which you enumerate with so much complacency, can further the happiness of Clarita.'

Annunziata looked at her nephew in astonishment. You have forgotten your country,' said she at length, in a gloomy tone.

'I suppose that such must be the case,' replied Theobald, provoked; 'for you are the third person who has told me the same thing since my return.'

'Act as you think proper, pursued Annunziata with bitterness; 'but for my conscience sake, I shall tell you, that if you refuse to profit by this opportunity of settling your sister in a suitable manner, I feel certain you will very shortly have reason to repent your folly.'

'I refuse nothing,' replied her young relative. 'The happiness of Clarita is my daily hope and desire; and if I find that the son of Signor Peroncelli possesses the necessary qualities—'

'There exists a point of far more importance than the happiness of a woman,' interposed Annunziata with asperity, 'and that is, the honor of our family. In accordance with this principle, my nephew, I had begun to enumerate the resources which you personally would derive from this alliance. If you will allow me, I will continue to inform you of all I know respecting the Peroncellis.'

'I am all attention,' replied Theobald coldly, for he felt himself altogether misunderstood.

'Francesco Peroncelli has pursued his studies on the Continent. He is a good young man, full of right feeling and courage, and one of whom every one speaks most highly. As he is the eldest of the sons, he will inherit the landed property, which is considerable. This, I need not tell you, is the Corsican custom.'

'Is Clarita disposed to receive his addresses? Is she gratified by his attentions?' asked Theobald.

'Clarita has never seen him, and does not know one word of what I have just told you.—But she is well educated, and can have no will but yours, as you stand in the place of her father. The Signor Peroncelli is enchanted with the idea of this alliance between our families.—He is, besides, aware that my niece possesses ten thousand francs, which she inherits from her mother, and he would not find so good a marriage portion within ten leagues around.'

'Yes, without reckoning on what I can do for her,' said the young man with pride.

'That is quite another affair; and I should advise you not to be too liberal, for the head of our family should be in a position to uphold his rank,' continued Annunziata. 'But listen to the rest I have to tell you. Francesco must return to the Continent to finish his studies. He would already have left several weeks ago, had not his father wished to present him to you before his departure, for, of course, we could decide on nothing during your absence. It would, therefore, be fit and proper that you should go and see Signor Peroncelli as soon as possible, in order to make all necessary arrangements.'

'Would it not be better to wait for him to pay us the first visit?' asked Theobald.

'No, no—we have already talked the matter over between ourselves,' said his aunt. 'Allow yourself to be guided by me on all subjects of decorum at least, such as they were practised by our ancestors—for I, thank God, have forgotten none of them. And now I will leave you, for you must require rest.'

'I promise you to think seriously on the conversation we have just had,' said Theobald with gravity, for he felt by no means decided.

'You will act wisely,' replied his aunt, 'for the subject will deserve consideration. This is your room. Good-bye till to-morrow. I have many more matters to tell you, but opportunities will not be wanting, now you have returned home.'

CHAPTER V.—THE PERONCELLI FAMILY.

Although Theobald had ridden fifteen leagues over the most abominable roads, his mind was so agitated he felt no inclination to sleep but a great want of solitude and quiet, to collect his thoughts and reflect calmly on his present position. For a young man of twenty years of age, having just left the benches of a college, and entirely without experience, he had, by no means, an easy part to play. He found himself suddenly called upon to fill up the duties of the head of the family, as Annunziata delighted to call him; the possessor of considerable property, the inhabitant of a country, whose manners and customs are altogether peculiar, and which he had totally

forgotten. To live among people who expected, as an act of positive duty, the commission of a crime utterly contrary to his conscience, both as a Christian and a man of honor; and who, moreover, found himself the sole arbitrator of his sister's destiny, whom it was a question of settling in life. The young man recalled to his mind all the information his aunt had given him on this most important subject, weighing maturely the advantages and disadvantages; he then implored the Almighty to enlighten him and lead him to act for the best. To go himself to Vescovato and judge as far as possible of the character and good qualities of Francesco Peroncelli, and then to consult the wishes of his sister, appeared to be the wisest plan he could adopt; he decided on doing so, and sank to sleep, thinking of the best means of putting his scheme into execution. The sun had long risen when Theobald awoke; he rose instantly, and opening the window, the first object that met his view was Clarita returning home, and entering the house, followed by a servant carrying a basket. He ran to meet her.

'Where do you come from so early in the morning?' asked he, kindly drawing her gently towards the garden.

'From a house close by, my dear brother.'

'And what took you there so early?' again inquired our hero.

'Do you remember old Cati, who is nearly as old as our great-grandmother?' replied the young girl blustering; she is very poor, and has no relations left, so I have made it a duty to go and see her every morning; I hope, Theobald, you will not forbid my continuing to visit her.'

'Certainly not; I shall never forbid anything noble or generous.' So taking Clarita's arm under his own, they were soon out of sight under a grove of lemon trees. The brother and sister walked thus for a long time, finding a great charm in this intimate chat, and Theobald was much struck by the good sense and proper feeling, the delicate sentiments of his young sister, whose education had been so defective. In truth, she possessed one of those happy natures who appear created for good; her heart was the good ground of which the Gospel speaks, and in which the word of God fructifies without hindrance; Clarita had received the good seed at the time of her First Communion, and it had produced an hundred-fold. Brought up in absolute retirement, knowing no other pleasure than that we all derive from the accomplishment of a great duty; entirely devoted to the task of consoling and cheering the old age of her great-grandmother, Clarita felt completely rewarded by the great affection of Madame Loncini, and thought it quite natural and a matter of course that she should devote her whole existence to the old lady. All her time had hitherto been taken up by household duties, the perusal of useful and pious books given to her by the baroness, the correspondence she had kept up with her brother, the charities she distributed to the poor of the village, and in various kinds of needlework which she had been taught during her stay at Bastia. Clarita had no particular intimacy with any of the young girls of Piovola; and yet all loved her for her virtues and gentleness.—Her only wish had been for her brother's return; and now that the wish had been happily accomplished, nothing appeared wanting to her perfect felicity. The morning walk was interrupted by the church bell which announced the nine o'clock Mass.

'The Mass will shortly commence, and my good mother and I always attend it; I must go to fetch her. Will you accompany us, Theobald?'

'Most willingly, my dear sister,' said he and both hand in hand, as in the days of their happy childhood, they went to seek Madame Loncini. On his return from church, where Theobald could not but admire the fervor and piety of the young girl, they found Annunziata waiting for them at the open door.

'I have been looking everywhere for you,' said she to her nephew, 'for we have many affairs to settle.'

'I am entirely at your orders,' was his reply. Annunziata then led him into her room, and placing several files of paper before him on the table, 'While you were absent,' said she, 'I endeavored to replace you as far and as well as I could; but now it is for you to undertake the management of your own affairs. I have gathered all these documents for your inspection, examine them well, and I hope you will be satisfied.'

'My dear aunt,' said Theobald, 'I am perfectly satisfied with your management; I rely entirely on you, and will receive no accounts whatever; I only entreat you to continue to direct everything as heretofore, for you are far more capable than I can be.'

'No, no,' replied Annunziata, 'that cannot be; we have each our part to perform. Men are the natural masters, and everything out of the house regards them; while we women under-

take the housekeeping and internal economy.—Read all these papers, I beg, that you may at least be familiar with the state of affairs.'

'Who then, may I ask, has made out these accounts?' asked Theobald, surprised at their neatness, for he remembered that when he left his aunt could neither read nor write.

'They are all made out by me,' replied Annunziata. 'I could not write, but it became necessary for me to learn. Clarita gave me lessons, and it only required three months' application to enable me to write sufficiently well for the purpose. But you appear surprised. Do you not know the Corsicans are superior to the generality of men and consequently of women? That they can, with facility, do all they desire?' added she proudly.

Theobald could not forbear smiling at this comfortable conviction, which he knew was shared by the great majority of his countrymen.

He rapidly glanced over all the different accounts, but one large bundle of papers particularly fixed his attention; it turned out to be the different documents of a lawsuit, which Annunziata had carried on, with a neighboring proprietor who had dared to encroach a little on a field belonging to the Loncinis. This proprietor, he it understood, was allied to the Fabianos. The memorial which this clever woman had herself drawn up was so remarkable for good sense and clearness, in one who had received so little education, that Theobald could not forbear exclaiming,

'You are indeed a superior woman.'

'Oh, no,' said Annunziata quietly. 'Any Corsican could do so much if necessary. It answered my purpose, for I gained my cause.'

The aunt and nephew then descended to the usual sitting-room, and Theobald found that his luggage had arrived. He had left it at Bastia on landing, and Monsieur Cafforelli had undertaken to forward it. He hastened to take out several presents he had brought for his relatives. For his great-grandmother, he had procured a handsome ivory crucifix, most beautifully carved. To Annunziata he presented a gold chain and earrings.

'For you, my Clarita,' said he, 'I have brought nothing but books, for I think they are more necessary, and will be more acceptable than anything else.'

He then gave his sister several highly instructive works, a handsomely bound New Testament, the histories of several countries, besides many excellent literary French and Italian books.—He had chosen this little collection with the greatest care.

'I will immediately begin a course of instruction with you,' said he, 'for there are many things yet for you to learn.'

'Clarita is already very clever,' objected Madame Loncini; 'she reads and writes like a schoolmaster, and I do not think it possible to find her equal on the whole island.'

'My good mother,' replied Theobald, gently, 'young men in these days learn more than they formerly did; consequently, the education of young girls should also be more general, in order that the companion of man should not be too inferior to her husband, so that she may understand, and even second him if necessary. Who can tell? My sister may be destined to marry a Frenchman, or a Corsican brought up on the Continent, and accustomed to the education of French women, a great many of whom unite much solid and varied learning to all the good and amiable qualities of their sex.'

'My nephew is right,' said Annunziata: 'our Clarita should be ignorant of nothing that other girls are taught, and I advise her by all means to profit by her brother's offer.'

'When shall we begin?' asked Clarita in her usual gentle voice.

'In a very few days, my dear sister,' replied Theobald. 'I leave to-morrow for Bastia, and shall return as soon as possible.'

'What! are you going to leave us again so soon?' timidly inquired the young girl.

'My absence will not be long, Clarita; I have some affairs to settle at Vescovato, and then I shall proceed to Bastia, to carry out a project that, I trust and believe, will receive the approbation of my family; it is that of uniting the remains of my dear mother to those of my father in the family vault.'

'That is most suitable and has my entire approbation,' replied Annunziata.

Clarita pressed her brother's hand in silence, and wiped away a few drops that glistened like diamonds on her eyelids.

Theobald then went out to visit his old friends and acquaintances, and everywhere he was treated with consideration and received with kindness. In several places, similar offers of assistance were tendered to those made by Burcica the bandit, or rather, outlaw; he thanked the persons coldly, and changed the conversation. In the afternoon of the following day he went into the paddock to select the most spirited horse among those which were grazing, for the Corsi-

can horses, of a half-wild nature, are not, like ours, shut up in stables, but are allowed to run at liberty, are always in excellent order. While he was occupied in saddling and bridling his courser, Annunziata joined him, armed with a superb double-barrelled gun, fresh from the manufactory of St. Etienne.

'This is the result and fruit of my savings for some years,' said she, 'accept my dear nephew, for the love of your aunt, and use it in remembrance of her when the time comes for upholding the honor of the family.'

'I trust I may use your magnificent present at all times in a way that shall reflect honor on you and myself,' stammered the young man, kissing his aunt's hand; 'and, with your permission, I will now take it with me.'

'Most assuredly, for it is unbecoming that you should go from home unarmed.'

Annunziata then gave a great deal of good advice to her nephew concerning the negotiation he was about to commence, with some further information of the character and family of the Signor Peroncelli. Theobald then set out, and proceeded for many hours through woods without meeting with any habitation; he feared he had lost his way, and began to regret having declined his aunt's offer of a guide at the moment of his departure. While reflecting on what was best to be done, he perceived a shepherd at some distance. He was watering his flock at a fresh spring, which flowed from under a rock covered with moss. It was in truth a beautiful spot.—Several young girls surrounded the spring, and were joking with each other, as they filled vases of antique shape with the clear liquid, carrying them on their heads with much ease and grace. Theobald contemplated this scene for some time, as it recalled to his mind those described in the Bible; then approaching one of the girls, he inquired if he were still far from Vescovato, and if he were in the right road; but instead of replying, the foolish little creature opened her large eyes, made a low courtesy, and ran off, laughing merrily. Thinking he was not understood, Theobald was going to repeat the question in the Corsican dialect, when a young man, who was sketching the picturesque view that had just excited our hero's admiration, suddenly rose from behind a tree that had concealed him, and approaching the traveller, said with great politeness, 'Monsieur, you are still a quarter of a league from the town. I am going to return there, and shall be most happy to show you the way if you will allow me.'

'You will greatly oblige me,' said Loncini, much surprised to find a sketcher in the woods of Vescovato. So leading his horse by the bridle, he began to examine the young artist, while they conversed on different subjects. He was a man about twenty-five years of age, of middle stature, a most pleasing countenance, and of quite a gentlemanly manners.

'Monsieur,' said he, 'you are no doubt a stranger, and consequently know no one at Vescovato; you will find neither hotel nor inn fit to receive you. Come and stay with my father; we shall consider your visit as a real fete.'

'I imagine you also to be a stranger, first, from your accent, and above all from your admirable talent,' replied Theobald, pointing to the sketch which the young man held in his hand.—'This country, which abounds in magnificent views, can boast so few people capable of reproducing its beauties, that I am utterly at a loss to imagine from what artist you can have taken lessons.'

'The little I know of painting and drawing I learnt in Paris,' observed the sketcher, smiling.

'Then we are doubly countrymen,' replied Theobald, 'both by birth and education, for I also was born in Corsica, and educated on the Continent.'

'Well, that is an additional reason to induce you to accept my proposition, and remain our guest for some time. If you also are fond of drawing, I can show you some beautiful views; if you are a sportsman, we will go through woods where you will find game more abundant than in the preserves of a royal residence. I hope this will tempt you.'

'It is, indeed, very difficult to resist such seductive offers,' said Theobald, who felt attracted towards his companion as by a charm; 'but I can remain but a short time at Vescovato, sufficient to talk over some affairs with Monsieur Peroncelli, with whom you are probably acquainted; but this I trust will not deprive me of the pleasure of seeing you before my departure.'

'My dear sir,' said the unknown, taking Theobald's hand affectionately, 'I am the eldest son of Monsieur Peroncelli; and I consider myself most fortunate in being the first to welcome you. We will not separate so long as you remain at Vescovato.'

Theobald was enchanted by this meeting; and showed by his manner and words, all the pleasure it afforded him. The evening before, he had watched his sister, and reflected on her charac-