

BROTHER CELESTINE

(From the Portfolio of a Tourist.)

Translated by J. H. LEUCK from the German of
M. VON GREIFFENSTEIN.

(Continued.)

Of the scenes that now followed the one on Mount Olivet was one of the most touching. That was not mere art of display, mere acting; it was in reality living in and through the death agony. At different times the thought came to me, whether the man before me, with that classical countenance, was not really acting under the impression of some fearful expectation or presentiment, which, so to speak, as a secondary, a deeper, moment lay at the bottom of his actions. At no other Passion Play, not even at Oberammergau, had I seen anything similar to this. During the scourging this impression of reality became still stronger. Was it the effect of the illumination, or did my eyes deceive me? Every time the thundering strokes of the hangman came down upon his back and shoulders, his face, distorted in utmost agony, changed color as in a shivering fit of pain. Deeper and still deeper grew the marble paleness of that countenance, so that I almost rejoiced when the curtain dropped, as I feared the actor must collapse in utter exhaustion.

Now came the Crowning with Thorns, then the violently agitated scene of the "Ecce Homo." Never to be forgotten was the moment of that horrifying self-condemnation, when blind, deluded Israel solemnly renounced its Leader-God and Messiah. There was a rent in the raving multitude—it was as though heathen and Jews, the present and the future, parted from one another, and the Saviour sorrowfully stretched forth his fettered hands towards the straying sheep who parted from their shepherd. From the ranks of the spectators arose, at first singly, then in increasing numbers, exclamations of protest and apology: "O Gesu re nostro! Non vogliamo abbandonarti! Re del nostro cuore!" (O Jesus, our King! We do not wish to leave Thee, King of our hearts!)

Grand, and moving in artful rhythm, was the Carrying of the Cross, which, at every moment, unfolded a new picture. As Veronica knelt down with her kerchief, Christ stepped to the edge of the stage, and from my position I could for a long time look into the incomparably beautiful countenance. I thought with satisfaction, that already tomorrow I should have this head, with its ideal, characterful lines, fixed on my plate; for I remember a friend who once asked me to procure for him a picture of Christ "before which one could pray." Here, it seemed to me, I had found the picture. But I had one fear; namely, that the actor, not being under the influence of a thousand eyes and the overwhelming music the next day, might not be able to find the same expression again.

The hall, in which the Passion Play was being performed, had in the meantime become filled more and more. During the pause that ensued after the scene of the Nailing to the Cross I had noticed another group of spectators enter, who took places that had been reserved. All around the hall places similar to boxes had been arranged for the public, and it was in one of these the newcomers located themselves, near the left of the stage. I heard one of the men inquire as to the progress of the play. On being told that the next scene would be Christ on the Cross, he answered in short: "Va bene,"—(All right) hereupon he turned to the others with a gesture that seemed to say: "We have come at the right time." While he, leaning over the side of the box, searchingly swept his eyes across the parterre. I scrutinized him more closely. He was a young man between the ages of 24-28 years, and wore an elegant suit of gray. Where was it I had seen these features, which looked as though cut out of stone, and those dark, glowing eyes? In vain I asked my recollections, I could not remember. Familiar, and yet strange, attractive, and at the same time repelling such was the appearance of this countenance, with its refined lines and its dark, spiteful expression. The entrance of this young man and his companions had brought something strange, something disharmonious into the gathering, and I felt somewhat relieved when soon afterward the sounds of the trumpets announced the raising of the curtain, which drew my attention thither.

Christ on the Cross! The stage was shrouded in pale twilight, since the eclipse of the sun was supposed to have already begun. More than a man's height from the floor, clothed in a tricot and a long, pendent thigh-cloth, hung the noble, pure figure on the wood of torture, his head, as though seeking for help, raised aloft, his lips thirstingly opened.

This picture surpassed all previous ones in reality, beauty, and power of emotion. When the choirs in soft tones began the "Ave, Rex Noster," which was sung to a melody of a familiar church hymn, many of the spectators enthusiastically fell in. Then—it came so unexpectedly that most of us could hardly believe our senses—suddenly a sharp, piercing, sinister hissing passed through the hall. It issued from the box on the left of the stage, and was forthwith answered from several places in the parterre. Above the "Ave, Rex Noster," rose wild shouts of "Down with the Nazarene!" "We need no king!" "Anarchy shall live!" "Down with the Carpenter's Son!" Curses and blasphemies, which my pen will not repeat, sounded loudly intermingled. Louder and ever louder grew the tumult, so that it seemed as though the evil spirits of hell had come to the help of the little crowd of demonstrators. At the head of all, surpassing all the others in insane madness, firing and leading the whole sacrilegious demonstration, stood the young man whose countenance before had so astounded me. He was raving mad, a picture of very hatred in living form.

Undaunted by the hissing, the actors had at first continued their performances. Soon, however, song and music were hushed, and when the raving ones began to throw rotten apples and suchlike at the cross, the play also came to a halt. I saw how the one in gray leaned over the balustrade and called up to the cross, words that I was unable to understand. The eyes of the Christ-actor met his, and, as it seemed, in sudden recognition. Never shall I forget the wonderful certainty of this look, which met the challenge of a true satanic hatred. The calmness of the actor was, in fact, incomprehensible, and was all the more noticeable, since the other players were already in great confusion.

The good-willed among the spectators—and they were by far in the majority—had hardly recovered from their surprise, when they began to protest strongly against the infamous disturbance, and tried to force an end to the same. They had already laid hold of several of the most violent demonstrators in the parterre, and would undoubtedly also have reached those in the box, but for an unhappy occurrence which took place at this moment.

A missile that had been thrown at the stage struck a magnesium lamp, which in falling set fire to the nearest scenery. Instantly there was a cry of "Fire!" The panic that followed immediately mocks every description. The actors on the stage dispersed. Only the one who acted the role of John spoke fearfully up to the crucified one, then rushed behind the scenery, and after a few seconds returned with a ladder, which he leaned against the cross, in order to help the fettered one down. But with the same unaccountable calmness that I had already observed in him, the latter turned his head to the side where the flames had broken out, and on seeing that in the meantime the fire had been gotten under control by such of the spectators as had hurried to the rescue, he refused to come down. Perhaps he thought the alarm would soon be quieted and the audience would return. However, there was little prospect of this. The blind right had so confused the multitude that, although from different sides the cry was heard that the danger had passed, the rowding and pushing towards the exits still did not stop. During all this time the iron curtain had not been lowered, which was incomprehensible.

The disturbers made use of this circumstance to continue their onslaught—throwing all kinds of missiles, and at last even hairs, on the stage. The one in gray had seized a pistol. I heard him again call, in a threatening manner, up to the cross, and, as I thought, speaking in French. The one who had played the part of John was besides himself with fright and horror, and now tried with all his might to loosen the Christ from the cross. This man, however, appeared as though hewn out of marble, and could not as much as move a point—nay, he scarcely seemed to hear the words of the other. His eyes were wide open, with the expression of supernatural quiet and happiness. When I noticed his peculiar, almost staring luster of his look, the thought came to my mind, whether, perhaps, the actor had lost the use of his senses, and then I even asked myself whether his spirit had not already flown—so unnatural was his perfect immobility. But no.—Why, he moved his lips and raised up his head with that unspeakable expression which he had had at the scene of the Last Supper. . . . Suddenly there was a shot. Without uttering a sound, the Christ dropped his head on the pierced breast, and from the wound flowed a stream of blood, which colored his light tricot a dark red. The Crucifixion scene was complete. . . .

Only now, after it was too late, the curtain was dropped; now, at last, the police guards appeared. I had tried repeatedly during the occurrences just described to get near the ruffians. However, the crowding of the multitude prevented my doing so. The policemen now brought about order, had the hall vacated, and placed guards at the entrances. A numerous multitude, however, still waited in front of the hall. Soon the news had spread that Christ had succumbed to his wound. Loud lamentations and imprecations against the murder were heard.

The manner in which the assassinated had withstood his opponent, the motives which had brought about the crime—all his was a puzzle to me, and I betook myself to the director of the troupe the following day, in order to seek an explanation of the matter.

I found the man in greatest excitement. The death of the actor was a very heavy blow to him, so much that it seemed almost impossible for him to resign himself to it. He repeated over and over again: "Che disgrazia! Sono un uomo perduto!" (What a misfortune! I am lost!) With great verbosity he praised the good qualities of the dead one, and lamented the impossibility of finding a substitute for him. Added to all this, he would have given an account before the court because the curtain, through a defect in the mechanism, had not been dropped at once after the fire had broken out.

In vain I sought to learn a little more about the person who had acted the Christ, and had so won my interest. Aside from numberless lamentations and maledictions against the assassin, he, the police, and the audience, as also constantly repeated exclamations of "sono un uomo perduto!" I could get nothing out of the director.

Finally I looked for John of the play, who had yesterday made a very sympathetic impression on me. I found him in the hall busy with packing up. . . . The poor man—he went by the name of Arrigo—had been, by a touching coincidence of inclination as well as by the role he played, the bosom friend of the assassinated, and he mourned his tragic fate with all the fidelity of a good heart. I could not have found a better reporter, and he himself rejoiced over the sympathy I displayed regarding the person and the sad fate of his dear friend. He led me into a small parterre which had served as a dressing room, and began his communication with the words: "Ah, Signore, Aristide era un santo!" (Ah, Signor, Aristide was a saint).

"Aristide?" I asked.

"Ah, I understand," he replied. "On the program you read the name of Celestino Bianco. The real name of the Christ, however, was Aristide Blanchard."

"Aristide Blanchard?" I exclaimed. "Aristide Blanchard!" or suddenly the picture of a fine little blond boy embracing a crucifix on the Vendome loomed up before my mind. "Tell me," continued, naturally somewhat excited, "was your friend the one of a Parisian actor?"

"In fact," replied Arrigo. He noticed my agitation, and asked: "So you knew him?"

I related the little incident I had witnessed at Paris.

"Appunto, appunto," he confirmed. "Aristide himself once told me of the occurrence."

"But how comes it that he bore another name?" I questioned.

Arrigo shrugged his shoulders. "A caprice of the padrone," he answered. "The director does not like the French, and then, too, it offended his national pride that the star of his troupe should be a foreigner." "Tut, what would you have? Everybody has his notions. Aside from that, he found it improper that the name of so renowned a Parisian actor—the old Blanchard's name also was Aristide—should appear on the program of a Passion Play. He feared there might be some unpleasant mistaking of names.

(To be continued.)

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