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THEOBALD; OR, THE TRIUMPH OF CHARITY. (Written by Madame la Comtesse de la Rochers, and published under the auspices of the Archbishop of Tours.)

INTRODUCTION. THE LADIES OF CHARITY. Oh, Charity! Daughter of Heaven! how ingenious art thou in creating resources to insure remedies for every ill—consolations for every misfortune.

I was intimately acquainted with a lady who had been for a long time one of the visiting members of an excellent society, 'The Ladies of Charity.' Calling upon her one day, at an early hour, when visitors were not expected, I found her seated at a table, noting in a register the list of articles she had been charged to distribute during the current month.

'What!' cried I, 'do you require so large a folio for your accounts?' 'Oh, no,' replied my friend; 'it is not larger than actually necessary.'

'What more, then, does this great book contain?' 'Some notes and memoranda, without order, or much importance.'

'Let me see,' said I, seizing upon the voluminous record. 'You will understand nothing I assure you, said Eliza.

'I care not; allow me to judge for myself.' I opened it, and read at hazard some passages of the following description:— 'Christine, mother of five children; her husband blind; to find employment for her, and situations for her two daughters.'

'François just confined. Mem.—To send her soup and place her infant at nurse, she being incapable of nursing it.'

'In truth,' said I, 'all this must give you an infinite of trouble and take much time.'

'No doubt it does,' replied my friend; 'but could my time be better employed?'

'Still,' I argued, 'there are social duties we ought to perform, besides those we owe to our families, even if a widow, without children, or one gifted with the wonderful activity I have so often admired in you.'

'Believe me,' said she, interrupting me and pressing my hand affectionately, 'in whatever position we may be placed, if we only abridge our superfluous conversation, curtail our useless visits and dangerous pleasures, many hours will remain each week that we could consecrate to good works; and as to the trouble of which you speak, I assure you the true enjoyment we feel in doing a little good repays us an hundred fold any privation we may have been obliged to impose upon ourselves. I have lived in the world and known its pleasures; but be assured, my dear friend, the most delightful ball, the most splendid fête, does not afford us half the real joy arising from the smile of an infant whom we found in tears, or the grateful thanks of an aged man to whom we have afforded relief.'

While Eliza pronounced these words with all the warmth of profound conviction, I continued turning over the leaves of her register and found the following memoranda:— 'Pierre Ferraud, nearly a hundred years old, and covered with wounds, living in a wretched loft, with no light but that proceeding from a door leading into the passage. It is urgent to remove this poor man immediately to a more wholesome lodging, his great age and infirmities rendering him incapable of exertion.'

visit the rich in their splendid hotels, when I admire their magnificent pier-glasses in rich gilded frames, their superb silken hangings, and examine with a curious eye those elegant and costly trifles that now ornament every console, and cover almost every table, and the thousand little chefs-d'œuvre of art that fill every etagere, without experiencing any feeling of envy (of which I am happily incapable), still I find the contrast great when I return home to my modest apartments, with the old-fashioned furniture; but, on the other hand, when I go home from my weekly visits to the poor in my districts, I find everything of wonderful magnificence. My muslin curtains—my arm-chairs, covered with Utrecht velvet—my clock, of a somewhat gothic design in fact, everything that surrounds me appears quite splendid. I feel almost ashamed of the luxury of my dress and furniture, and thank the Almighty for having been so bountiful to me, praying Him to succor those who are in want of the necessities of life.'

'I now perfectly understand your feelings,' said I; 'but do you not often assist those who are ungrateful, and find your good works derided by the very people who have most benefited by them?'

'This is, indeed, sometimes the case,' said she; 'for some of the poor are very exacting; and when we are unable to give all they desire, they murmur and complain without cause. But we remember that it is Jesus Christ we assist in the persons of the poor, and that if we do not meet our recompense on earth, we shall not fail to receive it in heaven.'

She continued to make other observations, which I understood imperfectly, my attention being suddenly arrested by the following annotation:— Mem: 'This day I went with the baroness to Brando. Found a stranger with three children in a stable.'

Here followed some illegible words, and lower down— 'I must immediately find a nurse for the newborn infant, make arrangements for the funeral, and institute every inquiry in order to discover the family to which the deceased lady belonged.'

'This is a singular memorandum,' said I, pointing it out to my friend. 'Ah,' said she, 'it was written at Bastia, and recalls to my mind a terrible as well as a touching event—a Corsican tragedy, the whole history of a vendetta, in short.'

'The history of a Corsican vendetta! Oh, oblige me by relating it, my dear friend.'

'With pleasure; for it appears to me very capable of inspiring good feelings, and proving the incalculable and lasting advantage of a religious education, while it makes us acquainted with the customs and manners of a very interesting country for many reasons, and one little visited by modern tourists. I shall therefore enlarge on many circumstances which I might otherwise abridge in this tale. The first part of what I am going to relate took place in my presence, and the rest I know to be positively true.'

Eliza then took from a drawer a large piece of woollen knitting, which I saw was intended as a warm waistcoat for one of her poor. I also took out my embroidery, and she commenced the following narrative, to which I listened with the greatest attention, for, in addition to its interest, nothing could surpass my friend's charming manner of telling a story.

CHAPTER I.—THE ORPHANS. I had been but a short time at Bastia, when Madame la Baronne de D—, that model of virtue, of whom I have so often spoken to you, determined to establish a society of ladies for the purpose of relieving the poor, both in their moral and physical sufferings, with the endeavor, as far as possible, to eradicate the greatest cause of their misery—indolence, that great curse of the Corsican population. For this desirable end they would offer work to all whom age and illness did not incapacitate, and use every means in their power to induce and persuade them to accept it; for we must admit, however high the promises of payment, this was by far the most difficult part of our task.— The establishment of such a society in a country like Corsica could not fail to meet with many and serious obstacles; but the sincere and lively charity of the baroness surmounted them all, and from the very first month our association numbered no less than sixty members.— About half were ladies residing on the island, the rest were subscribers in France; and all were presided over by the excellent curé of the parish. Our first funds were produced by a lottery, drawn in the salon of Madame D—, the town was then divided into six districts, and twelve ladies were chosen and appointed as visitors to the poor in their houses. I was one of the visiting ladies. Every month we all met, and, after attending High Mass, we each gave an account to the society of what we had

done, whom we had relieved, and the amount of our expenditure. My companion in this charitable undertaking was a venerable widow, who, following the affecting custom of Corsica, had never quitted her mourning garments, or appeared in any worldly assembly, since the death of her husband, which occurred thirty years before. One day, as we were returning from our daily visits, on arriving at the square of St. Nicholas, a young girl about fifteen years of age, tall and graceful as all women of this country are, approached my companion, the Signora Petrucci, and spoke to her in the Corsican dialect. I advanced a few steps to avoid hearing their conversation, but the widow joined me immediately.

'Good heavens,' said she, translating in bad French what the young girl had told her; 'a poor woman, whose husband had been assassinated, is dying of want with her children, in a stable on the road to Brando, a little before you reach La Madonna-della-Vesina. It is feared they cannot live long.'

'Let us hasten to their assistance,' said I, going forward. 'It is much too far for me,' replied the signora, arresting me by the arm. She was not young; and, accustomed from childhood to the idle, quiet life of the ladies of Bastia, was incapable of long walks or much exertion. 'Besides, what should we do at Vesina? The poor of the town are already more numerous than we can assist; besides, this woman is a stranger, a Genoese (or native of Genoa) without doubt.'

And she laid an emphasis on the word, showing all the contempt and hate which is felt by the Corsicans for that nation, under whose iron yoke they suffered so long. 'As you say she is dying, what does it matter whether a stranger or not? But you are right; we cannot appropriate to the use of this unfortunate woman those funds that have been given to us for the poor of the parish of St. Nicholas.— I will, therefore, go and consult the baroness.'

'A very good idea,' interrupted the widow; 'present my humble respects to her. We are very fortunate in having her in the island, she does so much good! Adieu, then, my dear friend,' added the signora, giving me her hand. 'I am going to take my siesta, for I am greatly fatigued.'

I crossed the square as quickly as possible. At that hour it was deserted, and taking the street between the barracks and the sea, crossed by the garden at the glass-door of a gallery, which the lady's maid opened immediately; and without giving her time to announce me, knocked gently at the door of Madame D—'s apartment.

'Come in,' said she, in a sweet voice. She was seated before a work-table, adjusting, with infinite patience, a multitude of small pieces of cotton, which she converted into caps and other articles, for the poor little children of Bastia.— This was her favorite occupation: she was working with all the ardor of a person obliged to gain her daily bread by the amount of her work.— Madame D— was no longer in the flower of youth; but her features were delicate and aristocratic, her eyes full of soft expression, her figure elegant and majestic, her step dignified and graceful at the same time, and all these physical advantages gave but a faint idea of the beauty of her mind, or the goodness of her heart. I readily related the object of my early visit.

'We must assist this poor woman,' said she, instantly pushing away her work-table, and ringing the bell. 'Bring round the carriage immediately,' said she to the servant who appeared. 'My dear Eliza, will you kindly accompany me, that is, if your children can spare you for a few hours, and your husband will not be annoyed at your absence?' for her enlightened and sincere piety would not permit her to advise even a good action, at the expense of a duty.

'I have nothing that retains me at this time,' I replied, 'and shall be most happy.' 'At all events, I will send to mention the cause of your absence at home,' said the baroness, while she hastily equipped herself in a simple costume; for no woman attached less importance to dress than she did; then opening a large closet, she took out a parcel of linen and children's clothing.

'This may be useful to us,' said she. The horses were soon harnessed, and we drove off.— It was one of those enervating and overwhelming days in which even animals appear to lose their energy under the baneful effects of the sirocco; so we advanced but slowly. In the street, and on the market-place, a crowd of idle people were in a state of complete inactivity, the greater part sleeping listlessly, extended in the shade under the walls.

'Is it not necessary,' asked Madame D—, 'to use all our influence to inspire these people with the love of work? A great many of them beg their bread, when they might gain it so easily; but it is not their fault, added she,

'they know no better. It is our duty to teach them.' One of the distinguished traits of this excellent woman was her perfect charity—that while blaming a vice she always found some excuse for the culprit. We took the high road to Pietrarena, by the sea shore, at times approaching so near that the waves bathed the edge of the road; at others, passing through groves of olive trees, intermixed with groups of pomegranates and myrtles.

'Go faster, Pierre,' cried the baroness, to the coachman. 'When I think of the distress of this unfortunate woman, I cannot be satisfied with our slow pace,' added she, to me. I shared her impatience. A most magnificent scene now presented itself to our view; the sea, tempestuous and blown furiously towards the land by the sirocco, contrasted with the smiling verdure of the hills to our left; but I was well acquainted with the beauty of this landscape, for the road to Brando, wide and even as the finest road in France, picturesque as the most beautiful park, was my favorite and constant walk.— Now the fate of the stranger interested me too keenly to admit of my remarking the beauties that surrounded me.

'Here we are at last, at the Rotunda of the Templars,' cried I, on perceiving the pretty pavilion, and the hanging terrace above the sea, that is said to have belonged at one time to this celebrated order. A few meagre, wild-looking sheep, with black coarse hair, rather than wool, grazed upon the aromatic herbs which is all now to be found on the ancient domain of the knights. Their shepherd, extended under an aged olive-tree, was singing in a monotonous tone of those interminable laments, which reckon not less than from sixty to eighty verses in length.

'Perhaps the shepherd could direct us to the place where this unhappy family is to be found,' I remarked to the baroness. She stopped the carriage and questioned the man herself. 'They are down there, in the lavel, just before you enter the village,' he replied. 'There is blood in that affair. I have seen the woman—are you a relation? You will arrive much sooner by leaving your carriage, and taking the path to the left. Will you allow me to show you the way? Gladly accepting his offer, we left the carriage; he placed his gun on his shoulder, and walked before us, without heeding his flock, which he left to the care of his dog. We had some trouble in following him on the hill, through the heath and briars, but in ten minutes we arrived at a miserable half-ruined cottage.— A most heart-rending sight then presented itself to our view, on a heap of straw, and in a stable open to all the inclemencies of the weather, a poor man had just brought an infant into the world, a weak little creature who was feebly crying in the apron of an old woman, evidently the owner of the miserable hovel. At her side a girl about ten years of age, half concealed by the straw, was shaking under an attack of intermittent ague; a youth about thirteen years old, was on his knees, close to his mother, contemplating her in mute astonishment and horror.— The poor woman was so pale, we should have thought her already dead, but for the sound of her hoarse breathing, which came with much effort.

'May God bless you for bringing the ladies here,' said the old woman to the shepherd, 'for I have not even an old sheet in which I can wrap this poor little innocent.'

I took the parcel of linen from the servant, and began dressing the infant. The baroness approached the mother. 'How do you feel?' asked the Italian. The stranger opened her eyes, and closed them immediately, saying, 'Antonio! oh, my Antonio!'

'Rest assured, mother, he shall be avenged,' murmured the young Corsican, pressing the already cold hand he held in his. These words made me shudder. I looked at the boy; his features were regular, and their expression amiable, with nothing in his appearance that denoted ferocity.

'This poor woman is very ill,' said the baroness to me in a low voice. 'Send for the medical man,' I suggested. 'And the Abbe Durand,' added she to the servant, who immediately left to execute those commissions. Then she requested the shepherd to fetch some strong soup from the nearest inn. During their absence we borrowed the pailasse and pillow that formed the old woman's only bed, and placed the sick mother upon it. She was a person apparently about thirty years of age, with a most pleasing and interesting countenance; her long fair hair fell in disorder on her shoulders. Everything in her costume presented the greatest contrast; her dress, which was soiled and torn in every direction, was composed of very handsome gros-de-Naples silk; her thin summer boots were burst, and allowed her poor bruised feet to be seen, and the finest thread stockings; part of a shawl of the brightest colors was

draped around her, but this remnant was that of a splendid real Cashmere. Who was this person, apparently a stranger in the country?— The state in which we found her, forbade our interrogations. The shepherd soon returned. The soup he brought appeared to revive the poor invalid, who thanked us by a soft and grateful look. We then showed her the newly-born infant.

'Poor child,' she cried, embracing it tenderly. 'Never will it know its father.' The poor woman then shed a torrent of tears. 'I will be its father, and Clarita's father also,' said her son, in a grave tone, which did not appear natural at his age.

'Theobald, my beloved son,' said the poor mother. She drew him to her and kissed his forehead, then shuddering convulsively. 'They will murder you also,' cried she. 'Oh, let us go, let us depart instantly, let us return to my beloved L'ouaine; there at least we shall be safe from the balls of an assassin. But he! He never can return! I shall never see him again; and her tears flowed afresh. Neither the baroness nor I could restrain our tears.

'Poor lady,' said I, at length, 'in heaven alone you will regain him whose loss you so much lament.' 'Ah! Yes, that is my only hope.'

Then, after a moment's silence, pointing to the children whom we had groomed around her, as the only consolation that remained to her on earth. 'But they— what will become of them? for I feel that I am dying, I know I cannot live.'

'Do not talk thus, dear mother,' said the little girl, shivering in every limb; 'we are already sufficiently miserable.'

'Oh! Why have I not still my relations?' pursued the sick woman; 'they would take care of my orphans; for if they remain here, they will die like their father.'

'Listen, my son, my dear Theobald,' added she, in a voice that became weaker every moment. 'You must be educated on the continent, your father, you know, had consented to it.— Now, mark well what I say: remain there all your life, never put your foot in the fatal island. With a profession you can live anywhere, and you neither want courage or activity. Some day when your sisters have lost their great-grandmother, send for them; they will be firmer with you in France, for my country is so beautiful.'

At this moment the Abbe Durand and the doctor entered the stable, the latter felt the pulse of the sick woman, and made an expressive joke which we understood only too well. 'Can medicine be removed to my house?' asked the baroness.

'Impossible,' replied the medical man, in a low voice, 'for she cannot live two hours.' We looked at each other sorrowfully; the unhappy fate of this young and interesting woman greatly affected us.

'The priest, who was French like ourselves, now approached. 'Madame,' said he, 'of whatever nature your sufferings may be, the aid of religion will soften them.'

She looked at him with resignation, for she fully understood him. 'It must be the Almighty who sends you here, my father,' said she. 'I earnestly desire to make my confession.'

We retired into a sort of dog-kennel, that served the old woman for a sleeping apartment, taking with us the doctor and Clarita, who was in a dreadful state from ague; as to Theobald, nothing we could say would induce him to leave; he remained on his knees at the door. Not a tear fell from his eyes, but his mute and concentrated grief, and the wretched expression of his countenance, was, indeed, melancholy to behold. In a quarter of an hour, the good abbe called us; Theobald was the first to approach his mother.

'My daughter,' said the worthy ecclesiastic, 'repeat in the presence of your children, that you pardon your husband's assassin.'