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TENESTINA; A TALE OF THE SIXTH CENTURY.

CHAPTER I.—THE MIRACULOUS CURE.

On the gently sloping side of a verdant hill in the suburbs of Cenomanum, stood a charming villa built in the Gallo-Roman style, a style which many wealthy noblemen in the sixth century much affected.

In an apartment on the first story, the floor of which was inlaid with brilliant colored mosaics, there stood near the window a young girl, whose eyes inflamed with crying, wandered over the surrounding country in vain search for some one whose arrival was eagerly expected.

'No one yet,' she said, sorrowfully, to a middle-aged woman beside her, whose coarse woollen tunic proclaimed her inferior condition.

'Have a little patience, dear Tenestina,' replied her follower, 'remember it is too far away to the country of the Sounois where the venerable Rigomer resides, for your messenger to be back already.'

'I so earnestly begged of him to hasten,' replied Tenestina. 'Oh, if this holy priest wished he could restore her to our prayers. They tell such wonderful things of him that I believe, nurse, if he visited my poor mother and administered to her the last sacrament, he could restore her to health.'

'Everything is possible to God,' said the nurse, with a profound sigh; 'but you ought retire to your chamber, my child, and take some repose, or you also will fall sick.'

'Oh! no, no, it is useless; I feel that I could not sleep. But look! what is that in the plain? Are they not a troop of cavaliers burying towards us? Rigomer and his followers, without doubt.'

The nurse gazed in the direction which she pointed out.

'You deceive yourself,' she said, 'the man of God does not travel with such pomp. He who now approaches us must be Lord Severus, your noble fiance, who has not been here for many weeks. Permit me to arrange your toilet, which you have entirely neglected this morning.'

'What matter about my toilet, what matter about Severus himself, when my mother is in danger of death?' cried the young girl, flinging herself on a couch, and weeping bitterly.

'You cannot refuse to receive him without displeasing your parents, who have destined him for your husband. Go then and meet him, and let not the trampling of the horses in the courtyard disturb your mother.'

Tenestina and her nurse, Julienne, descended the stone stairs, traversed the grand courtyard, and entered a long, pleasant pathway cut through a dense forest of oaks, whose thick branches formed an impenetrable shade overhead. Julienne was not mistaken, it was indeed Severus coming to visit the inhabitants of the villa. As soon as he perceived the two women he dismounted, threw the bridle to one of his followers and advancing toward the young girl, saluted her gracefully.

'What propitious divinity led you my way, beautiful Tenestina?' said he.

The speaker was tall, handsome and young, with brilliant eyes, hair black as the raven's wing, and a haughty and almost disdainful cast of countenance; for though baptized, he was still at heart a pagan.

'We have been very unhappy since we saw you,' said Tenestina, passing over without notice the compliments of her betrothed; 'my dear mother has taken the fever, and I fear she must be getting rapidly worse, for to-day I have not been permitted to approach her bedside.'

'Oh, I doubt not you exaggerate the danger,' replied Severus, in a careless, indifferent manner. 'Come dry your tears, my dear Tenestina, they dim the lustre of those beautiful eyes.'

'Can I see Heregarius?' asked the young man after a pause, seeing that his attempts at consolation were fruitless.

'My father is in my mother's room, where no one is now permitted to enter; but it will be a great consolation to him to know that you are here, for he loves you dearly. Come, then, and rest after your fatiguing journey.'

'No,' replied Severus, after a moment's hesitation, 'I cannot delay, for King Childebert has arrived at Matoval, where he intends passing some weeks, and I must hasten to present myself at court, particularly as there is to be a grand hunting party in the forest to-morrow to which I hope to be invited. So, adieu. I will soon return to hear tidings of the noble Truda.'

'May God protect you, Severus,' said the young girl, sadly, 'and give me the grace to be more resigned before you return.'

But Severus was already in the saddle and galloping rapidly away.

The Romans called Sundinum the city of the Cenomans. Under the reign of Julian the Apostle it took the name of the Gaulish tribe that conquered it and was called Cenomanum, which by abbreviation became Mans.

'And he leaves us in such a moment—he whom my mother chose for her son,' said Tenestina, bitterly.

As she gazed after her lover and his brilliant cortege, three men, mounted upon miserable horses, turned suddenly from a bye-path into the open road.

'It is Rigomer,' exclaimed the nurse, joyfully.

At the sight of this anxiously expected visitor, Tenestina bounded forward with irrepressible emotion, fell on her knees and cried in accents of earnest entreaty: 'Father, come and heal my mother, who is sick unto death.'

'God alone can give health to the sick,' replied Rigomer, with gentle seriousness; but observing her deep grief he felt moved with compassion, and added, 'have confidence, my dear daughter, he who has given his children an express command to honor their father and their mother, is sometimes pleased to reward their filial piety even in this life.'

The venerable man who thus spoke enjoyed, though still young, a high reputation for sanctity throughout all Maine.

He was born in Sounois, near the forest of Perseigne, in the very spot where now stands the village of Saint-Rigomer-des-Bois. His parents, who were noble and wealthy, had confided the care of his education to a holy priest named Sauxillus, with whom he made rapid progress in science and belles-lettres, and still more in the practice of every Christian virtue. Raised to the dignity of the priesthood by the holy bishop, Innocent, he preached Jesus Christ throughout the diocese, but particularly in Sounois, his native place, where he still found many worshippers of Odin, and a great number who were attached to Druidical customs, honoring with a superstitious worship fountains and trees, and offering up sacrifices to false divinities. The indefatigable zeal of Rigomer, his virtues and his eloquence, brought many to the knowledge of the pure truths of Christianity; and as if to give more force to the preaching of this holy priest, God worked several miracles through his intercession.

The sick were brought to him in crowds, the friends of the dying earnestly besought him to come and administer to them the last sacraments, for he had received from on high an especial grace to dispose them worthily for that last moment.

When the man of God was introduced by Tenestina into her mother's chamber, he found that noble lady in a high fever, and seated near her couch was Heregarius, her husband, in deep affliction.

'It is too late,' said the latter, in a low voice, pointing with his finger to the sick woman, who neither saw nor comprehended what was passing around her; but Rigomer, approaching, made the sign of the cross, and took from the hand of his acolyte a small silver box containing the holy oil, and opening it, recited with tears a long and fervent prayer. Meantime Tenestina, kneeling at the foot of the bed, prayed with unspeakable ardor. Never had she been so agitated before; she was inflamed with a celestial fire; her heart was dissolved with divine love; she felt that something great, mysterious, superhuman, was about to take place in that narrow space.

Rigomer having concluded his prayers, anointed the hands and feet of the sick woman with blessed oil, who immediately recovered her senses, sat up in bed, embraced her husband and child, and exclaimed in a tone of reverential awe—'I am healed!'

It is not in the power of words to express all that passed in the hearts of those three so tenderly united. Tenestina blessed the Lord, while tears of gratitude streamed from her overflowing eyes, and all present shared her emotion.

'How can we ever pay the debt of gratitude we owe you, father,' said Heregarius, falling at the feet of the holy man; 'you, who have restored a wife to her husband, a mother to her child?'

'Return thanks to God alone,' replied Rigomer, 'for every good and perfect gift comes from him,' and profiting by the favorable occasion, he exhorted the assistants to live in the practice of piety and good works, in order that they might preserve the health of the soul—more precious by far than the health of the body.

Then taking leave of the family to which he had restored joy and happiness, he mounted his horse, and without waiting to partake of the repast which they had hastened to prepare for him, he was soon lost sight of in the woods, and returned to his cell.

CHAPTER II.—THE CONVENT.

Three years after the miraculous cure we have described, Truda, accompanied by the nurse, and attended by a train of servants, passed through the forest of Perseigne in a chariot drawn by two oxen, who with slow and uniform step marched along. She looked the very picture of health, but her mind was evidently preoccupied with thoughts that cast a gloom over a

countenance usually calm and serene. After journeying for several hours, the little caravan reached a spot where the trees were so dense that pedestrians could with difficulty force their way through. The two women descended from the chariot, and preceded by their guide, strove to penetrate the dense thicket.

'Mon Dieu! how profound is this solitude! How could Tenestina endure it so long?' said the noble lady, who till that moment had been completely buried in thought.

As she spoke a burst of harmony swelled on the air.

'I recognise my daughter's voice,' said Truda, with emotion. Walking as rapidly as the condition of the ground permitted, she soon arrived at a verdant glade watered by a limpid stream, and scarcely had she taken a few steps on the grassy turf when a girl, bounding like a gazelle from a leafy arbor which served her as a retreat, fell into her arms in a state of joyous palpitation.

'You here, my dear mother!' said Tenestina, 'I can scarcely believe my eyes, for I did not expect to see you before the festival of Easter.'

Tenestina was no longer the fragile girl that we saw in such deep sorrow at the beginning of this story. She was now tall and handsome, with a clear, rosy complexion, and eyes sparkling with joy and happiness. Her costume also was changed. She no longer wore a robe of fine wool, embroidered in purple or azure, nor ornaments of gold and pearls befitting ladies of her condition, but a garment of coarse cloth enveloped her slight and delicate form, a hempen cord around her waist replaced the rich girdle formerly worn, and her beautiful hair was hidden under a simple linen cap.

'My daughter, said Truda, releasing her at length from her encircling arms, 'I wish to speak to you on a very important matter; listen to me with attention. Before the reapers have cut down the corn in the fields you will have attained your twentieth year. Severus, your betrothed husband, claims you, and will not wait longer.'

'Mother,' replied Tenestina, with gentle firmness, 'I will never have any other spouse than Jesus Christ, my Saviour, who preserved you from death, and whom the venerable Rigomer has taught me to serve in silence and in solitude.'

'And, my dear child, do you really wish to pass your youth in this frightful desert, this place in which we only permitted you to dwell for a time, in compliance with your earnest desire?'

'Ah! if you knew, my dear mother, how sweet and light is the service of Christ, and how pleasant the peaceful life my companions and I lead here, occupying all the day in working for the poor or making ornaments for the altar; in praying to God, or hymning His praises under the blue vault of heaven, face to face with the wonders of creation, you would not wish to tear me from this happy retreat.'

'But have you forgotten, my dear child, the day of your betrothal, and that your word is pledged to Severus, the only son of your father's ancient companion in arms?'

'I was scarcely six years old when that promise was made,' said Tenestina, 'and if you had not spoken of it frequently since, I would have lost all remembrance of the ceremony. It never bound my heart nor my faith, for the Sacrament of marriage alone has power to bind a woman to her husband indissolubly. How different this from the vow I made to God. I made it in the fullness of reason and liberty, and I renew it each day in all the joy of my soul. Oh! my mother, you who first taught me when I was a little child on your knee to know and love the Divine Saviour, you cannot desire to tear me from his service, to which I have vowed myself especially that very day when you were miraculously restored to health; for it will secure my happiness in this world and the next.'

Truda bent her head without replying, for she was between two feelings—the fear of offending the Lord by opposing her daughter's vocation, and the terror she felt in anticipation of the rage and reproaches of Severus.

In the heart of that pious matron, however, grace soon triumphed over nature. She looked upon her kneeling daughter with deep affection, kissed her again and again, and drying her tears, said, 'Then follow your vocation, my beloved daughter, and may the Almighty deign to accept my part of the sacrifice. Yes, you will accept it, my God,' she added in a low voice, 'it is not an offering like that of Cain, from which you turned away your face, for never was a purer dove offered up as a holocaust, never did a fairer creature hide her attractions under the consecrated veil.'

The mother and daughter then prostrated themselves on the earth, and prayed together, and afterwards Truda and the nurse shared with the little community the black bread and cheese which that day made their noontide meal. They quenched their thirst in the clear waters of the brook, and having visited the venerable Rigomer

whose cell was contiguous, and under whose guidance the community advanced in the paths of perfection, Truda and her retinue returned homewards.

CHAPTER III.—THE WORLDLING AND HIS FRIEND.

The following morning Truda arrived at her own residence, and made known to her husband the result of her journey. Heregarius, who was a good man and feared God, adored unobtrusively the designs of Providence with regard to his only daughter; but whilst the father and mother opened their hearts in confidential communication, Severus, who waited with impatience the return of his future mother-in-law, descended from the chamber which he occupied during his frequent visits to the villa, and entered unexpectedly.

'Well,' said he in the imperious tone which had become habitual to him, 'well, when will the marriage take place?'

Truda looked at her husband, who bent his head without replying, then summoning all her courage she offered the young man a seat beside her, and pressing his hand affectionately, said:—'Severus, your affianced bride has not chosen another husband among the noble lords of France. Vainly would the kings of the earth offer to share their throne with her, but the King of Heaven has claimed her for His spouse, and who may dispute His will. You will easily find another wife among the highest and noblest families of the country; then submit cheerfully to the Divine will, as Heregarius and I have done, who cannot find another daughter.'

'What do I hear?' cried the young man, whom surprise and rage had for a moment deprived of speech. 'Is this all you think of your pledged faith. Learn, then, that you cannot sport with impunity with such a one as I. So it was for this purpose you banished your daughter, and concealed from me so carefully the place of her retreat? But I shall discover it, if it were in the bowels of the earth, and woe to you, and woe to Tenestina if she breaks faith with me.'

'You forget the respect that is due to our age, and the affection we have always testified towards you,' said Heregarius with dignity, 'nevertheless I excuse your anger since your affection for our beloved daughter seems to be the cause, and because I believe you will not be tardy in returning to more generous sentiments.'

But Severus heard him not, for, a prey to violent anger, he hastened from his presence, and taking from the stable the horse he usually rode, set off at a furious pace, revolving in his mind a thousand projects of revenge. He had ridden for a half an hour when he met on the highway a young libertine of his acquaintance, prodigal and irreligious like himself, who, seeing him gloomy and preoccupied, at once asked the cause of his unusual mood.

Severus, whose heart was filled with gall, told him his troubles, adding that it was not Tenestina's pretty face which he regretted, but her large fortune and her broad lands, in the hope of enjoying which soon he had spent his own fortune and contracted large debts without a thought. 'Look at the absurdity of this young girl; she is beautiful it must be confessed; she is noble, she is rich, and yet she wishes to bury herself in solitude. Can you understand it?'

'Yes,' replied his companion, 'and you are the only one within ten leagues ignorant of the true cause of this singular folly. Learn, then, that your promised bride has been seduced by a certain Rigomer, whom the ignorant herd look upon as a saint, and to whom many superstitious men attribute the gift of miracles. She assiduously attended all the preachings of his man, who has latterly excited the multitude to such a degree that they have pulled down the temple of Mars, the noble god of war, the only one which remained to us in the country, and the daughter of Heregarius, rather than live at a distance from this unworthy Priest, has shamelessly followed him.'

'Curses on you who, calling yourself my friend did not sooner unveil to me this mystery of iniquity,' cried Severus, passionately; 'but if the evil is beyond remedy, revenge at least remains to me, and revenge is the pleasure of the gods.' So saying, he struck the spurs into the coursers' flank and left far behind him the infamous calumniator, who, with a diabolical smile playing over his face, coolly regarded his flying friend.

CHAPTER IV.—THE ORDEAL.

Tenestina sat embroidering an altar-cloth for the Christian Church, newly erected on the ruins of the temple of Mars, when a strange and unusual noise alarmed her, and threw her into a sudden tremor.

'What can that noise mean, sisters?' said she to her companions, who were seated beside her under the shadow of a wide-spreading oak; 'does it not sound like the clash of arms, and the trampling of horses in the distance?'

'Perhaps 'tis huntsmen coming to chase the stag even in the depths of the forest,' replied the prioress with a sigh of compassion. 'Ah!

my dear sisters why do they thus torment God's inoffensive creatures?' As she spoke a troop of armed men suddenly burst through the thicket. The timid recluses were on the point of seeking shelter in their cells when the venerable Rigomer advanced from amid the armed band and stood alone and unaccompanied in the centre of the glade.

'My daughter,' said he to Tenestina, 'King Childebert has summoned you and I to appear before his council, and render an account of our conduct, and we must obey his orders, since the sovereign authority represents God.'

Tenestina regarded him at first with surprise mingled with sorrow; but without permitting herself to murmur or question she embraced her companions and followed her father in Christ with all the calm of a pure conscience. Rigomer remembering that etiquette did not permit him to appear before the king without a present, went to the sacristy, and took from thence two large waxen tapers, and strong in his innocence, fearlessly followed the messengers of the Frankish Prince.

At that time Childebert and all his court were in one of the royal domains, situated in the ancient Ile de France, in that portion of the department of Seine-et-Oise, where at present stands the village of Palaiseau. When the King heard of the arrival of the persons summoned to appear before his tribunal he convened his council, and ordered the accused to be brought before him.

Rigomer and Tenestina were conducted into his presence, each holding in the right hand the waxen taper which they had brought as an offering.

'Behold the culprits!' said the counsellor engaged by Severus to sustain the accusation.—'Can your Serene Highness permit a priest to divert the affections of a young maiden from her affianced lord, and break a solemn engagement?'

During this appeal Childebert attentively regarded the accused and, prepossessed in their favor by the extreme beauty of the young girl, and the venerable appearance of Rigomer, he asked them kindly, what reply they had to make to these accusations. They replied simply that they were innocent of all crime, that in their conduct and their spiritual affection they had no object but the glory of God, and the salvation of their souls.

The king reflected for a moment. 'If what you say be true,' said he 'give us a clear and unmistakable proof of it. By the virtue of your prayers alone light those tapers which you hold in your hands.'

The whole assembly were astonished when they heard this strange decree; but the servants of God did not despair, and earnestly besought the Almighty to grant them this favor. Some minutes passed, and a thin white smoke was seen above the wick, to the surprise and awe of the spectators. Then Rigomer standing erect, stretched his hand over the tapers and making the sign of the cross, said solemnly,

'In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to give light.'

Scarcely were the words uttered when a dazzling light shone through the room, and the large hall was brilliantly illuminated by the supernatural light shed from the two tapers.

Struck with wonder and admiration, the King and all his counsellors left their seats, and, surrounding the two holy persons, asked pardon for their unjust suspicions and the insulting manner in which they had addressed them. Childebert did more. Not satisfied with word only, he offered Rigomer and Tenestina two estates which he possessed in Maine, that each might erect a hermitage. He ordered also that Tenestina should be left free to consecrate herself to God, and begged the prayers of both for his own welfare and that of his kingdom.

With hearts burning with gratitude to Him who had changed in their behalf the laws of nature, they returned to their native place.

Rigomer built a cell in a lonely wood, where now stands the town of Sordique sous-Vallon, dispensing in alms the great riches which he inherited from his family, and with all the zeal of his fervent spirit, devoting himself to penitence and prayer. Numerous disciples, attracted by his reputation for virtue and sanctity, placed themselves under his spiritual direction, and built their cells contiguous to his. Such was the origin of the parish of Sordique.

As for Tenestina, she repaired to Mans, where she received the veil from the hands of the holy prelate who then governed the diocese. Her father and mother, who were present at the ceremony, built an oratory and a convent for her which was dedicated to the Queen of Angels, in a place called Gourdaine, situated between the ancient Roman limits of the city of Mans and the river Sarthe. Other pious ladies joined her in this retreat, where she lived to a very advanced age, occupied like the ancient deaconess in the duties of her office.

Saint Innocent, eighth bishop of Maine, governed the diocese from 615 to 660.