

**ПРОСПЕР
МЕРИМЕ**

COLOMBA

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Prosper Mérimée

Colomba

CHAPTER I

*“Pe far la to vendetta,
Sta sigur’, vasta anche ella.”*
—*Vocero du Niolo.*

Early in the month of October, 181-, Colonel Sir Thomas Nevil, a distinguished Irish officer of the English army, alighted with his daughter at the Hotel Beauveau, Marseilles, on their return from a tour in Italy. The perpetual and universal admiration of enthusiastic travellers has produced a sort of reaction, and many tourists, in their desire to appear singular, now take the *nil admirari* of Horace for their motto. To this dissatisfied class the colonel’s only daughter, Miss Lydia, belonged. “The Transfiguration” has seemed to her mediocre, and Vesuvius in eruption an effect not greatly superior to that produced by the Birmingham factory chimneys. Her great objection to Italy, on the whole, was its lack of local colour and character. My readers must discover the sense of these expressions as best they may. A few years ago I understood them very well myself, but at the present time I can make nothing of them. At first, Miss Lydia had flattered herself she had found things on the other side of the Alps which nobody had ever before seen, about which she could converse *avec les honnetes gens*, as M. Jourdain calls them. But soon, anticipated in every direction by her countrymen, she despaired of making any fresh discoveries, and went over to the party of the opposition. It is really very tiresome not to be able to talk about the wonders of Italy without hearing somebody say “Of course you know the Raphael in the Palazzo— at —? It is the finest thing in Italy!” and just the thing *you* happen to have overlooked! As it would take too long to see everything, the simplest course is to resort to deliberate and universal censure.

At the Hotel Beauveau Miss Lydia met with a bitter disappointment. She had brought back a pretty sketch of the Pelasgic or Cyclopean Gate at Segni, which, as she believed, all other artists had completely overlooked. Now, at Marseilles, she met Lady Frances Fenwick, who showed her her album, in which appeared, between a sonnet and a dried flower, the very gate in question, brilliantly touched in with sienna. Miss Lydia gave her drawing to her maid—and lost all admiration for Pelasgic structures.

This unhappy frame of mind was shared by Colonel Nevil, who, since the death of his wife, looked at everything through his daughter’s eyes. In his estimation, Italy had committed the unpardonable sin of boring his child, and was, in consequence, the most wearisome country on the face of the earth. He had no fault to find, indeed, with the pictures and statues, but he was in a position to assert that Italian sport was utterly wretched, and that he had been obliged to tramp ten leagues over the Roman Campagna, under a burning sun, to kill a few worthless red-legged partridges.

The morning after his arrival at Marseilles he invited Captain Ellis—his former adjutant, who had just been spending six weeks in Corsica—to dine with him. The captain told Miss Lydia a story about bandits, which had the advantage of bearing no resemblance to the robber tales with which she had been so frequently regaled, on the road between Naples and Rome, and he told it well. At dessert, the two men, left alone over their claret, talked of hunting—and the colonel learned that nowhere is there more excellent sport, or game more varied and abundant, than in Corsica. “There are plenty of wild boars,” said Captain Ellis. “And you have to learn to distinguish them from the domestic pigs, which are astonishingly like them. For if you kill a pig, you find yourself in difficulties with the swine-herds. They rush out of the thickets (which they call *maquis*) armed to the teeth, make you

pay for their beasts, and laugh at you besides. Then there is the mouflon, a strange animal, which you will not find anywhere else—splendid game, but hard to get—and stags, deer, pheasants, and partridges—it would be impossible to enumerate all the kinds with which Corsica swarms. If you want shooting, colonel, go to Corsica! There, as one of my entertainers said to me, you can get a shot at every imaginable kind of game, from a thrush to a man!”

At tea, the captain once more delighted Lydia with the tale of a *vendetta transversale* (A vendetta in which vengeance falls on a more or less distant relation of the author of the original offence.), even more strange than his first story, and he thoroughly stirred her enthusiasm by his descriptions of the strange wild beauty of the country, the peculiarities of its inhabitants, and their primitive hospitality and customs. Finally, he offered her a pretty little stiletto, less remarkable for its shape and copper mounting than for its origin. A famous bandit had given it to Captain Ellis, and had assured him it had been buried in four human bodies. Miss Lydia thrust it through her girdle, laid it on the table beside her bed, and unsheathed it twice over before she fell asleep. Her father meanwhile was dreaming he had slain a mouflon, and that its owner insisted on his paying for it, a demand to which he gladly acceded, seeing it was a most curious creature, like a boar, with stag’s horns and a pheasant’s tail.

“Ellis tells me there’s splendid shooting in Corsica,” said the colonel, as he sat at breakfast, alone with his daughter. “If it hadn’t been for the distance, I should like to spend a fortnight there.”

“Well,” replied Miss Lydia, “why shouldn’t we go to Corsica? While you are hunting I can sketch—I should love to have that grotto Captain Ellis talked about, where Napoleon used to go and study when he was a child, in my album.”

It was the first time, probably, that any wish expressed by the colonel had won his daughter’s approbation. Delighted as he was by the unexpected harmony on their opinions, he was nevertheless wise enough to put forward various objections, calculated to sharpen Miss Lydia’s welcome whim. In vain did he dwell on the wildness of the country, and the difficulties of travel there for a lady. Nothing frightened her; she liked travelling on horseback of all things; she delighted in the idea of bivouacking in the open; she even threatened to go as far as Asia Minor—in short, she found an answer to everything. No Englishwoman had ever been to Corsica; therefore she must go. What a pleasure it would be, when she got back to St. James’s Place, to exhibit her album! “But, my dear creature, why do you pass over that delightful drawing?” “That’s only a trifle—just a sketch I made of a famous Corsican bandit who was our guide.” “What! you don’t mean to say you have been to Corsica?”

As there were no steamboats between France and Corsica, in those days, inquiries were made for some ship about to sail for the island Miss Lydia proposed to discover. That very day the colonel wrote to Paris, to countermand his order for the suite of apartments in which he was to have made some stay, and bargained with the skipper of a Corsican schooner, just about to set sail for Ajaccio, for two poor cabins, but the best that could be had. Provisions were sent on board, the skipper swore that one of his sailors was an excellent cook, and had not his equal for *bouilleabaisse*; he promised mademoiselle should be comfortable, and have a fair wind and a calm sea.

The colonel further stipulated, in obedience to his daughter’s wishes, that no other passenger should be taken on board, and that the captain should skirt the coast of the island, so that Miss Lydia might enjoy the view of the mountains.

CHAPTER II

On the day of their departure everything was packed and sent on board early in the morning. The schooner was to sail with the evening breeze. Meanwhile, as the colonel and his daughter were walking on the Canebiere, the skipper addressed them, and craved permission to take on board one of his relations, his eldest son's godfather's second cousin, who was going back to Corsica, his native country, on important business, and could not find any ship to take him over.

"He's a charming fellow," added Captain Mattei, "a soldier, an officer in the Infantry of the Guard, and would have been a colonel already if *the other* (meaning Napoleon) had still been emperor!"

"As he is a soldier," began the colonel—he was about to add, "I shall be very glad he should come with us," when Miss Lydia exclaimed in English:

"An infantry officer!" (Her father had been in the cavalry, and she consequently looked down on every other branch of the service.) "An uneducated man, very likely, who would be sea-sick, and spoil all the pleasure of our trip!"

The captain did not understand a word of English, but he seemed to catch what Miss Lydia was saying by the pursing up of her pretty mouth, and immediately entered upon an elaborate panegyric of his relative, which he wound up by declaring him to be a gentleman, belonging to a family of *corporals*, and that he would not be in the very least in the colonel's way, for that he, the skipper, would undertake to stow him in some corner, where they should not be aware of his presence.

The colonel and Miss Nevil thought it peculiar that there should be Corsican families in which the dignity of corporal was handed down from father to son. But, as they really believed the individual in question to be some infantry corporal, they concluded he was some poor devil whom the skipper desired to take out of pure charity. If he had been an officer, they would have been obliged to speak to him and live with him; but there was no reason why they should put themselves out for a corporal—who is a person of no consequence unless his detachment is also at hand, with bayonets fixed, ready to convey a person to a place to which he would rather not be taken.

"Is your kinsman ever sea-sick?" demanded Miss Nevil sharply.

"Never, mademoiselle, he is as steady as a rock, either on sea or land!"

"Very good then, you can take him," said she.

"You can take him!" echoed the colonel, and they passed on their way.

Toward five o'clock in the evening Captain Mattei came to escort them on board the schooner. On the jetty, near the captain's gig, they met a tall young man wearing a blue frock-coat, buttoned up to his chin; his face was tanned, his eyes were black, brilliant, wide open, his whole appearance intelligent and frank. His shoulders, well thrown back, and his little twisted mustache clearly revealed the soldier—for at that period mustaches were by no means common, and the National Guard had not carried the habits and appearance of the guard-room into the bosom of every family.

When the young man saw the colonel he doffed his cap, and thanked him in excellent language, and without the slightest shyness, for the service he was rendering him.

"Delighted to be of use to you, my good fellow!" said the colonel, with a friendly nod, and he stepped into the gig.

"He's not very ceremonious, this Englishman of yours," said the young man in Italian, and in an undertone, to the captain.

The skipper laid his forefinger under his left eye, and pulled down the corners of his mouth. To a man acquainted with the language of signs, this meant that the Englishman understood Italian, and was an oddity into the bargain. The young man smiled slightly and touched his forehead, in answer to Mattei's sign, as though to indicate that every Englishman had a bee in his bonnet. Then he sat

down beside them, and began to look very attentively, though not impertinently, at his pretty fellow-traveller.

"These French soldiers all have a good appearance," remarked the colonel in English to his daughter, "and so it is easy to turn them into officers." Then addressing the young man in French, he said, "Tell me, my good man, what regiment have you served in?" The young man nudged his second cousin's godson's father gently with his elbow, and suppressing an ironic smile, replied that he had served in the Infantry of the Guard, and that he had just quitted the Seventh Regiment of Light Infantry.

"Were you at Waterloo? You are very young!"

"I beg your pardon, colonel, that was my only campaign."

"It counts as two," said the colonel.

The young Corsican bit his lips.

"Papa," said Miss Lydia in English, "do ask him if the Corsicans are very fond of their *Buonaparte*."

Before the colonel could translate her question into French, the young man answered in fairly good English, though with a marked accent:

"You know, mademoiselle, that no man is ever a prophet in his own country. We, who are Napoleon's fellow-countrymen, are perhaps less attached to him than the French. As for myself, though my family was formerly at enmity with his, I both love and admire him."

"You speak English!" exclaimed the colonel.

"Very ill, as you may perceive!"

Miss Lydia, though somewhat shocked by the young man's easy tone, could not help laughing at the idea of a personal enmity between a corporal and an emperor. She took this as a foretaste of Corsican peculiarities, and made up her mind to note it down in her journal.

"Perhaps you were a prisoner in England?" asked the colonel.

"No, colonel, I learned English in France, when I was very young, from a prisoner of your nation."

Then, addressing Miss Nevil:

"Mattei tells me you have just come back from Italy. No doubt, mademoiselle, you speak the purest Tuscan—I fear you'll find it somewhat difficult to understand our dialect."

"My daughter understands every Italian dialect," said the colonel. "She has the gift of languages. She doesn't get it from me."

"Would mademoiselle understand, for instance, these lines from one of our Corsican songs in which a shepherd says to his shepherdess:

"S'entrassi 'ndru paradisu santu, santu,
E nun trovassi a tia, mi n'esciria."

("If I entered the holy land of paradise
and found thee not, I would depart!")

—*Serenata di Zicavo*.

Miss Lydia did understand. She thought the quotation bold, and the look which accompanied it still bolder, and replied, with a blush, "Capisco."

"And are you going back to your own country on furlough?" inquired the colonel.

"No, colonel, they have put me on half-pay, because I was at Waterloo, probably, and because I am Napoleon's fellow-countryman. I am going home, as the song says, low in hope and low in purse," and he looked up to the sky and sighed.

The colonel slipped his hand into his pocket, and tried to think of some civil phrase with which he might slip the gold coin he was fingering into the palm of his unfortunate enemy.

"And I too," he said good-humouredly, "have been put on half-pay, but your half-pay can hardly give you enough to buy tobacco! Here, corporal!" and he tried to force the gold coin into the young man's closed hand, which rested on the gunwale of the gig.

The young Corsican reddened, drew himself up, bit his lips, and seemed, for a moment, on the brink of some angry reply. Then suddenly his expression changed and he burst out laughing. The colonel, grasping his gold piece still in his hand, sat staring at him.

"Colonel," said the young man, when he had recovered his gravity, "allow me to offer you two pieces of advice—the first is never to offer money to a Corsican, for some of my fellow-countrymen would be rude enough to throw it back in your face; the second is not to give people titles they do not claim. You call me 'corporal,' and I am a lieutenant—the difference is not very great, no doubt, still—"

"Lieutenant! Lieutenant!" exclaimed Sir Thomas. "But the skipper told me you were a corporal, and that your father and all your family had been corporals before you!"

At these words the young man threw himself back and laughed louder than ever, so merrily that the skipper and his two sailors joined the chorus.

"Forgive me, colonel!" he cried at last. "The mistake is so comical, and I have only just realized it. It is quite true that my family glories in the fact that it can reckon many corporals among its ancestors—but our Corsican corporals never wore stripes upon their sleeves! Toward the year of grace 1100 certain villages revolted against the tyranny of the great mountain nobles, and chose leaders of their own, whom they called *corporals*. In our island we think a great deal of being descended from these tribunes."

"I beg your pardon, sir," exclaimed the colonel, "I beg your pardon a thousand times! As you understand the cause of my mistake, I hope you will do me the kindness of forgiving it!" and he held out his hand.

"It is the just punishment of my petty pride," said the young man, still laughing, and cordially shaking the Englishman's hand. "I am not at all offended. As my friend Mattei has introduced me so unsuccessfully, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Orso della Rebbia; I am a lieutenant on half-pay; and if, as the sight of those two fine dogs of yours leads me to believe, you are coming to Corsica to hunt, I shall be very proud to do you the honours of our mountains and our *maquis*—if, indeed, I have not forgotten them altogether!" he added, with a sigh.

At this moment the gig came alongside the schooner, the lieutenant offered his hand to Miss Lydia, and then helped the colonel to swing himself up on deck. Once there, Sir Thomas, who was still very much ashamed of his blunder, and at a loss to know what he had better do to make the man whose ancestry dated from the year 1100 forget it, invited him to supper, without waiting for his daughter's consent, and with many fresh apologies and handshakes. Miss Lydia frowned a little, but, after all, she was not sorry to know what a corporal really was. She rather liked there guest, and was even beginning to fancy there was something aristocratic about him—only she thought him too frank and merry for a hero of romance.

"Lieutenant della Rebbia," said the colonel, bowing to him, English fashion, over a glass of Madeira, "I met a great many of your countrymen in Spain—they were splendid sharp-shooters."

"Yes, and a great many of them have stayed in Spain," replied the young lieutenant gravely.

"I shall never forget the behaviour of a Corsican battalion at the Battle of Vittoria," said the colonel; "I have good reason to remember it, indeed," he added, rubbing his chest. "All day long they had been skirmishing in the gardens, behind the hedges, and had killed I don't know how many of our horses and men. When the retreat was sounded, they rallied and made off at a great pace. We had hoped to take our revenge on them in the open plain, but the scoundrels—I beg your pardon, lieutenant; the brave fellows, I should have said—had formed a square, and there was no breaking it. In the middle of the square—I fancy I can see him still—rode an officer on a little black horse."

He kept close beside the standard, smoking his cigar as coolly as if he had been in a café. Every now and then their bugles played a flourish, as if to defy us. I sent my two leading squadrons at them. Whew! Instead of breaking the front of the square, my dragoons passed along the sides, wheeled, and came back in great disorder, and with several riderless horses—and all the time those cursed bugles went on playing. When the smoke which had hung over the battalion cleared away, I saw the officer still puffing at his cigar beside his eagle. I was furious, and led a final charge myself. Their muskets, foul with continual firing, would not go off, but the men had drawn up, six deep, with their bayonets pointed at the noses of our horses; you might have taken them for a wall. I was shouting, urging on my dragoons, and spurring my horse forward, when the officer I have mentioned, at length throwing away his cigar, pointed me out to one of his men, and I heard him say something like '*Al capello bianco!*'—I wore a white plume. Then I did not hear any more, for a bullet passed through my chest. That was a splendid battalion, M. della Rebbia, that first battalion of the Eighteenth—all of them Corsicans, as I was afterward told!"

"Yes," said Orso, whose eyes had shone as he listened to the story. "They covered the retreat, and brought back their eagle. Two thirds of those brave fellows are sleeping now on the plains of Vittoria!"

"And, perhaps, you can tell me the name of the officer in command?"

"It was my father—he was then a major in the Eighteenth, and was promoted colonel for his conduct on that terrible day."

"Your father! Upon my word, he was a brave man! I should be glad to see him again, and I am certain I should recognise him. Is he still alive?"

"No, colonel," said the young man, turning slightly pale.

"Was he at Waterloo?"

"Yes, colonel; but he had not the happiness of dying on the field of battle. He died in Corsica two years ago. How beautiful the sea is! It is ten years since I have seen the Mediterranean! Don't you think the Mediterranean much more beautiful than the ocean, mademoiselle?"

"I think it too blue, and its waves lack grandeur."

"You like wild beauty then, mademoiselle! In that case, I am sure you will be delighted with Corsica."

"My daughter," said the colonel, "delights in everything that is out of the common, and for that reason she did not care much for Italy."

"The only place in Italy that I know," said Orso, "is Pisa, where I was at school for some time. But I can not think, without admiration, of the Campo-Santo, the Duomo, and the Leaning Tower—especially of the Campo-Santo. Do you remember Orcagna's 'Death'? I think I could draw every line of it—it is so graven on my memory."

Miss Lydia was afraid the lieutenant was going to deliver an enthusiastic tirade.

"It is very pretty," she said, with a yawn. "Excuse me, papa, my head aches a little; I am going down to my cabin."

She kissed her father on the forehead, inclined her head majestically to Orso, and disappeared. Then the two men talked about hunting and war. They discovered that at Waterloo they had been posted opposite each other, and had no doubt exchanged many a bullet. This knowledge strengthened their good understanding. Turning about, they criticised Napoleon, Wellington, and Blucher, and then they hunted buck, boar, and mountain sheep in company. At last, when night was far advanced, and the last bottle of claret had been emptied, the colonel wrung the lieutenant's hand once more and wished him good-night, expressing his hope that an acquaintance, which had begun in such ridiculous fashion, might be continued. They parted, and each went to bed.

CHAPTER III

It was a lovely night. The moonlight was dancing on the waves, the ship glided smoothly on before a gentle breeze. Miss Lydia was not sleepy, and nothing but the presence of an unpoetical person had prevented her from enjoying those emotions which every human being possessing a touch of poetry must experience at sea by moonlight. When she felt sure the young lieutenant must be sound asleep, like the prosaic creature he was, she got up, took her cloak, woke her maid, and went on deck. Nobody was to be seen except the sailor at the helm, who was singing a sort of dirge in the Corsican dialect, to some wild and monotonous tune. In the silence of the night this strange music had its charm. Unluckily Miss Lydia did not understand perfectly what the sailor was singing. Amid a good deal that was commonplace, a passionate line would occasionally excite her liveliest curiosity. But just at the most important moment some words of *patois* would occur, the sense of which utterly escaped her. Yet she did make out that the subject was connected with a murder. Curses against the assassin, threats of vengeance, praise of the dead were all mingled confusedly. She remembered some of the lines. I will endeavour to translate them here.

. . . "Neither cannon nor bayonets . . . Brought pallor to his brow. . . As serene on the battlefield . . . as a summer sky. He was the falcon—the eagle's friend . . . Honey of the sand to his friends . . . To his enemies, a tempestuous sea. Prouder than the sun . . . gentler than the moon . . . He for whom the enemies of France . . . never waited . . . Murderers in his own land . . . struck him from behind . . . As Vittolo slew Sampiero Corso . . . Never would they have dared to look him in The face . . . Set up on the wall Before my bed . . . my well-earned cross of honour . . . red is its ribbon . . . redder is my shirt! . . . For my son, my son in a far country . . . keep my cross and my blood-stained shirt! . . .

" . . . He will see two holes in it . . . For each hole a hole in another shirt! . . . But will that accomplish the vengeance? . . . I must have the hand that fired, the eye that aimed . . . the heart that planned!" . . .

Suddenly the sailor stopped short.

"Why don't you go on, my good man?" inquired Miss Nevil.

The sailor, with a jerk of his head, pointed to a figure appearing through the main hatchway of the schooner: it was Orso, coming up to enjoy the moonlight. "Pray finish your song," said Miss Lydia. "It interests me greatly!"

The sailor leaned toward her, and said, in a very low tone, "I don't give the *rimbecco* to anybody!"

"The what?"

The sailor, without replying, began to whistle.

"I have caught you admiring our Mediterranean, Miss Nevil," said Orso, coming toward her. "You must allow you never see a moon like this anywhere else!"

"I was not looking at it, I was altogether occupied in studying Corsican. That sailor, who has been singing a most tragic dirge, stopped short at the most interesting point."

The sailor bent down, as if to see the compass more clearly, and tugged sharply at Miss Nevil's fur cloak. It was quite evident his lament could not be sung before Lieutenant Orso.

"What were you singing, Paolo France?" said Orso. "Was it a *ballata* or a *vocero*? Mademoiselle understands you, and would like to hear the end."

"I have forgotten it, Ors' Anton'," said the sailor.

And instantly he began a hymn to the Virgin, at the top of his voice.

Miss Lydia listened absent-mindedly to the hymn, and did not press the singer any further—though she was quite resolved, in her own mind, to find out the meaning of the riddle later. But her maid, who, being a Florentine, could not understand the Corsican dialect any better than her mistress,

was as eager as Miss Lydia for information, and, turning to Orso, before the English lady could warn her by a nudge, she said: “Captain what does *giving the rimbecco* mean?”

“The rimbecco!” said Orso. “Why, it’s the most deadly insult that can be offered to a Corsican. It means reproaching him with not having avenged his wrong. Who mentioned the rimbecco to you?”

“Yesterday, at Marseilles,” replied Miss Lydia hurriedly, “the captain of the schooner used the word.”

“And whom was he talking about?” inquired Orso eagerly.

“Oh, he was telling us some odd story about the time—yes, I think it was about Vannina d’Ornano.”

“I suppose, mademoiselle, that Vannina’s death has not inspired you with any great love for our national hero, the brave Sampiero?”

“But do you think his conduct was so very heroic?”

“The excuse for his crime lies in the savage customs of the period. And then Sampiero was waging deadly war against the Genoese. What confidence could his fellow-countrymen have felt in him if he had not punished his wife, who tried to treat with Genoa?”

“Vannina,” said the sailor, “had started off without her husband’s leave. Sampiero did quite right to wring her neck!”

“But,” said Miss Lydia, “it was to save her husband, it was out of love for him, that she was going to ask his pardon from the Genoese.”

“To ask his pardon was to degrade him!” exclaimed Orso.

“And then to kill her himself!” said Miss Lydia. “What a monster he must have been!”

“You know she begged as a favour that she might die by his hand. What about Othello, mademoiselle, do you look on him, too, as a monster?”

“There is a difference; he was jealous. Sampiero was only vain!”

“And after all is not jealousy a kind of vanity? It is the vanity of love; will you not excuse it on account of its motive?”

Miss Lydia looked at him with an air of great dignity, and turning to the sailor, inquired when the schooner would reach port.

“The day after to-morrow,” said he, “if the wind holds.”

“I wish Ajaccio were in sight already, for I am sick of this ship.” She rose, took her maid’s arm, and walked a few paces on the deck. Orso stood motionless beside the helm, not knowing whether he had better walk beside her, or end a conversation which seemed displeasing to her.

“Blood of the Madonna, what a handsome girl!” said the sailor. “If every flea in my bed were like her, I shouldn’t complain of their biting me!”

Miss Lydia may possibly have overheard this artless praise of her beauty and been startled by it; for she went below almost immediately. Shortly after Orso also retired. As soon as he had left the deck the maid reappeared, and, having cross-questioned the sailor, carried back the following information to her mistress. The *ballata* which had been broken off on Orso’s appearance had been composed on the occasion of the death of his father, Colonel della Rebbia, who had been murdered two years previously. The sailor had no doubt at all that Orso was coming back to Corsica *per fare la vendetta*, such was his expression, and he affirmed that before long there would be *fresh meat* to be seen in the village of Pietranera. This national expression, being interpreted, meant that Signor Orso proposed to murder two or three individuals suspected of having assassinated his father—individuals who had, indeed, been prosecuted on that account, but had come out of the trial as white as snow, for they were hand and glove with the judges, lawyers, prefect, and gendarmes.

“There is no justice in Corsica,” added the sailor, “and I put much more faith in a good gun than in a judge of the Royal Court. If a man has an enemy he must choose one of the three S’s.” (A national expression meaning *schiaoppetto*, *stiletto*, *strada*—that is, *gun*, *dagger*, or *flight*.)

These interesting pieces of information wrought a notable change in Miss Lydia's manner and feeling with regard to Lieutenant della Rebbia. From that moment he became a person of importance in the romantic Englishwoman's eyes.

His careless air, his frank and good humour, which had at first impressed her so unfavourably, now seemed to her an additional merit, as being proofs of the deep dissimulation of a strong nature, which will not allow any inner feeling to appear upon the surface. Orso seemed to her a sort of Fieschi, who hid mighty designs under an appearance of frivolity, and, though it is less noble to kill a few rascals than to free one's country, still a fine deed of vengeance is a fine thing, and besides, women are rather glad to find their hero is not a politician. Then Miss Nevil remarked for the first time that the young lieutenant had large eyes, white teeth, an elegant figure, that he was well-educated, and possessed the habits of good society. During the following day she talked to him frequently, and found his conversation interesting. He was asked many questions about his own country, and described it well. Corsica, which he had left when young, to go first to college, and then to the *Ecole militaire*, had remained in his imagination surrounded with poetic associations. When he talked of its mountains, its forests, and the quaint customs of its inhabitants he grew eager and animated. As may be imagined, the word *vengeance* occurred more than once in the stories he told—for it is impossible to speak of the Corsicans without either attacking or justifying their proverbial passion. Orso somewhat surprised Miss Nevil by his general condemnation of the undying hatreds nursed by his fellow-countrymen. As regarded the peasants, however, he endeavoured to excuse them, and claimed that the *vendetta* is the poor man's duel. "So true is this," he said, "that no assassination takes place till a formal challenge has been delivered. 'Be on your guard yourself, I am on mine!' are the sacramental words exchanged, from time immemorial, between two enemies, before they begin to lie in wait for each other. There are more assassinations among us," he added, "than anywhere else. But you will never discover an ignoble cause for any of these crimes. We have many murderers, it is true, but not a single thief."

When he spoke about vengeance and murder Miss Lydia looked at him closely, but she could not detect the slightest trace of emotion on his features. As she had made up her mind, however, that he possessed sufficient strength of mind to be able to hide his thoughts from every eye (her own, of course, excepted), she continued in her firm belief that Colonel della Rebbia's shade would not have to wait long for the atonement it claimed.

The schooner was already within sight of Corsica. The captain pointed out the principal features of the coast, and, though all of these were absolutely unknown to Miss Lydia, she found a certain pleasure in hearing their names; nothing is more tiresome than an anonymous landscape. From time to time the colonel's telescope revealed to her the form of some islander clad in brown cloth, armed with a long gun, striding a small horse, and galloping down steep slopes. In each of these Miss Lydia believed she beheld either a brigand or a son going forth to avenge his father's death. But Orso always declared it was some peaceful denizen of a neighbouring village travelling on business, and that he carried a gun less from necessity than because it was the fashion, just as no dandy ever takes a walk without an elegant cane. Though a gun is a less noble and poetic weapon than a stiletto, Miss Lydia thought it much more stylish for a man than any cane, and she remembered that all Lord Byron's heroes died by a bullet, and not by the classic poniard.

After three days' sailing, the ship reached Les Sanguinaires (The Bloody Islands), and the magnificent panorama of the Gulf of Ajaccio was unrolled before our travellers' eyes. It is compared, with justice, to the Bay of Naples, and just as the schooner was entering the harbour a burning *maquis*, which covered the Punta di Girato, brought back memories of Vesuvius and heightened the resemblance. To make it quite complete, Naples should be seen after one of Attila's armies had devastated its suburbs—for round Ajaccio everything looks dead and deserted. Instead of the handsome buildings observable on every side from Castellamare to Cape Misena, nothing is to be seen in the neighbourhood of the Gulf of Ajaccio but gloomy *maquis* with bare mountains rising behind them. Not a villa, not a dwelling of any kind—only here and there, on the heights about the

town, a few isolated white structures stand out against a background of green. These are mortuary chapels or family tombs. Everything in this landscape is gravely and sadly beautiful.

The appearance of the town, at that period especially, deepened the impression caused by the loneliness of its surroundings. There was no stir in the streets, where only a few listless idlers—always the same—were to be seen; no women at all, except an odd peasant come in to sell her produce; no loud talk, laughter, and singing, as in the Italian towns. Sometimes, under the shade of a tree on the public promenade, a dozen armed peasants will play at cards or watch each other play; they never shout or wrangle; if they get hot over the game, pistol shots ring out, and this always before the utterance of any threat. The Corsican is grave and silent by nature. In the evening, a few persons come out to enjoy the cool air, but the promenaders on the Corso are nearly all of them foreigners; the islanders stay in front of their own doors; each one seems on the watch, like a falcon over its nest.

CHAPTER IV

When Miss Lydia had visited the house in which Napoleon was born, and had procured, by means more or less moral, a fragment of the wall-paper belonging to it, she, within two days of her landing in Corsica, began to feel that profound melancholy which must overcome every foreigner in a country whose unsociable inhabitants appear to condemn him or her to a condition of utter isolation. She was already regretting her headstrong caprice; but to go back at once would have been to risk her reputation as an intrepid traveller, so she made up her mind to be patient, and kill time as best she could. With this noble resolution, she brought out her crayons and colours, sketched views of the gulf, and did the portrait of a sunburnt peasant, who sold melons, like any market-gardener on the Continent, but who wore a long white beard, and looked the fiercest rascal that had ever been seen. As all that was not enough to amuse her, she determined to turn the head of the descendant of the corporals, and this was no difficult matter, since, far from being in a hurry to get back to his village, Orso seemed very happy at Ajaccio, although he knew nobody there. Furthermore, Miss Lydia had a lofty purpose in her mind; it was nothing less than to civilize this mountain bear, and induce him to relinquish the sinister design which had recalled him to his island. Since she had taken the trouble to study the young man, she had told herself it would be a pity to let him rush upon his ruin, and that it would be a glorious thing to convert a Corsican.

Our travellers spent the day in the following manner: Every morning the colonel and Orso went out shooting. Miss Lydia sketched or wrote letters to her friends, chiefly for the sake of dating them from Ajaccio. Toward six o'clock the gentlemen came in, laden with game. Then followed dinner. Miss Lydia sang, the colonel went to sleep, and the young people sat talking till very late.

Some formality or other, connected with his passports, had made it necessary for Colonel Nevil to call on the prefect. This gentleman, who, like most of his colleagues, found his life very dull, had been delighted to hear of the arrival of an Englishman who was rich, a man of the world, and the father of a pretty daughter. He had, therefore, given him the most friendly reception, and overwhelmed him with offers of service; further, within a very few days, he came to return his visit. The colonel, who had just dined, was comfortably stretched out upon his sofa, and very nearly asleep. His daughter was singing at a broken-down piano; Orso was turning over the leaves of her music, and gazing at the fair singer's shoulders and golden hair. The prefect was announced, the piano stopped, the colonel got up, rubbed his eyes, and introduced the prefect to his daughter.

"I do not introduce M. della Rebbia to you," said he, "for no doubt you know him already."

"Is this gentleman Colonel della Rebbia's son?" said the prefect, looking a trifle embarrassed.

"Yes, monsieur," replied Orso.

"I had the honour of knowing your father."

The ordinary commonplaces of conversation were soon exhausted. The colonel, in spite of himself, yawned pretty frequently. Orso, as a liberal, did not care to converse with a satellite of the Government. The burden of the conversation fell on Miss Lydia. The prefect, on his side, did not let it drop, and it was clear that he found the greatest pleasure in talking of Paris, and of the great world, to a woman who was acquainted with all the foremost people in European society. As he talked, he now and then glanced at Orso, with an expression of singular curiosity.

"Was it on the Continent that you made M. della Rebbia's acquaintance?" he inquired.

Somewhat embarrassed, Miss Lydia replied that she had made his acquaintance on the ship which had carried them to Corsica.

"He is a very gentlemanly young fellow," said the prefect, in an undertone; "and has he told you," he added, dropping his voice still lower, "why he has returned to Corsica?"

Miss Lydia put on her most majestic air and answered:

"I have not asked him," she said. "You may do so."

The prefect kept silence, but, an instant later, hearing Orso speak a few words of English to the colonel, he said:

“You seem to have travelled a great deal, monsieur. You must have forgotten Corsica and Corsican habits.”

“It is quite true that I was very young when I went away.”

“You still belong to the army?”

“I am on half-pay, monsieur.”

“You have been too long in the French army not to have become a thorough Frenchman, I have no doubt?”

The last words of the sentence were spoken with marked emphasis.

The Corsicans are not particularly flattered at being reminded that they belong to the “Great Nations.” They claim to be a people apart, and so well do they justify their claim that it may very well be granted them.

Somewhat nettled, Orso replied: “Do you think, M. le Prefet, that a Corsican must necessarily serve in the French army to become an honourable man?”

“No, indeed,” said the prefect, “that is not my idea at all; I am only speaking of certain *customs* belonging to this country, some of which are not such as a Government official would like to see.”

He emphasized the word *customs*, and put on as grave an expression as his features could assume. Soon after he got up and took his leave, bearing with him Miss Lydia’s promise that she would go and call on his wife at the prefecture.

When he had departed: “I had to come to Corsica,” said Miss Lydia, “to find out what a prefect is like. This one strikes me as rather amiable.”

“For my part,” said Orso, “I can’t say as much. He strikes me as a very queer individual, with his airs of emphasis and mystery.”

The colonel was extremely drowsy. Miss Lydia cast a glance in his direction, and, lowering her voice:

“And I,” she said, “do not think him so mysterious as you pretend; for I believe I understood him!”

“Then you are clear-sighted indeed, Miss Nevil. If you have seen any wit in what he has just said you must certainly have put it there yourself.”

“It is the Marquis de Mascarille, I think, who says that, M. della Rebbia. But would you like me to give you a proof of my clear-sightedness? I am something of a witch, and I can read the thoughts of people I have seen only twice.”

“Good heavens! you alarm me. If you really can read my thoughts I don’t know whether I should be glad or sorry.”

“M. della Rebbia,” went on Miss Lydia, with a blush, “we have only known each other for a few days. But at sea, and in savage countries (you will excuse me, I hope)—in savage countries friendships grow more quickly than they do in society . . . so you must not be astonished if I speak to you, as a friend, upon private matters, with which, perhaps, a stranger ought not to interfere.”

“Ah, do not say that word, Miss Nevil. I like the other far better.”

“Well, then, monsieur, I must tell you that without having tried to find out your secrets, I have learned some of them, and they grieve me. I have heard, monsieur, of the misfortune which has overtaken your family. A great deal has been said to me about the vindictive nature of your fellow-countrymen, and the fashion in which they take their vengeance. Was it not to that the prefect was alluding?”

“Miss Lydia! Can you believe it!” and Orso turned deadly pale.

“No, M. della Rebbia,” she said, interrupting him, “I know you to be a most honourable gentleman. You have told me yourself that it was only the common people in your country who still practised the *vendetta*—which you are pleased to describe as a kind of duel.”

“Do you, then, believe me capable of ever becoming a murderer?”

“Since I have mentioned the subject at all, Monsieur Orso, you must clearly see that I do not suspect you, and if I have spoken to you at all,” she added, dropping her eyes, “it is because I have realized that surrounded, it may be, by barbarous prejudices on your return home, you will be glad to know that there is somebody who esteems you for having the courage to resist them. Come!” said she, rising to her feet, “don’t let us talk again of such horrid things, they make my head ache, and besides it’s very late. You are not angry with me, are you? Let us say good-night in the English fashion,” and she held out her hand.

Orso pressed it, looking grave and deeply moved.

“Mademoiselle,” he said, “do you know that there are moments when the instincts of my country wake up within me. Sometimes, when I think of my poor father, horrible thoughts assail me. Thanks to you, I am rid of them forever. Thank you! thank you!”

He would have continued, but Miss Lydia dropped a teaspoon, and the noise woke up the colonel.

“Della Rebbia, we’ll start at five o’clock to-morrow morning. Be punctual!”

“Yes, colonel.”

CHAPTER V

The next day, a short time before the sportsmen came back, Miss Nevil, returning with her maid from a walk along the seashore, was just about to enter the inn, when she noticed a young woman, dressed in black, riding into the town on a small but strong horse. She was followed by a sort of peasant, also on horseback, who wore a brown cloth jacket cut at the elbows. A gourd was slung over his shoulder and a pistol was hanging at his belt, his hand grasped a gun, the butt of which rested in a leathern pocket fastened to his saddle-bow—in short, he wore the complete costume of a brigand in a melodrama, or of the middle-class Corsican on his travels. Miss Nevil's attention was first attracted by the woman's remarkable beauty. She seemed about twenty years of age; she was tall and pale, with dark blue eyes, red lips, and teeth like enamel. In her expression pride, anxiety, and sadness were all legible. On her head she wore a black silk veil called a *mezzaro*, which the Genoese introduced into Corsica, and which is so becoming to women. Long braids of chestnut hair formed a sort of turban round her head. Her dress was neat, but simple in the extreme.

Miss Nevil had plenty of time to observe her, for the lady in the *mezzaro* had halted in the street, and was questioning somebody on a subject which, to judge from the expression of her eyes, must have interested her exceedingly. Then, as soon as she received an answer, she touched her mount with her riding-switch, and, breaking into a quick trot, never halted till she reached the door of the hotel in which Sir Thomas Nevil and Orso were staying. There, after exchanging a few words with the host, the girl sprang nimbly from her saddle and seated herself on a stone bench beside the entrance door, while her groom led the horses away to the stable. Miss Lydia, in her Paris gown, passed close beside the stranger, who did not raise her eyes. A quarter of an hour later she opened her window, and saw the lady in the *mezzaro* still sitting in the same place and in the same attitude. Not long afterward the colonel and Orso returned from hunting. Then the landlord said a few words to the young lady in mourning, and pointed to della Rebbia with his finger. She coloured deeply, rose eagerly, went a few paces forward, and then stopped short, apparently much confused. Orso was quite close to her, and was looking at her curiously.

"Are you Orso Antonio della Rebbia?" said she in a tremulous voice. "I am Colomba."

"Colomba!" cried Orso.

And taking her in his arms he kissed her tenderly, somewhat to the surprise of the colonel and his daughter—but in England people do not kiss each other in the street.

"Brother," said Colomba, "you must forgive me for having come without your permission. But I heard from our friends that you had arrived, and it is such a great consolation to me to see you."

Again Orso kissed her. Then, turning to the colonel:

"This is my sister," said he, "whom I never should have recognised if she had not told me her name—Colomba—Colonel Sir Thomas Nevil—colonel, you will kindly excuse me, but I can not have the honour of dining with you to-day. My sister—"

"But, my dear fellow, where the devil do you expect to dine? You know very well there is only one dinner in this infernal tavern, and we have bespoken it. It will afford my daughter great pleasure if this young lady will join us."

Colomba looked at her brother, who did not need much pressing, and they all passed together into the largest room in the inn, which the colonel used as his sitting and dining room. Mademoiselle della Rebbia, on being introduced to Miss Nevil, made her a deep courtesy, but she did not utter a single word. It was easy to see that she was very much frightened at finding herself, perhaps for the first time in her life, in the company of strangers belonging to the great world. Yet there was nothing provincial in her manners. The novelty of her position excused her awkwardness. Miss Nevil took a liking to her at once, and, as there was no room disengaged in the hotel, the whole of which was

occupied by the colonel and his attendants, she offered, either out of condescension or curiosity, to have a bed prepared in her own room for Mademoiselle della Rebbia.

Colomba stammered a few words of thanks, and hastened after Miss Nevil's maid, to make such changes in her toilet as were rendered necessary by a journey on horseback in the dust and heat.

When she re-entered the sitting-room, she paused in front of the colonel's guns, which the hunters had left in a corner.

"What fine weapons," said she. "Are they yours, brother?"

"No, they are the colonel's English guns—and they are as good as they are handsome."

"How much I wish you had one like them!" said Colomba.

"One of those three certainly does belong to della Rebbia," exclaimed the colonel. "He really shoots almost too well! To-day he fired fourteen shots, and brought down fourteen head of game."

A friendly dispute at once ensued, in which Orso was vanquished, to his sister's great satisfaction, as it was easy to perceive from the childish expression of delight which illumined her face, so serious a moment before.

"Choose, my dear fellow," said the colonel; but Orso refused.

"Very well, then. Your sister shall choose for you."

Colomba did not wait for a second invitation. She took up the plainest of the guns, but it was a first-rate Manton of large calibre.

"This one," she said, "must carry a ball a long distance."

Her brother was growing quite confused in his expressions of gratitude, when dinner appeared, very opportunely, to help him out of his embarrassment.

Miss Lydia was delighted to notice that Colomba, who had shown considerable reluctance to sit down with them, and had yielded only at a glance from her brother, crossed herself, like a good Catholic, before she began to eat.

"Good!" said she to herself, "that is primitive!" and she anticipated acquiring many interesting facts by observing this youthful representative of ancient Corsican manners. As for Orso, he was evidently a trifle uneasy, fearing, doubtless, that his sister might say or do something which savoured too much of her native village. But Colomba watched him constantly, and regulated all her own movements by his. Sometimes she looked at him fixedly, with a strange expression of sadness, and then, if Orso's eyes met hers, he was the first to turn them away, as though he would evade some question which his sister was mentally addressing to him, the sense of which he understood only too well. Everybody talked French, for the colonel could only express himself very badly in Italian. Colomba understood French, and even pronounced the few words she was obliged to exchange with her entertainers tolerably well.

After dinner, the colonel, who had noticed the sort of constraint which existed between the brother and sister, inquired of Orso, with his customary frankness, whether he did not wish to be alone with Mademoiselle Colomba, offering, in that case, to go into the next room with his daughter. But Orso hastened to thank him, and to assure him they would have plenty of time to talk at Pietranera—this was the name of the village where he was to take up his abode.

The colonel then resumed his customary position on the sofa, and Miss Nevil, after attempting several subjects of conversation, gave up all hope of inducing the fair Colomba to talk, and begged Orso to read her a canto out of Dante, her favourite poet. Orso chose the canto of the Inferno, containing the episode of Francesca da Rimini, and began to read, as impressively as he was able, the glorious tiercets which so admirably express the risk run by two young persons who venture to read a love-story together. As he read on Colomba drew nearer to the table, and raised her head, which she had kept lowered. Her wide-open eyes, shone with extraordinary fire, she grew red and pale by turns, and stirred convulsively in her chair. How admirable is the Italian organization, which can understand poetry without needing a pedant to explain its beauties!

When the canto was finished:

“How beautiful that is!” she exclaimed. “Who wrote it, brother?”

Orso was a little disconcerted, and Miss Lydia answered with a smile that it was written by a Florentine poet, who had been dead for centuries.

“You shall read Dante,” said Orso, “when you are at Pietranera.”

“Good heavens, how beautiful it is!” said Colomba again, and she repeated three or four tercets which she had remembered, speaking at first in an undertone; then, growing excited, she declaimed them aloud, with far more expression than her brother had put into his reading.

Miss Lydia was very much astonished.

“You seem very fond of poetry,” she said. “How I envy you the delight you will find in reading Dante for the first time!”

“You see, Miss Nevil,” said Orso, “what a power Dante’s lines must have, when they so move a wild young savage who knows nothing but her *Pater*. But I am mistaken! I recollect now that Colomba belongs to the guild. Even when she was quite a little child she used to try her hand at verse-making, and my father used to write me word that she was the best *voceratrice* in Pietranera, and for two leagues round about.”

Colomba cast an imploring glance at her brother. Miss Nevil had heard of the Corsican *improvisatrici*, and was dying to hear one. She begged Colomba, then, to give her a specimen of her powers. Very much vexed now at having made any mention of his sister’s poetic gifts, Orso interposed. In vain did he protest that nothing was so insipid as a Corsican *ballata*, and that to recite the Corsican verses after those of Dante was like betraying his country. All he did was to stimulate Miss Nevil’s curiosity, and at last he was obliged to say to his sister:

“Well! well! improvise something—but let it be short!”

Colomba heaved a sigh, looked fixedly for a moment, first at the table-cloth, and then at the rafters of the ceiling; at last, covering her eyes with her hand like those birds that gather courage, and fancy they are not seen when they no longer see themselves, she sang, or rather declaimed, in an unsteady voice, the following *serenata*:

“THE MAIDEN AND THE TURTLE-DOVE

“In the valley, far away among the mountains, the sun only shines for an hour every day. In the valley there stands a gloomy house, and grass grows on its threshold. Doors and windows are always shut. No smoke rises from the roof. But at noon, when the sunshine falls, a window opens, and the orphan girl sits spinning at her wheel. She spins, and as she works, she sings—a song of sadness. But no other song comes to answer hers! One day—a day in spring-time—a turtle-dove settled on a tree hard by, and heard the maiden’s song. ‘Maiden,’ it said, ‘thou art not the only mourner! A cruel hawk has snatched my mate from me!’ ‘Turtle-dove, show me that cruel hawk; were it to soar higher than the clouds I would soon bring it down to earth! But who will restore to me, unhappy that I am, my brother, now in a far country?’ ‘Maiden, tell me, where thy brother is, and my wings shall bear me to him.’”

“A well-bred turtle-dove, indeed!” exclaimed Orso, and the emotion with which he kissed his sister contrasted strongly with the jesting tone in which he spoke.

“Your song is delightful,” said Miss Lydia. “You must write it in my album; I’ll translate it into English, and have it set to music.”

The worthy colonel, who had not understood a single word, added his compliments to his daughter’s and added: “Is this dove you speak of the bird we ate broiled at dinner to-day?”

Miss Nevil fetched her album, and was not a little surprised to see the *improvisatrice* write down her song, with so much care in the matter of economizing space.

The lines, instead of being separate, were all run together, as far as the breadth of the paper would permit, so that they did not agree with the accepted definition of poetic composition—“short lines of unequal length, with a margin on each side of them.” Mademoiselle Colomba’s somewhat fanciful spelling might also have excited comment. More than once Miss Nevil was seen to smile, and Orso’s fraternal vanity suffered tortures.

Bedtime came, and the two young girls retired to their room. There, while Miss Lydia unclasped her necklace, ear-rings, and bracelets, she watched her companion draw something out of her gown—something as long as a stay-busk, but very different in shape. Carefully, almost stealthily, Colomba slipped this object under her *mezzaro*, which she laid on the table. Then she knelt down, and said her prayers devoutly. Two minutes afterward she was in her bed. Miss Lydia, naturally very inquisitive, and as slow as every Englishwoman is about undressing herself, moved over to the table, pretended she was looking for a pin, lifted up the *mezzaro*, and saw a long stiletto—curiously mounted in silver and mother-of-pearl. The workmanship was remarkably fine. It was an ancient weapon, and just the sort of one an amateur would have prized very highly.

“Is it the custom here,” inquired Miss Nevil, with a smile, “for young ladies to wear such little instruments as these in their bodices?”

“It is,” answered Colomba, with a sigh. “There are so many wicked people about!”

“And would you really have the courage to strike with it, like this?” And Miss Nevil, dagger in hand, made a gesture of stabbing from above, as actors do on the stage.

“Yes,” said Colomba, in her soft, musical voice, “if I had to do it to protect myself or my friends. But you must not hold it like that, you might wound yourself if the person you were going to stab were to draw back.” Then, sitting up in bed, “See,” she added, “you must strike like this—upward! If you do so, the thrust is sure to kill, they say. Happy are they who never need such weapons.”

She sighed, dropped her head back on the pillow, and closed her eyes. A more noble, beautiful, virginal head it would be impossible to imagine. Phidias would have asked no other model for Minerva.

CHAPTER VI

It is in obedience to the precept of Horace that I have begun by plunging *in media res*. Now that every one is asleep—the beautiful Colomba, the colonel, and his daughter—I will seize the opportunity to acquaint my reader with certain details of which he must not be ignorant, if he desires to follow the further course of this veracious history. He is already aware that Colonel della Rebbia, Orso's father, had been assassinated. Now, in Corsica, people are not murdered, as they are in France, by the first escaped convict who can devise no better means of relieving a man of his silver-plate. In Corsica a man is murdered by his enemies—but the reason he has enemies is often very difficult to discover. Many families hate each other because it has been an old-standing habit of theirs to hate each other; but the tradition of the original cause of their hatred may have completely disappeared.

The family to which Colonel della Rebbia belonged hated several other families, but that of the Barricini particularly. Some people asserted that in the sixteenth century a della Rebbia had seduced a lady of the Barricini family, and had afterward been poniarded by a relative of the outraged damsel. Others, indeed, told the story in a different fashion, declaring that it was a della Rebbia who had been seduced, and a Barricini who had been poniarded. However that may be, there was, to use the time-honoured expression, "blood between the two houses." Nevertheless, and contrary to custom, this murder had not resulted in others; for the della Rebbia and the Barricini had been equally persecuted by the Genoese Government, and as the young men had all left the country, the two families were deprived, during several generations, of their more energetic representatives. At the close of the last century, one of the della Rebbias, an officer in the Neapolitan service, quarrelled, in a gambling hell, with some soldiers, who called him a Corsican goatherd, and other insulting names. He drew his sword, but being only one against three, he would have fared very ill if a stranger, who was playing in the same room, had not exclaimed, "I, too, am a Corsican," and come to his rescue. This stranger was one of the Barricini, who, for that matter, was not acquainted with his countryman. After mutual explanations, they interchanged courtesies and vowed eternal friendship. For on the Continent, quite contrary to their practice in their own island, Corsicans quickly become friends. This fact was clearly exemplified on the present occasion. As long as della Rebbia and Barricini remained in Italy they were close friends. Once they were back in Corsica, they saw each other but very seldom, although they both lived in the same village; and when they died, it was reported that they had not spoken to each other for five or six years. Their sons lived in the same fashion—"on ceremony," as they say in the island; one of them Ghilfuccio, Orso's father, was a soldier; the other Giudice Barricini, was a lawyer. Having both become heads of families, and being separated by their professions, they scarcely ever had an opportunity of seeing or hearing of each other.

One day, however, about the year 1809, Giudice read in a newspaper at Bastia that Captain Ghilfuccio had just been decorated, and remarked, before witnesses, that he was not at all surprised, considering that the family enjoyed the protection of General —. This remark was reported at Vienna to Ghilfuccio, who told one of his countrymen that, when he got back to Corsica, he would find Giudice a very rich man, because he made more money out of the suits he lost than out of those he won. It was never known whether he meant this as an insinuation that the lawyer cheated his clients, or as a mere allusion to the commonplace truth that a bad cause often brings a lawyer more profit than a good one. However that may have been, the lawyer Barricini heard of the epigram, and never forgot it. In 1812 he applied for the post of mayor of his commune, and had every hope of being appointed, when General — wrote to the prefect, to recommend one of Ghilfuccio's wife's relations. The prefect lost no time in carrying out the general's wish, and Barricini felt no doubt that he owed his failure to the intrigues of Ghilfuccio. In 1814, after the emperor's fall, the general's protégé was denounced as a Bonapartist, and his place was taken by Barricini. He, in his turn, was dismissed

during the Hundred Days, but when the storm had blown over, he again took possession, with great pomp, of the mayoral seal and the municipal registers.

From this moment his star shone brighter than ever. Colonel della Rebbia, now living on half-pay at Pietranera, had to defend himself against covert and repeated attacks due to the pettifogging malignity of his enemy. At one time he was summoned to pay for the damage his horse had done to the mayor's fences, at another, the latter, under pretence of repairing the floor of the church, ordered the removal of a broken flagstone bearing the della Rebbia arms, which covered the grave of some member of the family. If the village goats ate the colonel's young plants, the mayor always protected their owners. The grocer who kept the post-office at Pietranera, and the old maimed soldier who had been the village policeman—both of them attached to the della Rebbia family—were turned adrift, and their places filled by Barricini's creatures.

The colonel's wife died, and her last wish was that she might be buried in the middle of the little wood in which she had been fond of walking. Forthwith the mayor declared she should be buried in the village cemetery, because he had no authority to permit burial in any other spot. The colonel, in a fury, declared that until the permit came, his wife would be interred in the spot she had chosen. He had her grave dug there. The mayor, on his side, had another grave dug in the cemetery, and sent for the police, that the law, so he declared, might be duly enforced. On the day of the funeral, the two parties came face to face, and, for a moment, there was reason to fear a struggle might ensue for the possession of Signora della Rebbia's corpse. Some forty well-armed peasants, mustered by the dead woman's relatives, forced the priest, when he issued from the church, to take the road to the wood. On the other hand, the mayor, at the head of his two sons, his dependents, and the gendarmes, advanced to oppose their march. When he appeared, and called on the procession to turn back, he was greeted with howls and threats. The advantage of numbers was with his opponents, and they seemed thoroughly determined. At sight of him several guns were loaded, and one shepherd is even said to have levelled his musket at him, but the colonel knocked up the barrel, and said, "Let no man fire without my orders!" The mayor, who, like Panurge, had "a natural fear of blows," refused to give battle, and retired, with his escort. Then the funeral procession started, carefully choosing the longest way, so as to pass in front of the mayor's house. As it was filing by, an idiot, who had joined its ranks, took it into his head to shout, "Vive l'Empereur!" Two or three voices answered him, and the Rebbianites, growing hotter, proposed killing one of the mayor's oxen, which chanced to bar their way. Fortunately the colonel stopped this act of violence.

It is hardly necessary to mention that an official statement was at once drawn up, or that the mayor sent the prefect a report, in his sublimest style, describing the manner in which all laws, human and divine, had been trodden under foot—how the majesty of himself, the mayor, and of the priest had been flouted and insulted, and how Colonel della Rebbia had put himself at the head of a Bonapartist plot, to change the order of succession to the throne, and to excite peaceful citizens to take arms against one another—crimes provided against by Articles 86 and 91 of the Penal Code.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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