



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

THIODOLF THE ICELANDER.

BY BARON DE LA MOTTE FOUQUÉ.
CHAPTER VI.

As they sat together in the evening around the hearth, Pietro was so bright, so humble, so full of delicate tenderness towards Malgherita, that it seemed as if he would make amends to all for his former justice, although it had not been spoken of. All were greatly pleased with the accomplished knight; and Malgherita shone upon him in her still joy with heightened love, like a morning rose. Amongst others, he sang in his mother-tongue the following lay:

"O my lovely distant home,
Where the sun doth ever shine;
Land of rivers, fruits, and flowers,
Holy rood and holy shrine;—

"I have left thee far behind,
I have found a dreary spot;
Yet my bosom, never sad,
Cheerful bears its gloomy lot.

"For, while the fairest rose
Blossoms loving at my side,
Easy 'tis to smile at storms,
And defy the raging tide.

"Yea, fair land, I have thee too;
For, whenever we sing thy lays,
O'er our brows the breathing of spring,
Soft and balmy, blushing plays."

"Ah! it must be very fair in your country," said Thiodolf; "and glorious adventures must have befallen you that could drive you forth from the land of flowers. I think you will relate them to us here this very evening."

But a displeased look fell upon him from Uncle Nefiol, who said, "Art thou so without good manners that thou canst ask a guest whence he comes, and what has driven him to our hearth? Shame upon thee!"

Thiodolf shrugged his shoulders, and said—"There is amongst us a good old proverb: 'What is more helpless than a lame bear, a leaky ship, or a youth who has not yet been in foreign lands?' You must have patience with me till after my first flight, then I shall soon get good manners."

But Pietro grasped his hand, saying to Nefiol, "If it be not unpleasant to you and your wife, I would gladly take the opportunity to relate what has befallen Malgherita and me. We feel strange to one another as long as a veil hangs before the past."

"Right well," answered Nefiol, "if it seems good to you, I shall hear it myself willingly.—We shall henceforth, without doubt, live together in greater confidence."

Pietro began his tale in the following words: "On a gentle height, whence can be seen the fair Provençal coast and the rich port of Marseilles, there rises a stately castle, above whose walls many noble chestnuts, growing in the inner court, stretch their topmost branches: so that the traveller is allured, not less by this leafy green than by the grandeur of the building, to ask hospitality there, without fear of repulse.—And truly he would not seek in vain, for it belongs to a very noble and powerful lord, who is commonly called in all the country round, 'the great baron.' Now, as a noble and knightly mind is seldom without the love of song and poetry, the great baron was wont to hold yearly, on an appointed day, a splendid feast, to which the most skillful troubadours of the province were invited from far and near; the minstrels especially, from all lands, had free entrance. Then arose among them all an harmonious contention, from which the victor departed, crowned with an olive-wreath by the two daughters of the baron, and the other minstrels with valuable gifts of gold and gear.

"On one of these days a knightly expedition, undertaken from joy of heart and youthful curiosity, brought me into the neighborhood of the castle. On all sides were streaming towards it joyous companies of knights and ladies, burghers and peasants; and over the chestnut-trees of the castle there floated a sweet sound of bugles, flutes, and harps, as if the more surely to attract all friends of song to the pleasant strife. The meaning of the festival was soon explained to me, and I quickly found means to put on the dress of a troubadour. I never travelled without my dear lute at my side; and as I was from childhood familiar with the gay science, with poetry, song, and music, I dared to hope that I might take a not unworthy place with the other challengers, and perchance adorn my brows, already often overshadowed by bloody laurel wreaths, with the gentler olive-wreath of this day.

"I entered the spacious court of the castle, and perceived that in the midst there was a lofty olive-tree; its slender stem was wreathed with flowers, and on each side, leaning against the tree, were seated two bright, graceful female forms. You may have seen, Father Nefiol, in your southern voyages, lamps or delicate vases which have been dug out of the ruins of Roman cities, and which, in like manner, represent female figures leaning against a slender pillar or against a vase."

"I have, indeed, seen the like, and I can well think how beautiful must have been the baron's daughters by the olive-tree," answered the old man; and a gleam which seemed to have wandered from the young south, rested on his withered face.

"There was one difference," continued Pietro; "the two lovely statues were not of the same height. The one, beaming in majestic, somewhat stern, beauty, rose up like a tall lily—that was the elder sister, called Isolde. You can readily judge how lovely was the younger, who resembled a tiny blooming rosebud, when I tell you that she called Malgherita, and now sits near us by the fire."

The maiden blushed brightly, and all looked at her with admiration, while Pietro continued thus: "Opposite to the lofty Isolde had ranged themselves such of the troubadours as purposed to sing stately lays, called *sirventi* by the Provençals, or some other solemn strains. Before the delicate Malgherita we stood, who meant to try our skill in lighter, more joyous measure; and in the noble hall, just in front of the olive, was the great baron in all his pomp, begirt with vassals and retainers. Each of the maidens held already in her fair hand a wreath wherewith to adorn the most favored minstrel, and, with this sight before us, we gave little heed to all the splendor of the majestic baron. The minstrel-tourney began in fair order; our melodious weapons poured thro' the blue air streams of sweetest harmony; and higher and more confidently did the hope beat in my heart that I should receive the wreath from Malgherita's hand. I may fearlessly say that I had almost gained the prize, but the deepening passion that thrilled through me at the sight of my beloved; the fancy, or perchance the certainty—oh, blush not so brightly, my sweet bride!—that a kindly glance of her eye fell upon me—all this slackened the rapidity of my light song. A minstrel from Marseilles, emboldened by the feeble tones of my voice, raised a noble exulting strain, and the judges awarded him the prize. Anger and sorrow kept me from looking up as he knelt before Malgherita, and she wore the olive-wreath in his hair. The jewels and pearls which were proffered to me as second in skill I divided, in the bitterness of my heart, amongst the bystanders, and then went hastily towards the castle-gate. My victor meant to bear his honors humbly, and had therefore drawn back into the crowd, so that we unexpectedly met near the gate. He had modestly taken off the wreath and held it in his hand, so that accidentally, in the press of people, it touched my hair. A sudden thought flashed through me. I snatched from my bosom a jewel worth a baron's castle, which I carried with me, lest I might need a large sum on my journey, and held it before the minstrel's eyes, saying: 'Let us make an exchange. You will not let your wreath adorn your head; and who sees it where you now hold it?' Dazzled by the splendor of the offer, the minstrel began the unworthy folly of bargaining. I was ashamed of his baseness, however much the wreath rejoiced me, and, as I gave him the jewel, I struck him sharply on the hand with my dagger, saying, 'Take a lesson with your bargain, and learn to mend your evil ways.' He shrieked out, and the blood spouted up as from a fountain. All pressed round me in displeasure and anger. In one moment I had placed the wreath on my head, and drawn my sword; the crowd, seeing that I was protected by a chestnut-tree behind me, drew back in terror from my threatening looks. But the baron stalked wrathfully towards me. Already my contempt of his gift of pearls and gold had made him hate me, and he seemed glad that my outrage on the security of his castle gave him a pretext to revenge himself. He would not hearken to me, but only desired, as he held over me his naked sword, that I should instantly give up my arms, and surrender myself to his judgment, whether for pardon or condemnation. With eyes flashing fire, I sprang upon him, threw him on the ground by a dexterous stroke, and then rushed through the gate, securing safely to myself, my lute, and my olive-wreath. How I afterwards lingered for months in the neighborhood without ever falling into the power of the baron, though he diligently searched for me; how I succeeded in approaching Malgherita under many disguises, and at last won her pure love—let me pass over for to-day the many-colored tale, which I would rather put hereafter into the bright light of some song or ballad. The night is growing darker, and I have yet much to relate. As soon as I had gained the knowledge of Malgherita's love, I repaired to a baron who had long received hospitality at my castle in Tuscany, and now very gladly repaid it me after the true knightly fashion. In his company, and with all the splendor which befitted my rank, I went openly to the castle of the great baron, and excited no small wonder in him, when, in the person of the troubadour he had so tyrannically pursued, I presented to him the Marquis of Castel-Franco. He offered me all knightly satisfaction; but when I,

instead, asked for the hand of his youngest daughter, his large flashing eyes looked thoughtfully down. My companion had already warned me that, according to an old sacred custom of his house, the baron would hardly give his younger daughter in marriage before the elder; and that the proud Isolde looked so coldly on all knights, that not one of her many lovers had ever dared to approach her as wooers. I thought I saw a rejection ready to pass his imperious lips; but suddenly the great baron seemed to collect himself, a kindly gleam passed over his features, he grasped my hand and said, 'So let it be.' Perchance he thought that Malgherita's fame might suffer by any other issue of my suit, and he might find no fitting cause for its rejection; in short, my beloved was to be affianced to me, and the evening appointed for the solemn betrothal had arrived. The castle, lighted up with torches and lamps, shone out far into the valley. Joyful banners of my colors and the baron's floated from every tower in the torchlight; the guests were assembled, and, glowing with joy, I entered the hall, leading Malgherita; her father walked before us. He was about to speak the words which were to make my happiness, when Isolde approached with solemn grace, and said, so that all could hear: 'Since you, O beloved father, betroth one of your daughters, and bright earthly hopes arise in long succession to you for future times, you will the more willingly let your other child likewise make a vow, after which she has thirsted from her heart for long years—a vow which has its object beyond this world, and betrays me to a heavenly Lord. To speak openly—and blame it not in me as pride, ye honored guests—I think not to find any other bridegroom who shall be worthy of me. I therefore here solemnly declare that it is in my mind to live and die as a nun.'

"Ha! ha!" interrupted Thiodolf, "I know about that; uncle has told me of it. It must be a pretty catch to take one of those nunneries;—I hope to have that sport in some of my future voyages." And then, as Malgherita looked at him in some displeasure, he added: "Nay, I will do them no harm, those wonderful cloister-maidens; only I should like to see them, and then I would open wide the doors and say: 'Such of you as will go forth into the world, children, those who will remain, let them do so. No man must break his heart for such.'

"The baron thought very differently," said Pietro. "He first used entreaties, then threats, to make Isolde withdraw her overhasty word, and as she showed by her calm firmness that it was no question here of overhaste, and that she had no thought of retracting, he broke forth into the wildest fury against me, asserting that I had come but to insult and ruin him, injuring and provoking him in every way; and sooner would he give up both his daughters to the cloisters, yea, even to death, than give one of them to my arms. It was vain to speak to him; he broke off every engagement with me; and as I turned to Isolde, she said, coldly: 'I grieve for you both—you were well mated; but I cannot help you, for truly I can find my mate in no mortal.'

"Wait awhile," murmured Thiodolf to himself; "I may yet make thee repent of this, proud maiden. Art thou, then, too good for a noble knight? The tables may still be turned."

Pietro was about to continue, but Malgherita laid her hand on his mouth, saying: "Say nothing to-night of how thou carriest me away, beloved. Fearful things would be told, and sleep and dreams are drawing near."

"So be it," said Pietro; "I will then only say farther, that I carried my sweet prey on board ship; we did not sail at once for the coast of Tuscany, that we might deceive the boats which the baron and his allies of Marseilles undoubtedly sent in pursuit of us. We took the contrary direction, reached the open sea, and were driven, first by threatening ships and then by still more dangerous tempests, to this coast, where all, save Malgherita and myself, found their death."

"The rest were no great loss," said Thiodolf. "One can see that they were no Iceland sailors, or they would have better resisted the storm, and known more where they were. Those who have to do with sea-water will have to swallow some of it. But, Malgherita, do not be too much vexed that you are come to Iceland. I hope—I hope very much that you will soon have a glorious sport."

CHAPTER VII.

Images of her fair home passed soothingly through Malgherita's mind; so soon as she had closed her eyes in sleep, gales, as from orange-groves in spring, breathed upon her eyelids, and her ears were filled with songs of nightingales, and murmurings of the silvery streams which run through the Provençal plains. But hardly had she noticed this with deep delight and longing hope when a hoarse voice broke in upon the sweet sounds, saying, "Who bade thee strike so madly in the dark, sir knight? Knowest thou whom thou hast struck?" And a bloody head

seemed to look sharply into her eyes through their closed lids. She knew well that the voice and head were those of her father's castellan, whom Pietro, when he carried her away, had wounded, it might be mortally. Then she started in affright from her slumbers; deep darkness lay around her, and old Gunhilda breathed heavily, in her sleep, from under the covering of her bed. Malgherita lay down again shuddering, and closed her eyes. Then lights danced before her, and reminded her that she had not put out the torches in her chamber the night of her flight, whereby her father's castle might have been set on fire—a thought which often pressed heavily upon her, and now wove itself into a fearful, fiery dream. It seemed to her that all the chestnut and olive-woods of Provence were in flames, and that the whole of her sweet native land was, through her fault, laid waste by an inextinguishable fire, which destroyed knightly castles, towns and villages, cloisters and hermitages.

In the midst of these fearful visions, a voice pierced through Malgherita's sleep, crying out, "Hurray, hurrah! the fire-sport is begun!—the fire from the south has reached us!" Malgherita sprang up with a shriek, and a red stream of light, pouring in through the window, met her eyes. Flames fearfully bright were darting up from the summit of a high mountain opposite, changing night into day; and a gigantic man was seen balancing himself on the branches of an elm close to the window, his dark form marked out against the dazzling light, while he clapped his hands, as if he took pleasure in the terrifying sight, and perhaps had caused it. Malgherita trembled, and murmured softly, "Ah, gracious God, now truly have I lost my senses, or the end of the world is coming!" Then the tall man on the tree struck against the window, laughing;—and the maiden, in breathless terror, threw herself on the bed of Gunhilda, who was only now fully awakened.

"Gently, gently," said she, after looking a while through the window at the flames, "it is but an old acquaintance, which has never brought harm to our island, but is its most brilliant ornament. Mount Hecla is giving out flames; there is nothing to fear—we are in no danger."

Malgherita looked up at her, half comforted, half doubtful and was about to question her, when the giant on the tree again began to move, and sang the following words:

*Rocky cauldron's flaming stream,
Flieker upwards, dance and gleam!
Many elfins stir the same—
Laugh, good people, o'er the flame!
"Echo, give your answer back!
Plover, wind! and, lightning, crack,
Shrieks, and yells, and torches glowing,
Blazing torrents ever flowing!
Yells, and shrieks, and torches bright!
Hail, behold a glorious sight!"*

And again he turned to the window, laughing and clapping his hands. Malgherita hid her face in the garments of the old woman, whom she implored to save her from that dreadful spectacle.—Gunhilda went quickly to the window, and cried angrily, "Mad nephew, what art thou doing?—Wilt thou frighten to death the tender maiden here with thy uncouth singing and clapping?"

"What?" answered Thiodolf, gently from without, "am I again mistaken? Is she not pleased at this? My uncle has so often told me that there are fire-mountains in the south, just like this. I have been hoping so long that there would be an eruption of our Hecla, because I thought that little Malgherita would then be quite at her ease, and comfortable with us as if at home. And is it not so? Perhaps there is not noise enough—as she said lately that the sea here was not blue enough. Wait a while; I will just sing a magic song, or two to the flames, then they will rage as wildly as Loki the bad god, when the serpent's poison trickles on him."

And he began anew to attune his voice for the fearful song; but Gunhilda called to him that Malgherita lay half senseless from the terror he had already caused her. Then Thiodolf climbed down from his tree, shaking his head, and very much troubled.

Gunhilda's tender soothing at length made Malgherita lift up again by degrees her delicate, trembling form; and she looked out, not without a feeling of awful pleasure, at the burning Hecla, of which a few broken stories had reached her ears in Provence, and which she now with her own eyes saw so wonderfully near her.

Rest was over for this night; morning began to dawn, and the men were heard assembling in the hall. Gunhilda led her trembling foster-child down the dark stairs, across which fell occasionally gleams of the distant flames as they shot upwards.

Nefiol, Pietro and Thiodolf were seated round the hearth. The women took their usual raised seats, and many reproofs and scoldings were given to the wild youth who had so terrified the delicate maiden. He heard them all very humbly, with sunken head; only murmuring at times that it was most unheard-of and perverse ill-luck, which had thus spoiled the pleasure that he had so

long been expecting for Malgherita. In future he would think of other and much better sports.

CHAPTER VIII.

The fire-stream from Mount Hecla had ceased; for several days the island had lain calm, and of a misty gray, in the midst of the wild sea; it was cold, for already wintry storms breathed their wild notes across the plains. Long before had been heard the loud flapping of the wings of the wild swans, as they swept away to the south;—the trees were dripping with heavy moisture, and let fall their brown leaves, like a solemn covering, over valley and plain. At this time Thiodolf was very little in the house; he thought that now the woods were in their gayest dress. How could one ever dream of more beautiful trees than these in their golden, many-colored hues! He was sure that not the far-famed south itself could boast of brighter. Pietro and Nefiol laughed at him, but could not refrain from taking part in the youth's delight in hunting, and often went with him through the misty forests.

While these expeditions lasted, Malgherita felt often oppressed and ill at ease in the dark lofty house. Gunhilda's grave activity, and the solemn occupations of the household, chilled her whole existence; and then at times she thought that Pietro was gone forth never to return again, and that she should at length suffer in the cold north island, and pass the rest of her troubled, joyless life like one enchanted, whom none could understand. One thing alone stood out brightly before her eyes, and in some way bound her to this northern island—the elfin tales of Thiodolf, and the sweet name given to these invisible little creatures, the "good people." She had learned all the many lays about them, and often sang them in her soft Provençal tongue. She loved one of these especially, which told how the elves visit youths and maidens in their dreams, and give them riddles; and whoever the next day rightly guesses a riddle, finds, as a reward, a little golden tablet on the grass, with beautiful pictures on it. Now it often seemed to Malgherita, when she awoke, as if a band of elves had held their dance before her bed, and that the fairest of these tiny, beautiful and many-colored creatures had approached her with courteous salutation, and proposed a riddle to her; but she could never, when awake, recall what this riddle was. Then she would go forth thoughtfully into a neighboring valley, more fertile and fair than the others, and where the high grass looked as if amongst it might be found the golden prize tablet. And often, when the last rays of the early setting sun slanted over the valley, and the stream ran more widely over the pebbles as the night-wind rose, Malgherita would still stand musing under the tall shrubs, and still come back to the house without her riddle, or her glittering tablets.

As she stood thus one evening, a light seemed suddenly to flash upon her mind, and brought to her at least one or two verses of the elfin riddle. What she could collect ran somewhat as follows:

"Far in the land of vines two sisters dwell;
Two mighty swords are buried among rocks:
The sisters' twin pour out a burning drink;
The sword draw forth a stream of royal blood.
When the two sisters dwell by the same hearth."

Then some lines were wanting; again she recollected clearly:

"When the two swords the same stout arm
Shall wield"

Here she failed again, and a shudder came over her as she tried to recall what followed.—A few detached words, of which she could not gather the meaning, increased, as they came up before her, her indistinct terror, and she sighed: "Ah, thou riddle, I shall never win me a bright tablet through thee."

Just then something shone near her brightly amidst the high grass, and she joyfully went towards it. But what was her horror when two huge shining horns stretched up from a grim hairy bear's head, and slowly arose the figure of a tall growing monster, covered with various skins, and wound about with wreaths of moss and rushes. The frightful apparition danced several times around Malgherita, who remained motionless from fear; then he climbed up a young slender tree, bent it down towards the next tree, to which he swung himself, and thence on to another and another in succession. The leaves of the shaken trees fell rustling; and at length Malgherita also sank down on the fallen leaves, dizzy with affright. Immediately the monster sprang to the ground, caught up the maiden in his arms, and bore her away, now so completely senseless from terror, that she could not hear one of his kind words; for many kind words did he speak, in most hearty and sincere trouble for his delicate burden. It was none other than Thiodolf, who, to amuse Malgherita, had meant to appear before her as an elfin king. He always fancied that the dainty little creatures were subject to a terrible gigantic man; and now, again, all had turned out so vexatiously and perversely!