

### The Romance Of My Cousin

Translated from the French For St. Peter's Bote By Father Chrysostom, O. S. B.

At Montbriand there existed fifty years ago a peculiar custom in what is called good society. The men went to the club every evening, the ladies visited each other and spent the evening embroidering a little and gossiping a great deal. Only the nights at Madame la Prefete's house were an exception. There ladies and gentlemen met, but these nights were rare, and with the exception of these more official and amusing reunions the delights of tobacco and politics separated each evening the ladies and gentlemen. And if one of the fair sex, in the laudable endeavor to keep her spouse and his boys at home, permitted them to light a cigarette in the salon, or if she hazarded to speak of other things than trinkets, clothing, management of the household, or news of the town, she was unmercifully censured and looked upon as eccentric, a blue-stocking and romantically inclined.

Only one man at Montbriand never went to the club and was a faithful companion to the ladies. That was my cousin M. Morin, nicknamed Némorin, and justly so. Related to the best families of the bourgeoisie of Montbriand, he had so many cousins in that famous city, that we all had become accustomed to call him "cousin." He was the most amiable old boy that you could imagine. His entire income was devoted to the purchase of presents and to charities. His entire time, to visiting or to walking about. He did errands for everybody; was sponsor at baptisms, witness at marriages and at the drawing up of last wills and testaments. He made the fourteenth at table, wept at all funerals, sang at all the weddings, brought the collegians to their place of study, held the horses, finished upholstery that had been begun by some enthusiastic amateur but soon abandoned, in fact, his obliging disposition was equal to all demands. Under the pretext that he had nothing to do, each and everyone loaded him with commissions to such an extent that he was the busiest man at Montbriand where in fact no one scarcely ever did any work.

In spite of all these laudable qualities, my cousin had remained single. "Why?" you ask. Ah! if you had known him, gentle reader, you would not ask such a question. He had a nose! ah! a phenomenally long nose. Wicked people asserted that when he was in a hurry to get into a house, he pulled the bell-rope with his nose, sure of doing it quicker that way than with his hand.

It was also related of him that on a certain occasion whilst still young, he had the good fortune to find himself not at all displeasing to a charming young lady who was... blind. It was thought that he would get her since her parents had given him their permission to offer her his heart. But as bad luck would have it, one day when the company were adjourning to the dining room, a large fly tickled the ear of the young lady. She extended her hand to brush it off, but encountered an unforeseen obstacle—the nose of her cavalier. Its dimensions so frightened the poor girl that she broke off all relations with him.

My cousin Némorin, who had a better formed character than face, took his dismissal bravely. He composed a song about his adventure and sang it so well that he had the "laughers" on his side. Unable to bear tobacco smoke, his nose being sensitive in proportion to its colossal dimensions, he never visited the

club, but regularly spent his Monday evenings at Mme. Convenable's. Tuesday at Mme. Jupone's, Wednesday at Mme. Coqueluchon's and so forth.

However in the year of our Lord 1831 his habits were interrupted by an annoying accident. He sprained his foot whilst on his way, from pure kind-heartedness, to give Mme. Jupone's dressmaker a "calling down," and for the next eight days my cousin had to rest his leg upon a stool. If only a single one of the many ladies who had victimized him during the year had come to see him, all would have come trooping along in single file; but none dared to set the example of visiting an old bachelor, and so my poor cousin was alone except for the companionship of his old nurse, Miette Perrotin, who was deaf and shrewish.

Not knowing how to pass his time, he wrote a romance, and was so pleased with it (it was his first work of the kind) that he resolved to read it to the ladies on the first occasion.

As soon as he could walk again, he set out one evening for Mme. Convenable's, dressed in black and wearing adventurine gloves. He was welcomed most cordially, for the ladies, deprived during the past eight days of their only cavalier, and not knowing with whom to be vexed, teased and plagued each other in a most disquieting manner. The nieces of the lady of the house Alice and Theresa, offered him a comfortable arm-chair; their little brother Pierrot, brought him a footstool for his injured foot, and all the ladies present had him relate his accident ten or twelve times in succession, exclaiming "Oh! Alas!" in the most obliging manner imaginable.

When these preliminaries were disposed of, Mme. Jupone asked Mme. de Coqueluchon about her new bonnet, and for the next three-quarters of an hour, the different merits of valenciennes, blond or tulle laces were discussed from all angles, then satin, gauze or taffeta ribbons, more or less dyed, embossed or watered, were passed in review. Then Mme. Convenable broached the endless chapter of her maid's imperfections, the troubles with the cook, and my poor cousin was just asking himself how he was "to switch" the conversation over to literary grounds, when pretty Alice, a girl of fourteen summers, took it into her head to ask him: "Cousin, what is that roll of paper sticking out of your pocket?"

"My little cousin," he said hastily, "that is a manuscript of your very humble servant's."

"And what does the manuscript say?" continued Miss Curiosity.

"It is the story of the beautiful Ermengarde," replied my cousin, "a story of the times of the Crusades."

"Read it to us, cousin," the three children cried in chorus.

"If your aunt will permit," said my cousin.

"With pleasure, cousin," said Mme. Convenable, "provided it is not a romance."

"It is a story that I made up hence it is not a romance," boldly replied the author.

"Since you assure me of it, cousin, I should be pleased to hear you read it," graciously replied Mme. Convenable.

The ladies sat around him in a circle, and the children moved their chairs a little closer, some one put a glass of sweetened water at the convenience of the author, and my cousin, a little excited began as follows:

*Story of the Beautiful Ermengarde.*

"Ladies," he said by way of explanation, "I beg your indulgence. It is my first attempt in this line. I will not publish this work unless you find it worthy, and in order that it may become so, I beg you

to offer your criticisms. I will receive them gratefully."

"Charming!" exclaimed the ladies in chorus, "you may depend on us, cousin."

"Sh!" from Mme. Convenable, and my cousin resumed:—*Story of the Beautiful Ermengarde.*

"Allow me a little remark, cousin," said Mme. du Crochet. "Since it is not a true story, would it not be better to say: *The Beautiful Ermengarde,—A Novellet?*"

"You are right, cousin," said the author, and taking his pencil he struck out *Story of* and added *A Novellet*. Just as he was beginning again, Mme. de Saint-Crible, whose face was quite peck-marked, observed "Why say beautiful? It is so very trite. People are tired of all these beauties. It would be much more original to make of your heroine one of those intellectual, gracious beings who please without dazzling and who inspire serious and lasting attachment."

"I will think of it," replied my cousin, and he made a cross at the word beautiful. It now read: *Ermengarde, A Novellet.*

"Cousin," said a charming young lady, who was called Elodia, "The name Ermengarde seems very barbarous and inharmonious. I beg of you to call the heroine, Elvira, to oblige me."

"Alas! Mdle. Elodia," said the poor author, "I would gladly do so to oblige you if it were possible, but the events occurred in Germany in the thirteenth century, I must be true to local color. Moreover, there is in my novellet a ballad, and many of the rhymes would have to be rewritten entirely were I to sing of Elvira instead of Ermengarde."

"But," said the pretty Elodia, "it seems to me one word would not make so much difference."

"I will try," said my cousin, and he resumed: *Ermengarde, A Novellet of the Times of the Crusades.*

"It's not a new novellet, then," remarked little Theresa.

"Be silent, little fool!" cried Mme. Convenable. "The discussion of the title of the story has already lasted a good quarter of an hour, and that is quite enough. The tea ought to be served at half-past eight. Begin, Cousin."

He dared not repeat the title and so began at once with the story:—

"One beautiful summer evening, young Ermengarde de Rosenthal leaning on the battlements of the castle of her ancestors, let her eyes sweep over the vast country spread out before her. Her blond hair was tied up by a golden fillet ornamented with amethysts, and her long yellow silk dress, held by a cincture constellated with sapphires..."

"Permit me to offer a criticism that is more important than it would seem," said Mme. Jupone, "Blonds never wear yellow dresses. Such colors would only be becoming to mulattos."

"Agreed," replied my cousin, "but you will see by what follows that the beautiful Ermengarde was obliged to wear that kind of dress."

"It is a very shocking improbability," said Mme. Jupone stiffly, "but go on with the story."

"The plain was enlivened by a happy group of haymakers who were completing their stacks and the penetrating odor of the hay intoxicated the young chatelaine with its delicious perfume."

"Perfume of an odor?" remarked Mdle. Raiddillon, who had been a school teacher for thirty-five years, "that, sir, would seem to me to be a pleonasm."

"I will correct it," said my cousin, and he continued: "The beautiful Ermengarde began to feel bored. Her father and brothers were in Palestine and she had remained at the castle of Rosenthal with her morose old grandfather, and her mother who was always sick."

"She should have been at the bedside of her mother," interrupted

Mme. Convenable, "and not walking on the battlements like a cat on the water-spout."

"Alas! cousin," replied the author, "I am telling a story, not preaching a sermon. I am not pretending to draw up a report for the French Academy in order to obtain the Monthyon Prize for the beautiful Ermengarde. You will see by what follows how dearly she had to pay for this evening spent on the tower."

"Very well," said Mme. Convenable. "But you see, cousin, we must always have regard to good morals."

"I agree with you, cousin, but if you interrupt me this way at every phrase, I will never come to the second chapter which is the most beautiful."

"Ah! continue, cousin," urged the children, who were all ears, "continue, it is very fine."

"The young chatelaine said to herself sighing: 'Alas! when will our gallant knights return? When will we again enjoy feasts and tournaments, the chase of former days? If only some pilgrim would arrive in this castle, bringing news of Palestine.' Scarcely had she murmured these words when a cloud of dust rose on the road and soon the beautiful Ermengarde distinguished the casques and plumes of a troop of cavaliers who approached at a lively pace. One of them came in advance and halting at some distance, blew his horn to announce his arrival. He was mounted on a white charger magnificently accoutred. His armor shone like gold and the English leopards shone on his shield. He was a noble and beautiful young man, and as soon as he perceived the beautiful Ermengarde, he saluted her with his sword with as much grace as nobility."

"Alice," interrupted Mme. Convenable, "go and tell Gothou to serve the tea immediately. My cousin will rest a little. You Theresa, go and bring the gingerbreads and cream cakes that you will find in the pantry, on the third shelf of the cupboard to the left. Put them on the two plates that are ornamented with gold. And you, Pierrot, go bring me a large lemon. They are in the basket on the side-board to the right of the liquor frame."

The children having gone out of the salon, Mme. Convenable hastened to say to her cousin: "Before I can allow you to continue the reading before my nieces, you must give your word of honor that the beautiful Ermengarde does not marry the cavalier."

"Cousin," answered Némorin, "if I tell you the outcome of the story, it will lose its charm. After all, there are very many honest and upright people get married. Yourself, fortunately for M. Convenable decided on wedlock, so I do not see why the beautiful Ermengarde should become an old maid."

"Well, then," said Mme. Convenable, "I am going to send the children to bed."

Alice, who was just returning, heard this and made a frightfully wry face. She profited by the disturbance caused by the distribution of cups and cakes, to whisper to Theresa and Pierrot: "Aunt is going to send us to bed, because the beautiful Ermengarde is going to marry the knight." Theresa answered with a pout and Pierrot said: "Do you really wish to know the end of the story? It seems to me very tiresome!"

"It will become very amusing by-and-by since they are going to send us away," said Theresa, "I know my aunt."

"I have a capital idea!" exclaimed Pierrot, and the wild youngster left the salon and returned again without attracting attention. The ladies had seated themselves around the tea table and my cousin did his utmost to assist Mme. Convenable to serve them all.

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