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THEOBALD; OR, THE TRIUMPH OF CHARITY.

(Written by Madame la Comtesse de la Rochere, and published under the auspices of the Archbishop of Tours.)

CHAPTER II.—FUNERAL OBSEQUIES.

One evening, three years after Theobald's departure, a violent wind, the terrible libeccio, was blowing with fury, unroofing the houses and uprooting old oak-trees in the woods, while Clarita was sitting in the midst of her women spinning by the light of a lamp the wool destined to make a warm garment for her old favorite Cati.

'O Heavens,' cried Clarita, 'how mournfully the wind whistles to-night. How dreadful the sea must be in such weather. I pity the poor sailors exposed to it, and their wives and sisters, who live in constant apprehension of the dangers they incur, but can do nothing to help them.'

'Listen,' said the old servant, 'would you not say there are groans outside the house? It must be the lamentations of the souls in purgatory; for people say that in a storm like this they return on earth, to implore the prayers of their relatives and friends who are still in the world.'

'Do not believe such things my good woman,' said Clarita, simply; 'although nothing is impossible with the Almighty, He does not allow the souls of the departed to return and trouble the repose of the living. Theobald has often told me that all such ideas are nothing but superstitions, from which we cannot too soon free ourselves.'

'Good Lord! mademoiselle, did you not see your father's portrait move? All the servants, and even Clarita, clung together by an involuntary movement.'

'The wind from the door caused the frame to move, no doubt,' said she; 'but let us pray, my good women, pray for both the living and the dead.'

'She knelt down and recited the litanies of the Blessed Virgin; Annunciata and her servants responding—Ora pro nobis. Just then a furious and sudden gust of wind rushing down the chimney thrust the burning embers from the hearth into the very middle of the room, and a violent knock was heard at the door—all the women trembled.'

'For pity's sake, open the door,' cried a plaintive voice.

'We will not refuse hospitality to any one who suffers, whoever it may be,' said Clarita.

'Certainly not,' said Annunciata, rising at once. 'Follow me, Lucia.'

The old servant took a lamp that hung on the wall, which flickered and finally went out in her trembling hands. While she was occupied in relighting it, Annunciata went alone to the door, and unlocked it—

'Be welcome whoever you may be,' said she, 'and tell us what you came here for?'

'To die,' replied a smothered voice, that made the sick woman shudder. 'He that strikes with the sword, shall die by the sword.'

Clarita, who had taken the lamp herself, could not avoid uttering a cry of terror on recognising Burcica the bandit, covered with blood, and in a very weak state.

'What has happened to you?' inquired the young girl greatly alarmed.

'I have received a ball in my chest.'

'You did perfectly right, Burcica; but you will not die. I will send immediately for the surgeon, and I am myself very clever in healing wounds.'

The bandit shook his head. 'It is too late, believe me. I am not deceived in my condition. Quick! I beseech you—send for the Cure of the village.'

'Run and fetch him as quickly as possible,' said Clarita, to young Cati, the most active of all her domestics; 'and, above all, be sure to speak to no one but Monsieur le Cure himself.'

Meanwhile Burcica reposed his wounded and aching limbs on the soft bed.

'Let me open your coat and examine your wound,' said Annunciata.

'No, no,' he replied, 'I will preserve the little strength I possess, to speak to the cure—afterwards we will see. Give me something to drink, if you please. Oh! I suffer horribly.'

Clarita fetched a glass of wine and water, which the sick man drank off at a draught.

'When were you wounded?' asked Annunciata.

'I can scarcely tell. It was about twelve o'clock in the day, perhaps; but it appears an eternity to me since—those scoundrels of voltigeurs—ah! if I could only meet them once more.'

'Were you wounded by them?'

'Those fellows must be Corsicans to have aimed so exactly. They fired at a hundred paces, and they did not miss their aim. They are famous marksmen, I must confess.'

'And how did you manage, that you did not fall into their hands?' asked Annunciata.

'The grotto of the Fabianos was only ten paces distant,' replied Burcica with feverish volubility, 'and I succeeded in reaching it, and concealed myself. They passed twenty times over the rock that was my hiding-place, without guessing I was so near them—I heard their footsteps, their conversation, and even their breathing. Oh, Lord! how I suffer. So I must die at last; it is very distressing, very heart-rending. I had formed other projects; in a few months I should have been a free man; Giacomo had promised me his daughter, the little Varina, who is nearly fifteen years old, and who is as pretty as a Venus. I should have married and lived quietly in my village, in the midst of my relations and friends. I should have little children to love me. Oh! the cure does not come! Oh, pray the Almighty for me, Signora; you indeed are responsible for that which weighs most heavy on my conscience.'

'Poor Burcica is delirious,' said Annunciata, hurriedly to her niece. 'Go, child, and look out of the window in my bedroom, and see if by the light of Cati's lantern, you cannot perceive Monsieur Le Cure in the street.'

Had she anything to say in private to the dying man, or did she fear some indiscreet revelations in the presence of the young girl?

Clarita made no remark, nor did she appear to notice the last words of the dying man; but, after looking in vain up and down the street, she knelt down and implored the Almighty to have compassion on the poor sinner, and afford him time for repentance. The priest, who was fetched from the bedside of another dying man, now arrived in all haste and was instantly conducted to the chamber of Burcica. Annunciata then quitted it; her features were contracted, and her pale and livid lips trembled convulsively. Finding Clarita still on her knees, she knelt beside her, and a few tears of repentance, let us hope, rolled slowly down her sunken cheeks. The surgeon of the village also arrived, but he was obliged to wait more than a quarter of an hour before Burcica had finished his confession. At length the cure opened the door; Annunciata was the first to enter; the dying man addressed a few words to her in a low voice, which appeared to produce a very extraordinary impression upon her, for she tottered and was obliged to lean on the bedstead for support. The surgeon then began to examine the wound. The injury was both wide and deep, but while endeavoring to extract the ball, the sufferer uttered a cry of anguish, let his head fall back, and expired.

'All is over,' said the surgeon, placing the sheet over the head of the corpse.

Day now began to dawn. The surgeon departed, and the cure, kneeling by the side of the corpse, recited the service for the dead.

Annunciata's mind was entirely engrossed by other cares. She put out the fire, and closed the doors and windows very carefully such being the Corsican custom, and then despatched express messengers to Corsica (niolo) for the purpose of apprising the relatives and friends of Burcica, and of inviting them to the funeral ceremony.

The body was washed, and dressed in the costume of the Blue Penitents, a brotherhood to which the deceased bandit had formerly belonged. It was then placed on a table covered with a black cloth. Some women of the village received each a small sum of money to fill the office of weepers, and immediately commenced their cries and lamentations.

Clarita had retired to her room, but Annunciata, after having made all necessary arrangements for the company she expected, placed herself in the midst of the women, exciting them by her own tears; and, turning to the corpse, exclaimed—

'May misfortune befall him who has cut the thread of my life—may he be hated by God and man!'

'May he perish by the hand of a coward, and his blood be unavenged.'

Upon this the women redoubled their cries, and tore their hair.

The parents and friends of Burcica were not long in arriving, and came in successively. The groans and imprecations redoubled on the entrance of each new visitor; but they became almost deafening when the handsome Vanina, the affianced bride of Burcica, entered the room, accompanied by her father and mother.

Annunciata, standing before the coffin, then took up the funeral complaint—

'Ah! why did you quit this life when you were still in the pride of your age?'

'Was not your promised bride all that is beautiful and good?'

'Who can we compare to her?'

'She would have given you children as lovely as herself, as courageous as their father.'

'Oh! why did you leave the world—oh, Burcica!'

'The strong man relied on his strength: for a moment he forgot his prudence, and his enemies overwhelmed him. They pierced him with a ball, but from afar, for they would not have dared to confront him. They killed him, and the earth trembled at his fall. The mountain echoes repeated the sound.'

'The libeccio murmured it in the gloomy valley.'

'May all those who contributed to your end perish by fearful deaths.'

'May the earth drink their blood.'

'May the vultures devour their corpses.'

'But, thou, oh! Burcica, repose in holy ground. Sleep peacefully in the tomb which your friends are about to prepare for you, and may the Lord receive your soul.'

On concluding this improvisation, Annunciata fell on her knees. The mother of Vanina also poured forth her lamentations, at the same time making a pompous eulogium on him whom she had been so near calling her son-in-law.

The clergy now arrived, and all the company approached the body, and kissed it on the mouth. The procession was formed, and accompanied it to the church, and churchyard.

Clarita alone had taken no part in these noisy and exaggerated demonstrations, which were most repugnant to her feelings and the simplicity of her character. She could not understand how cries of vengeance could be mixed with Christian or religious ceremonies; and on her knees at the foot of the cross she prayed—

'Oh, my God, Thou who didst die for the salvation of men, have compassion on this poor soul. Shower down upon it the abundance of Thy mercies, and receive it in Thy everlasting tabernacles. May Thy grace touch and enlighten all those whom a culpable hate leads astray, and cause justice and charity to flourish amongst us.'

While Clarita was thus employed, Annunciata returned home pale and dishevelled. The energy that had supported her in the presence of so many strangers had completely abandoned her now that she was alone, and she fell in a fainting state into the young girl's arms.

CHAPTER III.—INCIDENTS OF WAR.

At the very time that Burcica fell under the fire of the Corsican voltigeurs, a far more dramatic scene was passing in the plains of Algeria. A convoy escorted by thirty men only, had been directed towards the Blockhaus de Mered. The commander of this little troop, an experienced officer of the 49th, was proceeding with perfect security through this country so frequently intersected by ravines. This confidence, however, did not appear to be shared by a fine young man close to him, wearing the uniform of Sergeant-Major, and decorated with the cross of the legion of honor, won by numerous acts of bravery. The latter listened anxiously to the slightest ruffle, and his piercing eye was continually directed to the fastnesses of a deep gorge which appeared particularly to have excited his suspicions. All at once, a white form was visible through the green foliage of a jujube-tree, and disappeared as rapidly.

'Lieutenant, the enemy is there,' cried the young man, pointing in the direction of the defile.

'You are mistaken, Loncini,' replied the officer; 'the Arabs would not be so bold as to attack us close to the gates of Bouffarick.'

He had scarcely pronounced these words, when a ball whistled through the air, and struck

him in the breast; the unfortunate man staggered and fell dead. Our old acquaintance Loncini, finding himself, by this melancholy event, in command of the troop, immediately gave orders to form a square with the vehicles that composed the convoy, and placed himself, with his men, in the centre of this quickly-made fortification. Scarcely were these arrangements completed, when the Arabs came out in great numbers from the defile that had so long excited his suspicions. They attacked the convoy with inconceivable fury, but the little detachment, encouraged by the example and exhortations of the Sergeant-Major, opposed a most obstinate resistance. Sheltered by the carriages, the French only showed themselves to shower balls on their adversaries, and then instantly retired. Theobald fired unceasingly, and the precision of his aim was such that every shot brought down a man. The Arabs, however, must have triumphed in the end—for their numbers increased every moment,—if the garrison of Bouffarick, hearing the firing, had not sent assistance to this handful of men. At the sight of this unexpected help, the enemy retreated in every direction, and the detachment continued its route. But this day was to be marked by a still more memorable event in Theobald's existence. He had only continued his march about an hour, when, from an eminence, he perceived about forty Bedouins seated on the banks of a rivulet, reposing themselves after the fatigues of the day. Several horses and a great number of cattle, captured from a tribe allied to the French, grazed at liberty by and around them. Nothing was easier than to avoid meeting them, for they appeared by no means inclined to attack, and the valley they were in was out of the road the detachment had to follow. But in the midst of these men, clothed in their long white bournouses, another man, dressed in the uniform of a French officer, was seen upright (debout) bound to a tree, and no doubt beginning to taste the horrors of a frightful captivity. Moved with compassion at the sight of the unfortunate prisoner, and only consulting his courage, Theobald divided his little troop into two parts, leaving a portion to guard the waggons, and then rushing with the remainder on the Arabs, who were greatly astonished at his hardihood. Reassured on seeing the small number of their opponents, the Bedouins seized their arms, and defended themselves for some time bravely, but they were charged with such fury, and lost so many men, that at length they endeavored to find safety in flight. One of them jumped on his horse, and having hastily untied the bands that bound the captive officer to the tree, galloped off at the extreme swiftness of this courser, dragging the prisoner after him by the help of a long rope made fast to his body. The unfortunate man would soon have been dead, if quicker than thought, Theobald had not aimed at the fugitive Arab, and fired with such admirable precision notwithstanding the great distance that separated them, that he stretched him dead on the sand, without touching either the horse or the prisoner. The rest of the Arabs were dispersed over the country. Loncini did not deem it prudent to pursue them.

He reassembled his little troop, and himself ran to the officer whose life he had saved, and who, too much exhausted to join his deliverers, remained extended on the ground close to the bleeding body of the Bedouin.

'You are free, captain,' said he. His soldiers at the same time were occupied in making sure of the cattle abandoned by the enemy.

The officer could not reply. He had fainted. Theobald approached nearer, and lifted up his head, but scarcely had he cast a glance on his face, stained with blood and covered with dust, than a cry of surprise burst from him.

'My God!' exclaimed he in the fulness of his heart, 'I will ever bless thee for having granted me the opportunity of exercising the only vengeance worthy of a Christian.' He remained in utter astonishment, his heart beating with unspeakable rapture, and then, with superhuman strength, he raised the wounded body of Pasquale Fabiano on his shoulders!

As soon as the victorious little troop had reached the Blockhaus de Mered, the young Sergeant-Major, after receiving the congratulations and praises of his superior officers, took his way to the tent where lay 'the enemy of his race,' whose wounds had been carefully dressed.

He had been placed on one of the baggage waggons, and Theobald had given all the directions that his state required, but had forbidden that any one should speak to him. Our hero had, however, been pointed out as his deliverer.

'How do you feel now, captain?' inquired Theobald, in Corsican, with an emotion no words can convey.

'Why, what is this?' said Fabiano, raising himself on his couch. 'Is it possible that my deliverer is also my countryman?'

'May I add your name?' inquired the Sergeant-Major.

'Can you for an instant doubt it?' cried the captain, offering his hand.

'You have yet to learn my name,' pursued our hero.

'Oh, tell it me quickly, that I may teach my children to revere and bless it! for without you they would now be orphans, and my dear wife would be languishing in widow's garments. Tell me that I may know the name of the man who saved my life at the risk of his own, and to whom I shall ever owe the deepest, most unbounded gratitude.'

'I am Theobald Loncini, of Plovela,' cried the young man, unable to express his feelings.— 'There was a pause.'

Surprise, admiration, shame, and in all probability remorse, rendered the officer incapable of uttering a word.

'You are the most noble, the most generous of human beings,' cried he at length, with intense emotion.

CHAPTER IV.—EXPLANATION AND CONCLUSION.

On a fine spring morning Annunciata was returning from church, leaning on her niece's arm, walking with difficulty, being just recovered from a long and dangerous illness.

'My dear aunt, how happy I am to see you not only so much better, but so much calmer and happier than you were last winter. Is it not well to trust to Almighty God, and to resign ourselves to His holy will. Is it not better to shed tears of love and repentance, than to harbor hatred in the heart?'

'Child,' replied Annunciata, 'all these religious thoughts have come too late; there are faults for which there is no remedy, no consolation.'

'Do not say so, my dear aunt; have we not all offended God? But He is good and merciful, he pardons as soon as we truly repent our sins. I have read somewhere that repentance is the sister of innocence.'

'How long my nephew delays writing,' said Annunciata with a sigh. 'If any misfortune happen to him, I shall die of grief, for I alone should be the cause.'

'No, no, rest assured,' interrupted Clarita; 'I know not how it is, but lately I feel so happy, so joyful, that I feel convinced we shall very soon receive good news of him.'

'But why, my child, is he so long in writing? When I think that the last of the Loncinis is at this moment but a private soldier, and exposed to all the risks and chances of war, and through my fault!'

At this instant, the sound of horse's feet were heard at the commencement of the street; the two ladies turned, and in utter amazement exclaimed together,—

'Heavens, it is Loncini himself!'

The young man was soon in their arms, dressed in the handsome uniform of lieutenant, for he had just obtained his promotion, and the cross of honor sparkled on his breast.

'What do I see?' said Annunciata, after the first transports of joy had subsided. 'You are an officer; you are decorated; and you did not write to apprise us of your good fortune!'

'My dear aunt,' replied her nephew, 'had suspected my courage, and I had sworn never to return until I had given sufficient proofs of it to satisfy even her, I have kept my word.'

Tears of joy and pride coursed down the cheeks of the invalid. Clarita strained her heart. A crowd of people, attracted by curiosity, gathered around them. 'Let us go home,' said the officer, 'for I see we are making an exhibition.'

'My dear nephew, had I been apprised in time of your return, I would have assembled all our friends, that your welcome might have been worthy of you.'

As she pronounced these words, a young woman, handsomely dressed, followed by a pretty little boy, about four years of age, and holding an infant in her arms, hastily came out of the Fabianos' house, and rushing through the crowd, fell at Theobald's feet.

'At length I see you, the saviour of my husband, the preserver of my Pasquale,' cried she with transport; 'you whom we all dreaded as his enemy, you have saved his life at the peril of your own; and she kissed his hands and bathed them with tears, while Theobald made vain efforts to escape from these marks of gratitude.'

'Long life and happiness to Theobald Loncini,' cried an old and infirm lady from a window in the same house, waving high an open letter, which proved to be one just received by the Signora Tecla Fabiano from her husband, announcing his safety. 'Long live Theobald Loncini, for he has saved my son,' repeated the old lady.

This cheer was taken up by the entire crowd and repeated several times, the number of people increasing every moment by the arrival of partisans and friends of both houses.

'My friends, I cannot express what I feel,' said Theobald in the deepest emotion; and after having thanked his countrymen by sign and voice