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THE DOUBLE SACRIFICE OR THE PONTIFICAL ZOUAVES. — A TALE OF CASTELFIDARDO.

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CHAPTER XVIII.—CONTINUED.

At the same moment they entered the room. 'My Victor! my child!' burst from the lips both parents at once.

'Father! Mother!' said he in reply, and in a moment they were in each other's arms.

There was a long pause, while they tasted the unspeakable joy of that meeting.

There are moments in human life when the overpowering feelings of the heart make all outward expression impossible. Yet better and stronger far than all human words, is then the voice of the heart, which needs no ear but the ear of the heart to receive and understand its utterances of love.

'I thank Thee, O Lord,' said Victor at last, 'that Thou hast granted me this comfort before my departure. Now I shall sleep in peace.'
'Oh, my child, my child!' cried his mother, 'speak not thus. Our Lord will not take you away from our love. We shall cure you, Victor, and you shall yet live to be the crown of my old age.'

'No, mother,' answered he, 'I shall not be cured. I feel that I shall not be cured. Our Lord will accept your offer and mine. You will be content, mother.'

The poor woman could make no answer; her anguish choked her utterance.

She took her place by her son's bedside, holding his hand close pressed in hers; her arm supporting his head with a mother's tender care.

'You, too, my good father, thanks, thanks, that you would not leave your poor child to die alone.'

Morren stood there before the sick bed, dark and mournful, with his arms crossed upon his breast. He could not account to himself for what was passing within him.

Throughout the journey he had struggled—struggled without intermission. He had reproach himself for allowing Victor to pursue his foolish determination, to perish so miserably in a foreign land. His agonized paternal affection had overpowered and swept away his anger.—Now he burst into an agony of tears.

'Victor, Victor!' said he in a stifled voice, 'should I reproach you, reproach you on your death-bed? No, oh, no,' continued he, falling once more on his son's neck, 'I will not embitter your last moments; but alas! I shall not long survive this blow. What comfort can remain for me when you are taken from me?'

'The Great Comforter,' answered Victor in a low and thrilling voice. 'He who is the support of the weak, the Hope of the hopeless. He who never forsakes any one who trusts in Him. Oh, father, dear father, did you but know Him how light would this separation be!—a separation with the assurance of an eternal reunion.—Father, father, will you not turn to God?'

Morren remained silent.

'Father, would you let your son die in the torturing fear of an eternal separation?'

'But, my child,' interrupted his mother, 'you will not die, God has already wonderfully preserved you. He can even yet restore you to health.'

'Mother, dearest mother,' answered Victor calmly, 'do not suffer yourself to be deceived by the wishes of your love, but rather prepare yourself calmly for the accomplishment of the Divine purpose to which I feel God has called me. My offering, mother, my offering.'

Indeed it seemed that Victor had spoken the truth, for from that moment he grew rapidly worse. The last coloring vanished from his cheek, his breathing became more difficult, and a terrible cough, which seemed to go through the hearts of the bystanders, shook his whole frame.

The physician who had been expected a few hours later, was sent for immediately.

He shook his head at the first sight of the invalid, and examined him carefully, while Myrtheer Morren and his wife watched every movement of his countenance with painful anxiety, fearing to read their fate in his face.

At last he turned to Stefano and the two Zouaves.

'I greatly fear the rupture of a fresh blood-vessel to-night,' said he, 'the administration of the last Sacraments must no longer be delayed.'

'Signor,' said Morren to the physician, 'you have given your sentence. All hope then is over.'

'It is very painful to me to be obliged to tell you the truth. I could not justify it to myself to hold out an apparent hope which must soon vanish. Your son may still live a few days, and were it not from the fear that he may be carried away by another spitting of blood, I should not so positively advise his receiving the last Sacraments.'

Meanwhile, the physician's opinion had been made known to Victor. He received the intelligence calmly and even joyfully.

'Oh! assuredly,' said he, 'I earnestly desire those blessed means of consolation and help, and I should have asked for them long ago, had it not been for a strange conviction which led me to believe that I should live to see my dear parents.'

Stefano left the house to summon the Priest, while Nunziata, with the assistance of Joseph and Martin, prepared everything in the room for the administration of the last Sacraments.

Morren stood silent and mournful at the foot of the bed, while his wife, with motherly care, smoothed the pillow and gently arranged the coverlet over her child. That heroic mother, who for a few moments had appeared to shriek from the anguish of approaching separation, had now recovered all her wonted courage and firmness.

The irrevocable decree, spoken by the mouth of the physician, instead of breaking her heart, seemed to have filled it with calm and heavenly peace.

She knelt for a moment before the crucifix to pray for the strength needful in this hour of anguish. She had seen her own picture placed by her pious son at the foot of the cross, and it reminded her of another Mother, who, when plunged in a sea of sorrows, stood at the foot of the tree of shame whereon her only Begotten, and her God died for us miserable sinners. Sorrowful, but calm and resigned, she united her sacrifice with the sacrifice of Calvary.

'Mother,' asked Victor, in a scarcely audible voice, as she pressed kiss after kiss upon his forehead, 'Mother, are you content with the will of God?'

'Dearest child,' answered she, 'how can I but be content when you are so resigned, so happy?'

'Mother,' said he again, 'will not God hear us? You know what I would say.'

'Let us hope, Victor,' answered she. 'Hope and pray.'

'Oh, mother, how joyfully should I die if only one wish were fulfilled.'

The Priest now entered the room.

'Peace,' said he, 'to this house.'

'And to all that dwell therein,' was the server's answer.

The Priest desired all to leave the room that he might hear the last confession of the dying man.

It did not last long, and the already pure soul gleamed brighter still under the blessing of the Lord's anointed.

The Priest again opened the door, and in deep silent recollection, Victor's friends knelt around the bed.

Morren, almost unconsciously, had fallen upon his knees in a corner of the room. Not a single tear was visible on his agonizing face. He would fain have wept, he could not weep. His wife had resumed her place by her son's pillow.

After a short pause the Priest began the consoling words of the Church.

'Our help is in the name of the Lord.

'Who hath made Heaven and earth.

'The Lord be with you.

'And with thy spirit.'

'Let us pray.—Hear us, O Holy Lord, Almighty Father, eternal God, and vouchsafe to send Thy holy Angels from Heaven, to guard, cherish, protect, visit and defend all that are assembled in this house, through Christ our Lord, Amen.'

Nunziata, meanwhile, had laid a linen cloth of snowy whiteness over the sick bed, and while the server repeated the Confiteor the Priest prepared to give the Body of the Holy of Holies, the last Viaticum to the poor sufferer.

Victor's eyes gleamed with new and heavenly light, as the servant of the Lord held up the Lamb of God, the pledge of our redemption; and with the deepest humility arose, from the bottom of his heart, the 'Domine non sum dignus' &c. 'Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldst come under my roof, but speak the word only and my soul shall be healed.'

Then the Priest resumed:

'Receive, brother, the Viaticum of our Lord Jesus Christ, that he may preserve thee from the malignant enemy and bring thee to life everlasting. Amen.'

It was accomplished. The Heart of Jesus now beats upon the Heart of His dying servant—incomprehensible moment which no pen can describe.

A light of joy seemed to surround the dying man like an aureole. It was the foretaste of his coming beatitude.

Then the Priest began the holy unction.

'Let there enter, O Lord Jesus Christ, into this house, at the entrance of our humility, everlasting felicity, divine prosperity, serene gladness, fruitful charity, perpetual health. Let the approach of devils flee from this place, let the Angels of peace be present therein, and let all malignant discord depart from this house. Magnify, O Lord, upon us Thy Holy Name, bless our conversation; sanctify the entrance of our humility, who art holy and good, and abide with the Father and the Holy Ghost for ever and ever. Amen.'

'Let us pray and beseech our Lord Jesus Christ that blessing, He may bless this tabernacle, and all who dwell therein, and give unto them a good Angel for a guardian, and make them serve Him that they may consider the wonderful things out of His law. May he avert from them all adverse powers, may He deliver them from all fear and from all disquiet, and vouchsafe to keep them in health in this tabernacle. Who, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, liveth and reigneth God, for ever and ever. Amen.'

'Let us pray.—Hear us, O Holy Lord, Almighty Father, Eternal God, and vouchsafe to send Thy holy Angel from Heaven to guard, cherish, protect, visit and defend all that are assembled in this house, through Christ our Lord, Amen.'

Then followed the mournful, yet unspeakably, soothing words of the 'Miserere,' a strain of hope and comfort in the poor sufferer's ear.

'Have mercy upon me, O God; according to Thy great mercy.'

'And according to the multitude of Thy tender mercies: blot out my iniquity.'

'Wash me yet more from my iniquity: and cleanse me from my sin.'

'For I acknowledge my iniquity: and my sin is always before me....'

'Thou shalt sprinkle me with hyssop, and I shall be cleansed; Thou shalt wash me and I shall be made whiter than snow.'

'Thou shalt make me hear of joy and gladness: and the bones that are humbled shall rejoice.'

'Turn away Thy face from my sins: and blot out all my iniquities.'

'Create in me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within my bowels.'

'Cast me not away from Thy presence: and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.'

'Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation: and strengthen me with a perfect spirit.'

'I will teach the unjust Thy ways: and the wicked shall be converted unto Thee....'

Oh! how full of healing power are the consoling prayers of Holy Church.

Morren had silently listened to them from his place, and they fell like soft drops of dew upon his hardened heart, till at last his long suppressed feeling found relief in a flood of tears.

Had that heart-rending entreaty for pardon arisen for Victor the guiltless one? No, far rather, thought he, for himself, for him, the sinner, the guilty one, it implored forgiveness, for him it asked purification of heart, for him a renewed spirit, for him the gift of the Spirit of God, to renovate and enlighten his proud, blind reason.

Did not the last victorious sound heard, 'I will teach the unjust Thy ways,' befit the lips of his son?

Had not Victor taught him, from his death-bed, the unfathomable ways of God's providence? Had the Lord taken his child from him in order to recall the father by the voice of the son?—

'And the wicked shall be converted unto Thee.' There is still hope, then, even for the ungodly—for him who had set God at defiance.

Yes, for now the pious response, as if in answer to his thoughts, made answer—

'The sacrifice of God is an afflicted spirit; a contrite and humble heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise.'

It seemed as if a cloud had been rolled away from before his eyes.

The holy prayers continued, but Morren heard not a single word more.

The Priest began the holy unction, but Morren was unconscious. He no longer knew what was passing within him. He seemed to have lost all consciousness.

He had buried his face in his hands, and big tears fell from between his fingers on the floor.

Long—very long—did he remain in the same posture, and it was not till the Priest had left the room with the 'Most Holy' that he raised his head and gazed, as if half bewildered, at the bed of death.

Then suddenly he sprang to his feet, flew to the bed, and fell powerless in the arms of his son.

'Victor! dear Victor!' he cried, and his sobs, 'it is over! You have conquered. I believe, I believe! My God! I believe, as my son Victor believes!'

A second cry—a cry of victory—rang through the room, as Victor's mother mingled her tears of joy with those of her converted husband and her dying child.

It was a sight which brought tears into the eyes of all who witnessed it.

But Victor soon extricated himself from the arms of his parents.

There was a heavenly joy upon his countenance. His eyes rested, for a moment, with inexpressible affection upon the father over whose errors he had mourned so long, upon the mother who so nobly shared his sacrifice, and then they were raised triumphantly to Heaven.

'Lord,' he said, 'now dost Thou let Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy Word, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation. I thank Thee, O God of boundless mercy. Thou hast heard my prayer. Thou hast accepted my sacrifice. For now may I unfold the wonders of Thy goodness. I may now say that, before I left my fatherland, I offered my life for the defence of Thy Vicar, to obtain my father's conversion. Mother,' continued he, turning to her, 'see now whether the voice of which I spoke to you that evening in the summer-house was not the Voice of God. Oh, happy we! that we did not close our ears against it. Thanks to you, dear Joseph,' he continued, turning to his cousin; 'it was your noble resolution to offer yourself for your mother that inspired me with the blessed thought which has won my dear father's soul.'

No sooner did Morren hear these words, which so suddenly revealed to him the secret of Victor's determination than he burst again into tears, as if borne down by the heroism of the filial love which, in his unbelief, he had not even suspected.

'Oh, Victor, Victor,' cried he, 'what love, what love! And I—woe is me! wretch that I am!—I called you an ungrateful child—a ven-

omous snake, wounding the bosom that fostered it; and that at the very moment when you were about to sacrifice yourself for me. Ah, dear child, continued he, falling on his knees before the sick-bed, 'how deeply have I wronged you by doubting your love. Forgive me, Victor, forgive me; but, oh! my child, can you still love your miserable father?'

'Enough, enough,' interrupted Victor; 'your words make my heart bleed. I have nothing to forgive. Was not your whole conduct dictated by love for your child? You ask me if I can still love that dear father whom I loved so deeply amid his errors—if I can love him now, when he is converted to God? Father, mother, come to my heart, into which the God of goodness and love has but now descended, and there let the kiss of peace unite us all with Him.'

And they forgot for a moment, in that fervent embrace, the anguish of approaching separation. Suddenly there was a loud noise in the street before the house.

'There is the Bambino d'Ara Cœli,' cried a voice.

At the end of the street, slowly approaching, was seen a large, brown, close carriage, over the door of which hung a red curtain. In it were two Friars Minor, one of whom wore a stole, and the other carried a lighted candle.

It was the carriage of the Bambino of Ara Cœli (an image of the Infant Saviour), held in high veneration by the people of Rome, who greatly desire to be blessed by it at the hour of death.

Victor, when he felt his end approaching, had earnestly besought the Priest from whom he received the last Sacraments: to obtain for him a visit from the holy image.

All the people in the street fell upon their knees.

'Oh, Santo Bambino, bless us.'

'Give us health.'

'Cure my child.'

'Multiply the fruits of the earth.'

These, and a hundred other supplications, arose from these faithful Roman hearts.

The carriage stopped before Stefano's house, and the two Friars carried the holy image to the sick man's chamber.

A glance of joy lighted up his eyes as he saw the servants of the Lord enter, and he bent his head in earnest devotion for the blessing of the miraculous Bambino, while a prayer of thankful and triumphant love arose from the depth of his heart to the Throne of the Most High.

One other blessing still awaited him—the Pontifical Benediction, sent by the Holy Father to his dying child.

'Mother,' said he, in a low voice, to her who knelt motionless by his side, 'now all is well.—Now I shall soon say farewell. But, mother, dearest, will not—'

As if in confirmation of his words, a painful gurgling sound was heard in his throat. It was the moment anticipated by the physician.

He breathed with difficulty, and every breath came with a rattle which seemed to rise higher and higher in his throat.

At last a distressing cough was heard, and a fearful stream of blood issued from his mouth.

Morren sprang forward with a terrible cry, as if he would shield his child from the approach of death, while his wife tenderly supported the dying head.

The bystanders wept over their inability to help him.

Poor Martin wrung his hands in anguish.

'My God,' murmured he to himself, 'take me instead. I am good for nothing in this world. Poor Victor! poor parents!'

Victor alone remained calm in the midst of his sufferings.

'It is nothing,' said he, with a smile; 'it is the release.'

Meanwhile, night was slowly drawing on. Nunziata lighted a lamp.

All was silent in the room for a long time. The flow of blood seemed to have relieved the sick man, and he was now again lying quietly in his bed. His face was already pale as death, his cheeks had fallen in, a cold sweat stood upon his brow, and the coverlet was raised up and