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ALEXANDRE

CENCI

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THE CENCI – 1598

Should you ever go to Rome and visit the villa Pamphili, no doubt, after having sought under its tall pines and along its canals the shade and freshness so rare in the capital of the Christian world, you will descend towards the Janiculum Hill by a charming road, in the middle of which you will find the Pauline fountain. Having passed this monument, and having lingered a moment on the terrace of the church of St. Peter Montorio, which commands the whole of Rome, you will visit the cloister of Bramante, in the middle of which, sunk a few feet below the level, is built, on the identical place where St. Peter was crucified, a little temple, half Greek, half Christian; you will thence ascend by a side door into the church itself. There, the attentive cicerone will show you, in the first chapel to the right, the Christ Scourged, by Sebastian del Piombo, and in the third chapel to the left, an Entombment by Fiammingo; having examined these two masterpieces at leisure, he will take you to each end of the transverse cross, and will show you – on one side a picture by Salviati, on slate, and on the other a work by Vasari; then, pointing out in melancholy tones a copy of Guido's

Martyrdom of St. Peter on the high altar, he will relate to you how for three centuries the divine Raffaele's Transfiguration was worshipped in that spot; how it was carried away by the French in 1809, and restored to the pope by the Allies in 1814. As you have already in all probability admired this masterpiece in the Vatican, allow him to expatiate, and search at the foot of the altar for a mortuary slab, which you will identify by a cross and the single word; Orate; under this gravestone is buried Beatrice Cenci, whose tragical story cannot but impress you profoundly.

She was the daughter of Francesco Cenci. Whether or not it be true that men are born in harmony with their epoch, and that some embody its good qualities and others its bad ones, it may nevertheless interest our readers to cast a rapid glance over the period which had just passed when the events which we are about to relate took place. Francesco Cenci will then appear to them as the diabolical incarnation of his time.

On the 11th of August, 1492, after the lingering death-agony of Innocent VIII, during which two hundred and twenty murders were committed in the streets of Rome, Alexander VI ascended the pontifical throne. Son of a sister of Pope Calixtus III, Roderigo Lenzuoli Borgia, before being created cardinal, had five children by Rosa Vanozza, whom he afterwards caused to be married to a rich Roman. These children were:

Francis, Duke of Gandia;

Caesar, bishop and cardinal, afterwards Duke of Valentinois;

Lucrezia, who was married four times: her first husband was

Giovanni Sforza, lord of Pesaro, whom she left owing to his impotence; the second, Alfonso, Duke of Bisiglia, whom her brother Caesar caused to be assassinated; the third, Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, from whom a second divorce separated her; finally, the fourth, Alfonso of Aragon, who was stabbed to death on the steps of the basilica of St. Peter, and afterwards, three weeks later, strangled, because he did not die soon enough from his wounds, which nevertheless were mortal;

Giofre, Count of Squillace, of whom little is known;

And, finally, a youngest son, of whom nothing at all is known.

The most famous of these three brothers was Caesar Borgia. He had made every arrangement a plotter could make to be King of Italy at the death of his father the pope, and his measures were so carefully taken as to leave no doubt in his own mind as to the success of this vast project. Every chance was provided against, except one; but Satan himself could hardly have foreseen this particular one. The reader will judge for himself.

The pope had invited Cardinal Adrien to supper in his vineyard on the Belvidere; Cardinal Adrien was very rich, and the pope wished to inherit his wealth, as he already had acquired that of the Cardinals of Sant' Angelo, Capua, and Modena. To effect this, Caesar Borgia sent two bottles of poisoned wine to his father's cup-bearer, without taking him into his confidence; he only instructed him not to serve this wine till he himself gave orders to do so; unfortunately, during supper the cup-bearer left his post for a moment, and in this interval a careless butler served

the poisoned wine to the pope, to Caesar Borgia, and to Cardinal Corneto.

Alexander VI died some hours afterwards; Caesar Borgia was confined to bed, and sloughed off his skin; while Cardinal Corneto lost his sight and his senses, and was brought to death's door.

Pius III succeeded Alexander VI, and reigned twenty-five days; on the twenty-sixth he was poisoned also.

Caesar Borgia had under his control eighteen Spanish cardinals who owed to him their places in the Sacred College; these cardinals were entirely his creatures, and he could command them absolutely. As he was in a moribund condition and could make no use of them for himself, he sold them to Giuliano della Rovere, and Giuliano della Rovere was elected pope, under the name of Julius II. To the Rome of Nero succeeded the Athens of Pericles.

Leo X succeeded Julius II, and under his pontificate Christianity assumed a pagan character, which, passing from art into manners, gives to this epoch a strange complexion. Crimes for the moment disappeared, to give place to vices; but to charming vices, vices in good taste, such as those indulged in by Alcibiades and sung by Catullus. Leo X died after having assembled under his reign, which lasted eight years, eight months, and nineteen days, Michael Angelo, Raffaele, Leonardo da Vinci, Correggio, Titian, Andrea del Sarto, Fra Bartolommeo, Giulio Romano, Ariosto, Guicciardini, and Macchiavelli.

Giulio di Medici and Pompeo Colonna had equal claims to succeed him. As both were skilful politicians, experienced courtiers, and moreover of real and almost equal merit, neither of them could obtain a majority, and the Conclave was prolonged almost indefinitely, to the great fatigue of the cardinals. So it happened one day that a cardinal, more tired than the rest, proposed to elect, instead of either Medici or Colonna, the son, some say of a weaver, others of a brewer of Utrecht, of whom no one had ever thought till then, and who was for the moment acting head of affairs in Spain, in the absence of Charles the Fifth. The jest prospered in the ears of those who heard it; all the cardinals approved their colleague's proposal, and Adrien became pope by a mere accident.

He was a perfect specimen of the Flemish type a regular Dutchman, and could not speak a word of Italian. When he arrived in Rome, and saw the Greek masterpieces of sculpture collected at vast cost by Leo X, he wished to break them to pieces, exclaiming, "Suet idola anticorum." His first act was to despatch a papal nuncio, Francesco Cherigato, to the Diet of Nuremberg, convened to discuss the reforms of Luther, with instructions which give a vivid notion of the manners of the time.

"Candidly confess," said he, "that God has permitted this schism and this persecution on account of the sins of man, and especially those of priests and prelates of the Church; for we know that many abominable things have taken place in the Holy See."

Adrien wished to bring the Romans back to the simple and austere manners of the early Church, and with this object pushed reform to the minutest details. For instance, of the hundred grooms maintained by Leo X, he retained only a dozen, in order, he said, to have two more than the cardinals.

A pope like this could not reign long: he died after a year's pontificate. The morning after his death his physician's door was found decorated with garlands of flowers, bearing this inscription: "To the liberator of his country."

Giulio di Medici and Pompeo Colonna were again rival candidates. Intrigues recommenced, and the Conclave was once more so divided that at one time the cardinals thought they could only escape the difficulty in which they were placed by doing what they had done before, and electing a third competitor; they were even talking about Cardinal Orsini, when Giulio di Medici, one of the rival candidates, hit upon a very ingenious expedient. He wanted only five votes; five of his partisans each offered to bet five of Colonna's a hundred thousand ducats to ten thousand against the election of Giulio di Medici. At the very first ballot after the wager, Giulio di Medici got the five votes he wanted; no objection could be made, the cardinals had not been bribed; they had made a bet, that was all.

Thus it happened, on the 18th of November, 1523, Giulio di Medici was proclaimed pope under the name of Clement VII. The same day, he generously paid the five hundred thousand ducats which his five partisans had lost.

It was under this pontificate, and during the seven months in which Rome, conquered by the Lutheran soldiers of the Constable of Bourbon, saw holy things subjected to the most frightful profanations, that Francesco Cenci was born.

He was the son of Monsignor Nicolo Cenci, afterwards apostolic treasurer during the pontificate of Pius V. Under this venerable prelate, who occupied himself much more with the spiritual than the temporal administration of his kingdom, Nicolo Cenci took advantage of his spiritual head's abstraction of worldly matters to amass a net revenue of a hundred and sixty thousand piastres, about £32,000 of our money. Francesco Cenci, who was his only son, inherited this fortune.

His youth was spent under popes so occupied with the schism of Luther that they had no time to think of anything else. The result was, that Francesco Cenci, inheriting vicious instincts and master of an immense fortune which enabled him to purchase immunity, abandoned himself to all the evil passions of his fiery and passionate temperament. Five times during his profligate career imprisoned for abominable crimes, he only succeeded in procuring his liberation by the payment of two hundred thousand piastres, or about one million francs. It should be explained that popes at this time were in great need of money.

The lawless profligacy of Francesco Cenci first began seriously to attract public attention under the pontificate of Gregory XIII. This reign offered marvellous facilities for the development of a reputation such as that which this reckless

Italian Don Juan seemed bent on acquiring. Under the Bolognese Buoncampagno, a free hand was given to those able to pay both assassins and judges. Rape and murder were so common that public justice scarcely troubled itself with these trifling things, if nobody appeared to prosecute the guilty parties. The good Gregory had his reward for his easygoing indulgence; he was spared to rejoice over the Massacre of St. Bartholomew.

Francesco Cenci was at the time of which we are speaking a man of forty-four or forty-five years of age, about five feet four inches in height, symmetrically proportioned, and very strong, although rather thin; his hair was streaked with grey, his eyes were large and expressive, although the upper eyelids drooped somewhat; his nose was long, his lips were thin, and wore habitually a pleasant smile, except when his eye perceived an enemy; at this moment his features assumed a terrible expression; on such occasions, and whenever moved or even slightly irritated, he was seized with a fit of nervous trembling, which lasted long after the cause which provoked it had passed. An adept in all manly exercises and especially in horsemanship, he sometimes used to ride without stopping from Rome to Naples, a distance of forty-one leagues, passing through the forest of San Germano and the Pontine marshes heedless of brigands, although he might be alone and unarmed save for his sword and dagger. When his horse fell from fatigue, he bought another; were the owner unwilling to sell he took it by force; if resistance were made, he struck, and always with the point, never the hilt. In most cases,

being well known throughout the Papal States as a free-handed person, nobody tried to thwart him; some yielding through fear, others from motives of interest. Impious, sacrilegious, and atheistical, he never entered a church except to profane its sanctity. It was said of him that he had a morbid appetite for novelties in crime, and that there was no outrage he would not commit if he hoped by so doing to enjoy a new sensation.

At the age of about forty-five he had married a very rich woman, whose name is not mentioned by any chronicler. She died, leaving him seven children – five boys and two girls. He then married Lucrezia Petroni, a perfect beauty of the Roman type, except for the ivory pallor of her complexion. By this second marriage he had no children.

As if Francesco Cenci were void of all natural affection, he hated his children, and was at no pains to conceal his feelings towards them: on one occasion, when he was building, in the courtyard of his magnificent palace, near the Tiber, a chapel dedicated to St. Thomas, he remarked to the architect, when instructing him to design a family vault, “That is where I hope to bury them all.” The architect often subsequently admitted that he was so terrified by the fiendish laugh which accompanied these words, that had not Francesco Cenci’s work been extremely profitable, he would have refused to go on with it.

As soon as his three eldest boys, Giacomo, Cristoforo, and Rocco, were out of their tutors’ hands, in order to get rid of them he sent them to the University of Salamanca, where, out of

sight, they were out of mind, for he thought no more about them, and did not even send them the means of subsistence. In these straits, after struggling for some months against their wretched plight, the lads were obliged to leave Salamanca, and beg their way home, tramping barefoot through France and Italy, till they made their way back to Rome, where they found their father harsher and more unkind than ever.

This happened in the early part of the reign of Clement VIII, famed for his justice. The three youths resolved to apply to him, to grant them an allowance out of their father's immense income. They consequently repaired to Frascati, where the pope was building the beautiful Aldobrandini Villa, and stated their case. The pope admitted the justice of their claims, and ordered Francesco, to allow each of them two thousand crowns a year. He endeavoured by every possible means to evade this decree, but the pope's orders were too stringent to be disobeyed.

About this period he was for the third time imprisoned for infamous crimes. His three sons then again petitioned the pope, alleging that their father dishonoured the family name, and praying that the extreme rigour of the law, a capital sentence, should be enforced in his case. The pope pronounced this conduct unnatural and odious, and drove them with ignominy from his presence. As for Francesco, he escaped, as on the two previous occasions, by the payment of a large sum of money.

It will be readily understood that his sons' conduct on this occasion did not improve their father's disposition towards them,

but as their independent pensions enabled them to keep out of his way, his rage fell with all the greater intensity on his two unhappy daughters. Their situation soon became so intolerable, that the elder, contriving to elude the close supervision under which she was kept, forwarded to the pope a petition, relating the cruel treatment to which she was subjected, and praying His Holiness either to give her in marriage or place her in a convent. Clement VIII took pity on her; compelled Francesco Cenci to give her a dowry of sixty thousand crowns, and married her to Carlo Gabrielli, of a noble family of Gubbio. Francesco driven nearly frantic with rage when he saw this victim released from his clutches.

About the same time death relieved him from two other encumbrances: his sons Rocco and Cristoforo were killed within a year of each other; the latter by a bungling medical practitioner whose name is unknown; the former by Paolo Corso di Massa, in the streets of Rome. This came as a relief to Francesco, whose avarice pursued his sons even after their death, for he intimated to the priest that he would not spend a farthing on funeral services. They were accordingly borne to the paupers' graves which he had caused to be prepared for them, and when he saw them both interred, he cried out that he was well rid of such good-for-nothing children, but that he should be perfectly happy only when the remaining five were buried with the first two, and that when he had got rid of the last he himself would burn down his palace as a bonfire to celebrate the event.

But Francesco took every precaution against his second daughter, Beatrice Cenci, following the example of her elder sister. She was then a child of twelve or thirteen years of age, beautiful and innocent as an angel. Her long fair hair, a beauty seen so rarely in Italy, that Raffaele, believing it divine, has appropriated it to all his Madonnas, curtained a lovely forehead, and fell in flowing locks over her shoulders. Her azure eyes bore a heavenly expression; she was of middle height, exquisitely proportioned; and during the rare moments when a gleam of happiness allowed her natural character to display itself, she was lively, joyous, and sympathetic, but at the same time evinced a firm and decided disposition.

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