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A NOBLE REVENGE. A LEGEND OF THE CRUSADERS. CHAPTER I.

Day was declining; already the mists of the evening were gathering in the valleys, when a horseman, who had been for some time skirting the shores of the Mediterranean, plunging at length into a deep and winding ravine, whose lofty sides were thickly clothed with pines—

Both horse and rider gave signs of a long and fatiguing journey; but in spite of his well-worn mantle, soiled helmet, and arms rusted with rain, the countenance of the young cavalier appeared radiant with happiness. With eager joy he spurred on his steed, casting, as he went, looks of leader interest around him, as though he recognised at each fresh turn of the road some dear familiar object, and ejaculating to himself with a sort of rapturous emotion, indicated no less by the smile that played on his lips and the tear that glistened in his eye. When he reached a certain point in the road, he stopped—it was before a little image of Our Lady placed in a half-ruined niche; there, joining his hands devoutly together, he cried aloud:

"O Mother of Mercy, thanks to thy tender care, I once more behold my beloved country. Here, as I departed for the Holy war, I made my vow before thee; and here, as is meet, I promise to perform it. On this spot will I raise a chapel and hospice for pilgrims; hither will I myself come each year to visit thy holy image, and on the same day will I relieve with great devotion thirty-three poor men, in honor of the thirty-three years which thy dear Son lived with thee on earth. O Virgin, ever blessed, have pity on me!"

With reason might Berenger d'Elvaz thank the Lord, whose almighty hand had delivered him out of so many perils. He had gone to the crusades as a faithful vassal of St. Louis—wounded at Mansoura, he had endured a hard captivity in the house of an Egyptian emir, nor had he recovered his liberty till the King of France had paid a million bezants of gold for his followers' ransom, and surrendered Damietta in payment for his own freedom; and now, at last, he had returned over sea to his own dear land of Provence, and to the home of his fathers, so fondly remembered. He was returning, it was true, a poor knight, possessed of nothing but his own good sword, but abundance awaited him in his father's halls; he was wearied and worn with travel, but what affectionate solicitude would not his mother and his sister lavish upon him! He pictured to himself their joy, and in imagination anticipated his own. He thought of the ancient retainers who had known him from a child; he forgot not even his poor faithful dog, who, perhaps, already had instinctively divined the near approach of his master.

"Come, Valiant," said he to his horse, "let us push along; a few steps further and we shall be at home. Once there, a good stable, plenty of fodder, and careful grooming will be yours. Push on, then, Valiant, my brave steed!"

The docile animal set himself to a canter, and soon the young traveller beheld through the increasing darkness the tall, shadowy outline of the castle of Elvaz. His heart leaped within him at the sight; but he observed with surprise that no light glimmered through the narrow windows, nor a sound could be heard from the ramparts.

"They are in the northern hall," said he, as if to re-assure himself; "my father is playing chess with the chaplain; my mother and sister ply the distaff; the valets are busy somewhere. I will soon make them hear me."

So saying, he took the horn that hung at his belt, and sounded the once familiar notes by which he was wont to announce his return from the chase. No answer. Seized with impatience, he rode on; the drawbridge was down in spite of the lateness of the hour. Berenger crossed it. Beneath the dark vault over which rose the belfry tower, he found neither servants nor men-at-arms. He shouted; the echo of the ramparts alone replied. He advanced into the court, and all around him was silence, darkness, absolute solitude.

"Good God!" he cried, "what has happened?"

At this moment the moon struggled through the thick mantle of clouds with which she was enveloped, and poured a flood of light upon the castle. Berenger gazed around him, struck with a secret and indefinable terror; and it seemed as if the life-blood froze in his veins when he beheld the scene of desolation that was now disclosed. The castle was a ruin; the roofs were uncovered, the windows displayed their gaping recesses, stripped of glass and hangings; masses of rubbish strewed the pavement of the court in every direction; fragments of richly-carved furniture, costly armor, broken ornaments; parchments with large waxen seals attached, lay scattered on the ground; fire and pillage seemed to have spared nothing but the massive walls, which themselves bore the mark

of flames. At this sight, Berenger leaped from his horse, and, almost beside himself with terror, opened a window, the fastenings of which some hostile hand no doubt shattered, and entered the armor-room, where once he used to tilt with his father and his old retainers.

"My father!" he called aloud; "my father! where are you? My mother! Alice, my sister, answer me."

"Holloa! who calls?" replied a voice which proceeded from a corner of the vast and gloomy hall.

Berenger rushed to the spot whence the sound seemed to come, stretched out his hands, and encountered the arm of a man clothed in a coarse garment of goat's hair.

"Who are you?" cried the young knight;—and he dragged the unknown to the window, through which the beams of the moon were falling.

The two looked into each other's faces.

"Is it you? is it indeed you, my lord?" said the man, as he fell at the feet of Berenger.—"You are still alive! Do you not know me? I am James Lerouge, the goatherd, once the companion of your sports."

"Yes, I know you, my poor James. But—tell me—what has happened? My father, my mother, my sister—in the name of God, where are they?"

The man drew back; then, with a look of the deepest horror, answered, as he grasped the young man's arm:

"Your father, your mother, and the Lady Alice, are all dead—slain by John de Melfort, the ancient enemy of your house. They lie buried in the chapel."

Berenger's knees tottered under him; he supported himself against the wall, and fixed his haggard eyes upon the goatherd.

The latter resumed:

"It was believed that you had perished at Mansoura. Melfort, no longer fearing your return, fell upon us. Vassals, men-at-arms, all were massacred. My lord was slain defending his daughter; your sister was pierced with an arrow, and your venerable mother died of grief. The wretches pillaged the castle, leaving the bodies of their victims without burial, but the monks of St. Benedict laid them in consecrated earth. For myself, I was left for dead in a corner of the court yonder; but I recovered from my wounds, and continued with my flock to inhabit the place in which I had been bred. I never believed that you were dead; I looked for your return, and, besides, I had something to say to you."

"What?" said the young man eagerly.

"John de Melfort has a castle, a wife, and a daughter. Revenge is sweet."

Next day broke fair and bright; a man clothed in a white habit, and wearing a scapular on which shone a shield of gules and gold, was approaching along the path that led to Elvaz. He walked with a firm step, seeming to contemplate with delight the leafy thickets, the banks covered with wild thyme, the ripples of the sparkling stream which ran babbling along its rocky bed, and repeating from time to time, in an under tone verses from the psalms, as though using the strains of the royal prophet to sing the praises of the Lord of all. Stopping under the walls of the castle, he cast his eyes over the ruined towers, and said to himself:

"I will go into the chapel and pray a moment over its deserted tombs."

He crossed the drawbridge, no longer guarded by men-at-arms; he entered the courtyard, and appeared struck with astonishment on beholding a young man standing with his back against the ramparts, and gazing with a mournful countenance on the havoc that surrounded him. The monk approached, and moved by a lively feeling of compassion, thus addressed him:

"My son what dost thou alone in this deserted spot? The masters of the castles are no more; but you look pale and wan—are you ill, tell me? If you are hungry, I have bread and figs in my wallet. If you are ill, I am somewhat of a leech."

Whilst the good religious was thus speaking with a tender earnestness, Berenger slowly raised his head, and casting on him at once a look cold and calm, said in a low voice, more terrible than the wildest cry of despair:

"I am Berenger d'Elvaz!"

"What, my dear son!" exclaimed the monk, "are you then alive?" Alas! it has been God's will to lay most heavy trials on you; yet, doubtless, He has given you the strength and faith to bear them. But why remain here? You have relations, you have friends, who will rejoice to welcome you. I pray you, my son, leave this melancholy place, where everything conspires to awaken your grief."

"Never will I leave this castle," was Berenger's emphatic answer.

The monk, though still young, had long since sounded the lowest depths of man's heart. He knew well how a smooth brow and a placid smile

will often cover the bitterest and most excited feelings, and the fiercest passion disguise itself under a tranquil mien, as the burning volcano lies concealed beneath its veil of snow. Taking, then, the young man's hand, and fixing on him his dark eyes, mild yet penetrating, he said: "My son, you will not leave these ruins because you are nursing, not your grief, but your revenge; and there, where you stand, you meditate less upon your father than on John de Melfort."

And what if I meditate requiting him the evil he has done me—would it not be just?"

"Vengeance is mine, I will repay it," saith the Lord. No, my child, it is not just to intrench on the rights that belong to God, and by an untimely and violent death to rob the sinner of the day of repentance which God might perchance have reserved for him. I say to you, from that God will be your judge, vengeance is not yours; and again I say to you, from Him who is your Saviour, 'By patience shall ye find peace to your soul.' When you have made your enemy's hearth, will you find your own restored? When you have plunged the sword into the breasts of his wife and daughter, will your mother and sister rise again from the dead? When you have burdened your conscience with the load that now oppresses his, will your own be more light?"

"My father," interposed Berenger, "you are a man of peace; you cannot understand me."

"My son, before I was a monk, I was a man of war like yourself; before I put on this frock, I wore the breastplate and belt of a knight; I felt the excitement of worldly passions. I speak to you then, as one who has had experience of human glory; and I tell you that, if to your blinded eyes there be certain grandeur in an insatiable revenge, there is that which is infinitely grander and more noble in the generous forgiveness which triumphs, not over an enemy prostrate at our feet, but over the haughty passions of our own hearts."

"But, father, you do not understand me;—leave me."

"My son, my brother, I will not leave you; for the hour of despair is no time for good resolutions. God has sent me hither, blessed be His divine providence, which does nothing in vain!"

"But know you," cried Berenger, impatiently, "you who want me to forgive like a coward—know you the evil this man has done me? Do you know that, after two long years of hard captivity, I return with a heart bounding with hope and joy, longing for love, full of overflowing with the tenderest affection for my aged parents and my young sister; and, thanks to this Melfort, find, instead of my father's hearth, you three tombstones? Did he not revenge on a few poor vassals, an old man, and two women, the wrongs of his ancestors? and shall I not render him wo for wo, pang for pang? I tell you that all night as I paced these deserted courts, by the side of the graves where all I love lie buried, I heard dear familiar voices crying 'Strike and avenge us!' and I will obey."

"No, my son, your grief deceives you; I knew those for whom you mourn. Your father was a just man, your mother a noble and pious lady, your young sister an angel of innocence; they have entered into the rest of the angels, and they pray for pardon on their murderer;—they heap upon his head, not the burning coals of vengeance, but the riches of a glowing charity. Oh, no, blessed souls! it is not revenge you ask of the Lord; you ask but to see your enemy pardoned, and throned in glory with you for all eternity. But your child, your brother, still bound with the cords of the flesh, cannot understand you."

"Your words grieve me," said Berenger, "and yet your voice is that of a friend." "Ah! doubt it not, my brother; that grief of which you have made me sole confidant, binds us together forever. In the name of the friendship with which you have inspired me, grant me one favor. Our monastery is not far from hence—deign to accept its hospitality; our house shall be your home; there you will find fathers, brothers, ready to welcome you; and your projects, whatever they be, will ripen in silence and reflection. Leave this dreary place, and come to the abode which the Lord offers you."

"Who are you? and what is your name?"—asked the young man.

"I am a knight of Our Lady of Mercy," replied the monk, "and my name is Peter Nolasco."

CHAPTER II.

Ten years have passed away. The Order of Mercy possesses a commandery at the gates of Montpellier, from which, as from an advanced post of charity, issues forth from day to day the valiant chivalry of the Cross to defend the countries of Europe against the Saracens, or, more heroic still, to rescue their victims from their hands in the very heart of their baggios, and amidst the sands of the desert. It was towards this retreat, whose white walls were conspicuous from afar, that about midday a young girl, might

be seen directing her steps, accompanied by a youth and an aged serving-man. After crossing the drawbridge, they stopped under the donjon-keep, from the summit of which waved the banner of the order; there they spoke a few words to a sentinel, who pointed out the way to the cloister. The youthful inquirers paused, as if awe-struck, at the entrance of that wide enclosure, where already some of the brave companions of Peter Nolasco and Raymond of Pennafort were taking their peaceful and glorious rest.—Their modest tombs rose in the centre of a court; around, under the vaulted cloister, walked in silence a number of knights and priests, the former wearing their white tunic and mantle, the latter having their habit of the same snowy purity, embroidered with the arms of the King of Arrogan—a token of the affection borne by that truly Christian prince for the noble order of Redemption. Nothing disturbed the quiet seclusion of the place, save the measured fall of their foot upon the pavement, and the rustling of their long robes of serge, as they paced continually to and fro.

At length a priest perceiving the maiden and her companions, approached them. He was a man still in the prime of life; but his sorrow-stricken brow, and his hair prematurely sprinkled with grey, seemed to mark him as one who had in the world encountered wrongs and sufferings such as had left wounds in his soul, which time as yet had but imperfectly healed. In a voice full of sweetness he asked:

"Maiden, what seekest thou?"

"Alas, sir!" she answered, "we are two unhappy children, well-nigh orphans, I might say, though our father and mother are both still living. One is a captive among the Saracens, and the other is dying of anxiety and grief!"

"Your father is in slavery?"

"Yes, sir. He had gone to Barcelona to receive a legacy bequeathed him by a friend of my mother's, and was returning in confidence to Provence, when the galley in which he had embarked was taken by the Barbary corsairs.—Resistance was vain, the infidels carried him off into slavery; and we have reason to believe that he is now in Tangiers. My noble father a slave!—put up for sale!" Tears and sobs interrupted her words, and her brother wept at seeing her weep.

"Compose yourself, my child," said the monk, "your father shall be redeemed."

"Ah, noble sir, we shall count nothing too costly for his ransom. See; my mother has given me her jewels, her bracelets, and her rings; we will pledge our lands,—everything we possess. If only you consent to go to my father's rescue, we will put into your hands a sum more than sufficient for his redemption; we have faithful vassals, too, and tried friends, and there is not one amongst them but would contribute to the deliverance of the Lord of Melfort."

"Melfort, did you say? Melfort!" cried the monk. "Your father's name is—"

"John de Melfort, sir. If you are of Provence, you know it is no ignoble name."

"I know it!" said the monk, in a low stern voice; "I know it, alas too well!"

He turned away; his eyes for an instant gleamed fiercely; the next moment he raised them to the crucifix which hung in the middle of the cloister:

"O great God," he muttered, "and do such fierce passions reign in a soul which Thy grace has vanquished? The voice of this child rouses in my soul feelings of hatred and revenge which I deemed stifled forever! My father, my mother, my sister, what will you have me to do? Blessed souls, what is it you ask of me?"

He stood for some time silent, his eyes fixed on the divine crucifix; then, turning towards the children, he said, in a voice of inexpressible sweetness:

"I will myself go in search of your father, and, if it please God, will restore him to you.—I pray for me, a miserable sinner."

A few hours after a monk, habited for a journey, was receiving on his knees the benediction of Peter Nolasco, the General of the Order, who, as he embraced him, said:

"Go, dear son, and spare neither your blood nor your life in the service of your neighbor.—Go, servant of Christ, follow in your Master's steps; forget not your vows, which oblige you to remain yourself in chains to deliver a Christian from captivity. Brother Berenger, farewell!"

The watchman on the top of the tower of St. Victor's Abbey, at Marseilles, had just given warning that several vessels were on the point of entering the harbor; crowds were hurrying to the quay, and trying to distinguish the respective barks by their rigging, or their general trim, as they ran before the morning breeze. In the midst of the bustling, noisy throng, yet somewhat apart, might be seen a little, silent group; it consisted of a lady, wearing the black dress and head gear of a widow, a young girl, who clung timidly to her mother, and a handsome boy twelve or thirteen years of age, who from time

to time played carelessly with a tall greyhound by his side. An old servant stood behind them, and all were following eagerly with their eyes the white sails, which approached nearer every moment. The outline of the rigging was distinctly visible, sharply defined against the sky. The forms of three vessels in particular were now clearly discernible; and soon the spectators could distinguish the colors of the flags displayed at their bows.

The practiced eye of a master-pilot at length recognised the leading vessel: "Praised be our Lady of La Garde! 'tis the Happy Bark; she comes from Palermo, and brings news of Monsieur d'Anjou, husband of Beatrice of Provence."

"And the second," broke in another, "is the sloop St. Mary; she comes from Smyrna, with fruits and perfumes."

The two ships thus announced rapidly entered the roads, amidst the acclamations of the crowd. The third still lagged behind in the distance, laboring heavily, as it seemed, against the wind, which had become less favorable.

The widow and her children stood anxiously watching her; though the poor lady would say, "It is of no use expecting, my children; it is God's will to try us."

"Mother!"—suddenly exclaimed the boy, "look!—I see it clearly;—'tis the holy standard that floats on that galley!"

The widow turned pale, and pressed her hand upon her heart, fluttering between hope and fear. She gazed out upon the waters, the flag unfurled itself in the breeze, and she saw plainly on the white ground the arms of Arrogan, with the device, "Redemptionem misit populo suo"—He gave redemption to His people."

"It is the St. John the Baptist, the galley of the Redeemers!" cried the people.

"Great God!" said the widow, "is it possible? Holy Virgin! let me not be disappointed of my hope."

Still she gazed; and on the deck she beheld a man in a white habit.

"My mother," cried the young girl, "it is he—it is the priest!"

"There is a captive on board. Hurrah!—hurrah!" shouted the mariners and people, whose attention was now strongly excited; "thanks to our Lady of La Garde! He shall hang up his chains at her altar."

The lady tottered to the water's edge; a mist came over her eyes; she dared not look up, dreading not to behold her husband, so long and fruitlessly expected; but the exclamations of her children and the shouts of the people forced her to raise her head. The vessel was close upon the quay; a man was landing from it, wretchedly clad, his feet and hands loaded with chains; but his countenance,—'twas he! She uttered a cry, made a few steps forward, and felt swooning with joy into the arms of the captive.

He strained her to his heart, and extended his hands to bless his children, who, kneeling at his feet, were endeavoring to loosen the fetters which he had but just resumed; then, turning towards the monk, who was at that moment leaving the galley, he cried:

"My wife, my children, if you love me, love and bless this good religious; to whom I owe my liberty, my life. Let all who love Melfort honor and bless this man of God." Then, as the monk strove to move away, he grasped him by the arm and in a still louder voice, cried:

"He sought me out on the verge of the Great Desert, whither my masters had carried me; he found me dying of the black plague. All had abandoned me; but, undeterred by the loathsome disease, he installed himself as my nurse; he cured me by his skill, or rather by his loving and tender care. The barbarians declared my ransom-money insufficient; he offered to remain himself in my stead; but this I called God and His blessed Mother to witness that I would not suffer. And this he did: and now—hear me, my son—I bid every one who bears the name of Melfort be henceforth the friend and servant of the Holy Order of Mercy."

As he concluded, a man wearing a cloth gown and cap, pushed his way through the crowd, and said abruptly, "You are the lord of Melfort.—Do you know the name of your deliverer, messire?"

"He is called Brother Berenger; but what other name he bears I know not."

"I will tell it to you, then. His name is Berenger, Lord of Elvaz—Elvaz! do you hear?—Ah, my master, my dear lord," added the man, bathing the monk's hands with his tears, "I knew you." Melfort had started back as if thunderstruck; he gazed at the monk with a sort of terror, as though the dead had suddenly stood before him. "Berenger d'Elvaz!" he said, at last, "can this be so?" "Be so!" cried James Lerouge (for he it was), "I should have known my lord amongst a thousand. I was his serf, his liege-man; he freed me, and amply provided for me. I am now