

Bierce Ambrose, Voss Richard, De Castro
Adolphe Danziger

The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter



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Under the name of G. A. Danziger I wrote in the year 1889 a story founded on a German tale, which I called *The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter*. The story was tragic but I gave it a happy ending. Submitting it to the late Ambrose Bierce, asking him to revise the story, he suggested the retention of the tragic part and so revised it. The story was published and the house failed.

When in 1900 a publisher desired to bring out the story provided I gave it a happy ending, I submitted the matter to Bierce and on August 21, 1900, he wrote me a long letter on the subject of which the following is an extract:

‘I have read twice and carefully, your proposed addition to *The Monk*, and you must permit me to speak plainly, if not altogether agreeably, of it. It will not do for these reasons and others:

‘The book is almost perfect as you wrote it; the part of the work that pleases me least is *my* part (underscores Bierce’s). I am surprised that you should yield to the schoolgirl desire for that shallowest of all literary devices, a “happy ending,” by which all the pathos of the book is effaced to “make a woman holiday.”

It is unworthy of you. So much did I feel this unworthiness that I hesitated a long time before even deciding to have so much of “odious ingenuity” and “mystery” as your making Benedicta the daughter of the Saltmaster and inventing her secret love for Ambrosius instead of Rochus.

“Dramatic action,” which is no less necessary in a story than in a play, requires that so far as is possible what takes place shall be *seen* to take place, not related as having previously taken place... Compare Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* with his better plays. See how he spoiled it the same way. You need not feel ashamed to err as Shakespeare erred. Indeed, you did better than he, for his explanations were of things already known to the reader, or spectator, of the play. *Your* explanations are needful to an understanding of the things explained; it is *they* that are needless. All “explanation” is unspeakably tedious, and is to be cut as short as possible. Far better to have nothing to explain – to *show* everything that occurs, in the very act of occurring. We cannot always do that, but we should come as near to doing it as we can. Anyhow, the “harking back” should not be done at the end of the book, when the dénouement is already known and the reader’s interest in the action exhausted...

‘Ambrosius and Benedicta are unique in letters. Their nobility, their simplicity, their sufferings – everything that is theirs stamps them as “beings apart.” They live in the memory sanctified and glorified by these qualities and sorrows. They are, in the last and most gracious sense, children of nature. Leave them lying there

in the lovely valley of the gallows, where Ambrosius shuddered as his foot fell on the spot where he was destined to sleep...

‘Let *The Monk and the Hangman’s Daughter* alone. It is great work and *you* should live to see the world confess it. Let me know if my faith in your faith in me is an error. You once believed in my judgment; I think it is not yet impaired by age.

‘Sincerely yours,

‘(Signed) Ambrose Bierce.’

I can only add that my faith in Bierce’s judgment of letters is as firm to-day as it was then, when I gave him power of attorney to place my book with a publisher. This publisher embodied *The Monk and the Hangman’s Daughter* in Bierce’s collected works, then sold the right to Messrs. Albert and Charles Boni who without knowledge of the true facts brought out an edition under Bierce’s name.

ADOLPHE de CASTRO.

1

On the first day of May in the year of our Blessed Lord 1680, the Franciscan monks Ægidius, Romanus and Ambrosius were sent by their Superior from the Christian city of Passau to the Monastery of Berchtesgaden, near Salzburg. I, Ambrosius, was the strongest and youngest of the three, being but twenty-one years of age.

The Monastery of Berchtesgaden was, we knew, in a wild and mountainous country, covered with dismal forests, which were infested with bears and evil spirits; and our hearts were filled with sadness to think what might become of us in so dreadful a place. But since it is Christian duty to obey the mandates of the Church, we did not complain, and were even glad to serve the wish of our beloved and revered Superior.

Having received the benediction, and prayed for the last time in the church of our Saint, we tied up our cowls, put new sandals on our feet, and set out, attended by the blessings of all. Although the way was long and perilous, we did not lose our hope, for hope is not only the beginning and the end of religion, but also the strength of youth and the support of age. Therefore our hearts soon forgot the sadness of parting, and rejoiced in the new and varying scenes that gave us our first real knowledge of the beauty of the earth as God has made it. The colour and brilliance of the air were like the garment of the Blessed Virgin; the sun shone like the Golden Heart of the Saviour, from which streameth light and life for all mankind; the dark blue canopy that hung above formed a grand and beautiful house of prayer, in which every blade of grass, every flower and living creature praised the glory of God.

As we passed through the many hamlets, villages and cities that lay along our way, the thousands of people, busy in all the vocations of life, presented to us poor monks a new and strange spectacle, which filled us with wonder and admiration. When so

many churches came into view as we journeyed on, and the piety and ardour of the people were made manifest by the acclamations with which they hailed us and their alacrity in ministering to our needs, our hearts were full of gratitude and happiness. All the institutions of the Church were prosperous and wealthy, which showed that they had found favour in the sight of the good God whom we serve. The gardens and orchards of the monasteries and convents were well kept, proving the care and industry of the pious peasantry and the holy inmates of the cloisters. It was glorious to hear the peals of bells announcing the hours of the day: we actually breathed music in the air – the sweet tones were like the notes of angels singing praise to the Lord.

Wherever we went we greeted the people in the name of our patron Saint. On all sides were manifest humility and joy: women and children hastened to the wayside, crowding about us to kiss our hands and beseech a blessing. It almost seemed as if we were no longer poor servitors of God and man, but lords and masters of this whole beautiful earth. Let us, however, not grow proud in spirit, but remain humble, looking carefully into our hearts lest we deviate from the rules of our holy Order and sin against our blessed Saint.

I, Brother Ambrosius, confess with penitence and shame that my soul caught itself upon exceedingly worldly and sinful thoughts. It seemed to me that the women sought more eagerly to kiss my hands than those of my companions – which surely was not right, since I am not more holy than they; besides,

I am younger and less experienced and tried in the fear and commandments of the Lord. When I observed this error of the women, and saw how the maidens kept their eyes upon me, I became frightened, and wondered if I could resist should temptation accost me; and often I thought, with fear and trembling, that vows and prayer and penance alone do not make one a saint; one must be so pure in heart that temptation is unknown. Ah me!

At night we always lodged in some monastery, invariably receiving a pleasant welcome. Plenty of food and drink was set before us, and as we sat at table the monks would crowd about, asking for news of the great world of which it was our blessed privilege to see and learn so much. When our destination was learned we were usually pitied for being doomed to live in the mountain wilderness. We were told of ice-fields, snow-crowned mountains and tremendous rocks, roaring torrents, caves and gloomy forests; also of a lake so mysterious and terrible that there was none like it in the world. God be with us!

On the fifth day of our journey, while but a short distance beyond the city of Salzburg, we saw a strange and ominous sight. On the horizon, directly in our front, lay a bank of mighty clouds, with many grey points and patches of darker hue, and above, between them and the blue sky, a second firmament of perfect white. This spectacle greatly puzzled and alarmed us. The clouds had no movement; we watched them for hours and could see no change. Later in the afternoon, when the sun was sinking into the

west, they became ablaze with light. They glowed and gleamed in a wonderful manner, and looked at times as if they were on fire!

No one can imagine our surprise when we discovered that what we had mistaken for clouds was simply earth and rocks. These, then, were the mountains of which we had heard so much, and the white firmament was nothing else than the snowy summit of the range – which the Lutherans say their faith can remove. I greatly doubt it.

2

When we stood at the opening of the pass leading into the mountains we were overcome with dejection; it looked like the mouth of Hell. Behind us lay the beautiful country through which we had come, and which now we were compelled to leave forever; before us frowned the mountains with their inhospitable gorges and haunted forests, forbidding to the sight and full of peril to the body and the soul. Strengthening our hearts with prayer and whispering anathemas against evil spirits, we entered the narrow pass in the name of God, and pressed forward, prepared to suffer whatever might befall.

As we proceeded cautiously on our way giant trees barred our progress and dense foliage almost shut out the light of day, the darkness being deep and chill. The sound of our footfalls and of our voices, when we dared to speak, was returned to us from the great rocks bordering the pass, with such distinctness

and so many repetitions, yet withal so changed, that we could hardly believe we were not accompanied by troops of invisible beings who mocked us and made sport of our fears. Great birds of prey, startled from their nests in the treetops and the sides of the cliffs, perched upon high pinnacles of rock and eyed us malignly as we passed; vultures and ravens croaked above us in hoarse and savage tones that made our blood run cold. Nor could our prayers and hymns give us peace; they only called forth other fowl and by their own echoes multiplied the dreadful noises that beset us. It surprised us to observe that huge trees had been plucked out of the earth by the roots and hurled down the sides of the hills, and we shuddered to think by what powerful hands this had been done. At times we passed along the edges of high precipices, and the dark chasms that yawned below were a terrible sight. A storm arose, and we were half-blinded by the fires of heaven and stunned by thunder a thousand times louder than we had ever heard. Our fears were at last worked up to so great a degree that we expected every minute to see some devil from Hell leap from behind a rock in our front, or a ferocious bear appear from the undergrowth to dispute our progress. But only deer and foxes crossed our path, and our fears were somewhat quieted to perceive that our blessed Saint was no less powerful in the mountains than on the plains below.

At length we reached the bank of a stream whose silvery waters presented a most refreshing sight. In its crystal depths between the rocks we could see beautiful golden trout as large as

the carp in the pond of our monastery at Passau. Even in these wild places Heaven had provided bountifully for the fasting of the faithful.

Beneath the black pines and close to the large lichen-covered rocks bloomed rare flowers of dark blue and golden yellow. Brother Ægidius, who was as learned as pious, knew them from his herbarium and told us their names. We were delighted by the sight of various brilliant beetles and butterflies which had come out of their hiding-places after the rain. We gathered handfuls of flowers and chased the pretty winged insects, forgetting our fears and prayers, the bears and evil spirits, in the exuberance of our joy.

For many hours we had not seen a dwelling nor a human being. Deeper and deeper we penetrated the mountain region; greater and greater became the difficulties we experienced in forest and ravine, and all the horrors of the wilderness that we had already passed were repeated, but without so great an effect upon our souls, for we all perceived that the good God was preserving us for longer service to His holy will. A branch of the friendly river lay in our course, and, approaching it, we were delighted to find it spanned by a rough but substantial bridge. As we were about to cross I happened to cast my eyes to the other shore, where I saw a sight that made my blood turn cold with terror. On the opposite bank of the stream was a meadow, covered with beautiful flowers, and in the centre a gallows upon which hung the body of a man! The face was turned toward us, and I

could plainly distinguish the features, which, though black and distorted, showed unmistakable signs that death had come that very day.

I was upon the point of directing my companions' attention to the dreadful spectacle, when a strange incident occurred: in the meadow appeared a young girl, with long golden hair, upon which rested a wreath of blossoms. She wore a bright red dress, which seemed to me to light up the whole scene like a flame of fire. Nothing in her actions indicated fear of the corpse upon the gallows; on the contrary, she glided toward it barefooted through the grass, singing in a loud but sweet voice, and waving her arms to scare away the birds of prey that had gathered about it, uttering harsh cries and with a great buffeting of wings and snapping of beaks. At the girl's approach they all took flight, except one great vulture, which retained its perch upon the gallows and appeared to defy and threaten her. She ran close up to the obscene creature, jumping, dancing, screaming, until it, too, put out its wide wings and flapped heavily away. Then she ceased her dancing, and, taking a position at the gibbet's foot, calmly and thoughtfully looked up at the swinging body of the unfortunate man.

The maiden's singing had attracted the attention of my companions, and we all stood watching the lovely child and her strange surroundings with too much amazement to speak.

While gazing on the surprising scene, I felt a cold shiver run through my body. This is said to be a sure sign that someone has stepped upon the spot which is to be your grave. Strange

to say, I felt this chill at the moment the maiden stepped under the gallows. But this only shows how the true beliefs of men are mixed up with foolish superstitions; for how could a sincere follower of Saint Franciscus possibly come to be buried beneath a gallows?

‘Let us hasten,’ I said to my companions, ‘and pray for the soul of the dead.’

We soon found our way to the spot, and, without raising our eyes, said prayers with great fervour; especially did I, for my heart was full of compassion for the poor sinner who hung above. I recalled the words of God, who said, ‘Vengeance is mine,’ and remembered that the dear Saviour had pardoned the thief upon the cross at His side; and who knows that there were not mercy and forgiveness for this poor wretch who had died upon the gallows?

On our approach the maiden had retired a short distance, not knowing what to make of us and our prayers. Suddenly, however, in the midst of our devotions, I heard her sweet, bell-like tones exclaim: ‘The vulture! the vulture!’ and her voice was agitated, as if she felt great fear. I looked up and saw a great grey bird above the pines, swooping downward. It showed no fear of us, our sacred calling and our pious rites. My brothers, however, were indignant at the interruption caused by the child’s voice, and scolded her. But I said: ‘The girl is probably a relation of the dead man. Now think of it, brothers; this terrible bird comes to tear the flesh from his face and feed upon his hands and his body. It

is only natural that she should cry out.'

One of the brothers said: 'Go to her, Ambrosius, and command her to be silent that we may pray in peace for the departed soul of this sinful man.'

I walked among the fragrant flowers to where the girl stood with her eyes still fixed upon the vulture, which swung in ever narrowing circles about the gallows. Against a mass of silvery flowers on a bush by which she stood the maid's exquisite figure showed to advantage, as I wickedly permitted myself to observe. Perfectly erect and motionless, she watched my advance, though I marked a terrified look in her large, dark eyes, as if she feared that I would do her harm. Even when I was quite near her she made no movement to come forward, as women and children usually did, and kiss my hands.

'Who are you?' I said, 'and what are you doing in this dreadful place all alone?'

She did not answer me, and made neither sign nor motion; so I repeated my question:

'Tell me, child, what are you doing here?'

'Scaring away the vultures,' she replied, in a soft, musical voice, inexpressibly pleasing.

'Are you a relation of the dead man?' I asked.

She shook her head.

'You knew him?' I continued, 'and you pity his unchristian death?'

But she was again silent, and I had to renew my questioning:

‘What was his name, and why was he put to death? What crime did he commit?’

‘His name was Nathaniel Alfinger, and he killed a man for a woman,’ said the maiden, distinctly and in the most unconcerned manner that it is possible to conceive, as if murder and hanging were the commonest and most uninteresting of all events. I was astounded, and gazed at her sharply, but her look was passive and calm, denoting nothing unusual. ‘Did you know Nathaniel Alfinger?’

‘No.’

‘Yet you came here to protect his corpse from the fowls?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why do you do that service to one whom you did not know?’

‘I always do so.’

‘How – !’

‘Always when any one is hanged here I come and frighten away the birds and make them find other food. See – there is another vulture!’

She uttered a wild, high scream, threw her arms above her head, and ran across the meadow so that I thought her mad. The big bird flew away, and the maiden came quietly back to me, and, pressing her sunburnt hands upon her breast, sighed deeply, as from fatigue. With as much mildness as I could put into my voice, I asked her:

‘What is your name?’

‘Benedicta.’

‘And who are your parents?’

‘My mother is dead.’

‘But your father – where is he?’

She was silent. Then I pressed her to tell me where she lived, for I wanted to take the poor child home and admonish her father to have better care of his daughter and not let her stray into such dreadful places again.

‘Where do you live, Benedicta? I pray you tell me.’

‘Here.’

‘What! here? Ah, my child, here is only the gallows.’

She pointed toward the pines. Following the direction of her finger, I saw among the trees a wretched hut which looked like a habitation more fit for animals than human beings. Then I knew better than she could have told me whose child she was.

When I returned to my companions and they asked me who the girl was, I answered: ‘The hangman’s daughter.’

3

Having commended the soul of the dead man to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin and the Holy Saints, we left the accursed spot, but as we withdrew I looked back at the lovely child of the hangman. She stood where I had left her, looking after us. Her fair white brow was still crowned with the wreath of primroses, which gave an added charm to her wonderful beauty of feature and expression, and her large, dark eyes shone like

the stars of a winter midnight. My companions, to whom the hangman's daughter was a most unchristian object, reproved me for the interest that I manifested in her; but it made me sad to think this sweet and beautiful child was shunned and despised through no fault of her own. Why should she be made to suffer blame because of her father's dreadful calling? And was it not the purest Christian charity which prompted this innocent maiden to keep the vultures from the body of a fellow-creature whom in life she had not even known and who had been adjudged unworthy to live? It seemed to me a more kindly act than that of any professed Christian who bestows money upon the poor. Expressing these feelings to my companions, I found, to my sorrow, that they did not share them; on the contrary, I was called a dreamer and a fool who wished to overthrow the ancient and wholesome customs of the world. Everyone, they said, was bound to execrate the class to which the hangman and his family belonged, for all who associated with such persons would surely be contaminated. I had, however, the temerity to remain steadfast in my conviction, and with due humility questioned the justice of treating such persons as criminals because they were a part of the law's machinery by which criminals were punished. Because in the church the hangman and his family had a dark corner specially set apart for them, that could not absolve us from our duty as servants of the Lord to preach the gospel of justice and mercy and give an example of Christian love and charity. But my brothers grew very angry with me, and the wilderness rang with

their loud vociferations, so that I began to feel as if I were very wicked, although unable to perceive my error. I could do nothing but hope that Heaven would be more merciful to us all than we are to one another. In thinking of the maiden it gave me comfort to know that her name was *Benedicta*. Perhaps her parents had so named her as a means of blessing to one whom no one else would ever bless.

But I must relate what a wonderful country it was into which we were now arrived. Were we not assured that all the world is the Lord's, for He made it, we might be tempted to think such a wild region the kingdom of the Evil One.

Far down below our path the river roared and foamed between great cliffs, the grey points of which seemed to pierce the very sky. On our left, as we gradually rose out of this chasm, was a black forest of pines, frightful to see, and in front of us a most formidable peak. This mountain, despite its terrors, had a comical appearance, for it was white and pointed like a fool's cap, and looked as if some one had put a flour-sack on the knave's head. After all, it was nothing but snow. Snow in the middle of the glorious month of May! – surely the works of God are wonderful and almost past belief! The thought came to me that if this old mountain should shake his head the whole region would be full of flying snow.

We were not a little surprised to find that in various places along our road the forest had been cleared away for a space large enough to build a hut and plant a garden. Some of these rude

dwelling stood where one would have thought that only eagles would have been bold enough to build; but there is no place, it seems, free from the intrusion of Man, who stretches out his hand for everything, even that which is in the air. When at last we arrived at our destination and beheld the temple and the house erected in this wilderness to the name and glory of our beloved Saint, our hearts were thrilled with pious emotions. Upon the surface of a pine-covered rock was a cluster of huts and houses, the monastery in the midst, like a shepherd surrounded by his flock. The church and monastery were of hewn stone, of noble architecture, spacious and comfortable.

May the good God bless our entrance into this holy place.

4

I have now been in this wilderness for a few weeks, but the Lord, too, is here, as everywhere. My health is good, and this house of our beloved Saint is a stronghold of the Faith, a house of peace, an asylum for those who flee from the wrath of the Evil One, a rest for all who bear the burden of sorrow. Of myself, however, I cannot say so much. I am young, and although my mind is at peace, I have so little experience of the world and its ways that I feel myself peculiarly liable to error and accessible to sin. The course of my life is like a rivulet which draws its silver thread smoothly and silently through friendly fields and flowery meadows, yet knows that when the storms come and the rains fall

it may become a raging torrent, defiled with earth and whirling away to the sea the wreckage attesting the madness of its passion and its power.

Not sorrow nor despair drew me away from the world into the sacred retreat of the Church, but a sincere desire to serve the Lord. My only wish is to belong to my beloved Saint, to obey the blessed mandates of the Church, and, as a servant of God, to be charitable to all mankind, whom I dearly love. The Church is, in truth, my beloved mother, for, my parents having died in my infancy I, too, might have perished without care had she not taken pity on me, fed and clothed me and reared me as her own child. And, oh, what happiness there will be for me, poor monk, when I am ordained and receive holy orders as a priest of the Most High God! Always I think and dream of it and try to prepare my soul for that high and sacred gift. I know I can never be worthy of this great happiness, but I do hope to be an honest and sincere priest, serving God and Man according to the light that is given from above. I often pray Heaven to put me to the test of temptation, that I may pass through the fire unscathed and purified in mind and soul. As it is, I feel the sovereign peace which, in this solitude, lulls my spirit to sleep, and all life's temptations and trials seem far away, like perils of the sea to one who can but faintly hear the distant thunder of the waves upon the beach.

Our Superior, Father Andreas, is a mild and pious gentleman. Our brothers live in peace and harmony. They are not idle, neither are they worldly nor arrogant. They are temperate, not indulging too much in the pleasures of the table – a praiseworthy moderation, for all this region, far and wide – the hills and the valleys, the river and forest, with all that they contain – belongs to the monastery. The woods are full of all kinds of game, of which the choicest is brought to our table, and we relish it exceedingly. In our monastery a drink is prepared from malt and barley – a strong, bitter drink, refreshing after fatigue, but not, to my taste, very good.

The most remarkable thing in this part of the country is the salt-mining. I am told that the mountains are full of salt – how wonderful are the works of the Lord! In pursuit of this mineral Man has penetrated deep into the bowels of the earth by means of shafts and tunnels, and brings forth the bitter marrow of the hills into the light of the sun. The salt I have myself seen in red, brown and yellow crystals. The works give employment to our peasants and their sons, with a few foreign labourers, all under the command of an overseer, who is known as the Saltmaster. He is a stern man, exercising great power, but our Superior and the brothers speak little good of him – not from any unchristian spirit, but because his actions are evil. The Saltmaster has an only

son. His name is Rochus, a handsome but wild and wicked youth.

6

The people hereabout are a proud, stubborn race. I am told that in an old chronicle they are described as descendants of the Romans, who in their day drove many tunnels into these mountains to get out the precious salt; and some of these tunnels are still in existence. From the window of my cell I can see these giant hills and the black forests which at sunset burn like great firebrands along the crests against the sky.

The forefathers of these people (after the Romans) were, I am told, more stubborn still than they are, and continued in idolatry after all the neighbouring peoples had accepted the cross of the Lord our Saviour. Now, however, they bow their stiff necks to the sacred symbol and soften their hearts to receive the living truth. Powerful as they are in body, in spirit they are humble and obedient to the Word. Nowhere else did the people kiss my hand so fervently as here, although I am not a priest – an evidence of the power and victory of our glorious faith.

Physically they are strong and exceedingly handsome in face and figure, especially the young men; the elder men, too, walk as erect and proud as kings. The women have long golden hair, which they braid and twist about their heads very beautifully, and they love to adorn themselves with jewels. Some have eyes whose dark brilliancy rivals the lustre of the rubies and garnets

they wear about their white necks. I am told that the young men fight for the young women as stags for does. Ah, what wicked passions exist in the hearts of men! But since I know nothing of these things, nor shall ever feel such unholy emotions, I must not judge and condemn.

Lord, what a blessing is the peace with which Thou hast filled the spirits of those who are Thine own! Behold, there is no turmoil in my breast; all is calm there as in the soul of a babe which calls 'Abba,' dear Father. And so may it ever be.

7

I have again seen the hangman's beautiful daughter. As the bells were chiming for mass I saw her in front of the monastery church. I had just come from the bedside of a sick man, and as my thoughts were gloomy the sight of her face was pleasant, and I should have liked to greet her, but her eyes were cast down: she did not notice me. The square in front of the church was filled with people, the men and youths on one side, on the other the women and maidens all clad in their high hats and adorned with their gold chains. They stood close together, but when the poor child approached all stepped aside, whispering and looking askance at her as if she were an accursed leper and they feared infection.

Compassion filled my breast, compelling me to follow the maiden, and, overtaking her, I said aloud:

‘God greet you, Benedicta.’

She shrank away as if frightened, then, looking up, recognised me, seemed astonished, blushed again and again and finally hung her head in silence.

‘Do you fear to speak to me?’ I asked.

But she made no reply. Again I spoke to her: ‘Do good, obey the Lord and fear no one: then shall you be saved.’

At this she drew a long sigh, and replied in a low voice, hardly more than a whisper: ‘I thank you, my lord.’

‘I am not a lord, Benedicta,’ I said, ‘but a poor servant of God, who is a gracious and kind Father to all His children, however lowly their estate. Pray to Him when your heart is heavy, and He will be near you.’

While I spoke she lifted her head and looked at me like a sad child that is being comforted by its mother. And, still speaking to her out of the great compassion in my heart, I led her into the church before all the people.

But do thou, O holy Franciscus, pardon the sin that I committed during that high sacrament! For while Father Andreas was reciting the solemn words of the mass my eyes constantly wandered to the spot where the poor child knelt in a dark corner set apart for her and her father, forsaken and alone. She seemed to pray with holy zeal, and surely thou didst grace her with a ray of thy favour, for it was through thy love of mankind that thou didst become a great saint, and didst bring before the Throne of Grace thy large heart, bleeding for the sins of all the world.

Then shall not I, the humblest of thy followers, have enough of thy spirit to pity this poor outcast who suffers for no sin of her own? Nay, I feel for her a peculiar tenderness, which I cannot help accepting as a sign from Heaven that I am charged with a special mandate to watch over her, to protect her, and finally to save her soul.

8

Our Superior has sent for me and rebuked me. He told me I had caused great ill-feeling among the brothers and the people, and asked what devil had me in possession that I should walk into church with the daughter of the public hangman.

What could I say but that I pitied the poor maiden and could not do otherwise than as I did?

‘Why did you pity her?’ he asked.

‘Because all the people shun her,’ I replied, ‘as if she were mortal sin itself, and because she is wholly blameless. It certainly is not her fault that her father is a hangman, nor his either, since, alas, hangmen must be.’

Ah, beloved Franciscus, how the Superior scolded thy poor servant for these bold words.

‘And do you repent?’ he demanded at the close of his reproof. But how could I repent of my compassion – incited, as I verily believe, by our beloved Saint?

On learning my obduracy, the Superior became very sad. He

gave me a long lecture and put me under hard penance. I took my punishment meekly and in silence, and am now confined to my cell, fasting and chastising myself. Nor in this do I spare myself at all, for it is happiness to suffer for the sake of one so unjustly treated as the poor friendless child.

I stand at the grating of my cell, looking out at the high, mysterious mountains showing black against the evening sky. The weather being mild, I open the window behind the bars to admit the fresh air and better to hear the song of the stream below, which speaks to me with a divine companionship, gentle and consoling.

I know not if I have already mentioned that the monastery is built upon a rock high over the river. Directly under the windows of our cells are the rugged edges of great cliffs, which none can scale but at the peril of his life. Imagine, then, my astonishment when I saw a living figure lift itself up from the awful abyss by the strength of its hands, and, drawing itself across the edge, stand erect upon the very verge! In the dusk I could not make out what kind of creature it was; I thought it some evil spirit come to tempt me; so I crossed myself and said a prayer. Presently there is a movement of its arm, and something flies through the window, past my head, and lies upon the floor of my cell, shining like a white star. I bend and pick it up. It is a bunch of flowers such as I have never seen – leafless, white as snow, soft as velvet, and without fragrance. As I stand by the window, the better to see the wondrous flowers, my eyes turn again to the figure on the

cliff, and I hear a sweet, low voice, which says: 'I am Benedicta, and I thank you.'

Ah, Heaven! it was the child, who, that she might greet me in my loneliness and penance, had climbed the dreadful rocks, heedless of the danger. She knew, then, of my punishment – knew that it was for her.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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