

THE CORSICAN LOVERS

A STORY OF THE VENDETTA

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THE CORSICAN LOVERS.

CHAPTER I. BROTHERLY LOVE.

“YOU have no right, Pascal, to command me to marry a man whom I do not love.”

The speaker was a young girl not more than eighteen years of age. As she spoke, the flashing of her eyes and her clenched hands betokened the intensity of her feelings.

The person to whom the words were addressed was a man of about forty. He was smooth-shaven, and the black, shaggy eyebrows which met above the bridge of his nose, gave to his face a stern and almost forbidding expression. He did not reply to his sister's impassioned words for some time, but sat, apparently unconcerned, tapping lightly on the library table with the fingers of his right hand.

At last he spoke: “I do not command you, Vivienne; all I ask is that you will comply with your father's dying wish.”

“How do you know that it was his dying wish? He was dead when found, stabbed to the heart, as you told me, by Manuel Della Coscia—that brave Corsican who ran away to escape the vengeance he so well deserved.”

The man looked up approvingly. “My sister, that was spoken like a true Batistelli. If you loved your father, as your words seem to indicate, I do not see how you can disobey his slightest wish.”

The girl turned upon him, that bright flash again in her eyes. “Why are you so anxious that I should marry? Why is it that you yourself do not marry?”

The man’s answer came quickly: “I have sworn, and so has your brother Julien, that we will not marry until our father’s death has been avenged.”

The girl placed both her hands on the edge of the table, leaned forward, and looked into her brother’s face, as she said: “And neither will I.”

She spoke with suppressed intensity.

“You knew our father,” she continued; “you loved him when he was alive and you can love him now. You have something tangible to remember; I can only love his memory. I was but a child a few days old when he fell beneath the knife of the assassin. I do love his memory, and I know if he were living he would not condemn me to a loveless marriage.”

Again that inscrutable look came upon the man’s face. He shrugged his shoulders and the dark line of eyebrows lifted perceptibly.

“I do not know what he would do; I only know what he did.”

“And what did he do?” broke in Vivienne.

The man started. The question was asked with such vehemence that for an instant his marked self-possession was overcome.

“What did he do?” he repeated, thus gaining time, for he wished to think of the most forcible way in which to present the matter to his sister. “I will tell you. I know that he talked the matter

over with old Count Mont d'Oro. The Count is dead, or there would be a living witness to the compact. But a few days before our father's death, in fact the very day you were born, even while you were in your nurse's arms, he said to me, 'I am glad that it is a daughter. She shall be called Vivienne, and when she grows to womanhood she shall be a countess, for I have talked the matter over with Count Mont d'Oro, and we have both agreed that the little Count Napier shall be the husband of my little Vivienne.' Three days later I looked upon his lifeless body. The words of the dead cannot be changed."

It was now the young girl's turn to think before speaking. The position that her brother had taken seemed, for the moment at least, unanswerable; but woman's wisdom, like her wit, is equal to any emergency.

"Brother Pascal," she began, and her voice was tremulous, "when I was bereft of a father's and a mother's love, you took their place. It is to you I have always looked for advice—both Julien and I, for you are so much older and wiser than we are. You have taken our father's place; his words have become your words, but you are living and can change your words and free me from this bondage, for I would rather die than become the wife of Count Napier, or any other man I cannot love."

Pascal Batistelli set his teeth tightly together, a dark look came into his face. "Am I to understand, then, that you absolutely refuse to marry Count Mont d'Oro?"

"Not only him, but any one else," answered the girl. "I am content as I am."

She turned away from the table, walked to the window, and looked out upon the grounds which stretched far and wide from the castle walls. The bright sunlight fell on tree and bush and on the brightly tinted flowers. All was beauty and peace without. How could nature be so happy, and she so miserable? Suddenly she turned and approached her brother, who had not changed his position.

“When did you wish this marriage to take place?” she asked, making a vain attempt to smile.

“On your eighteenth birthday,” he said, calmly.

“Oh, I have some time, then, to wait,” and she gave a little laugh. “You may tell Count Mont d’Oro that I will see him. I will tell him how much I love him. Then——” She could say no more. With a convulsive sob she turned and fled from the room.

“When a woman says she won’t, she often will,” soliloquised Pascal, as he arose and went to the window from which Vivienne had looked. “My father left fine estates. How could a sensible man make such a foolish will?”

Pascal took a small silver key from his pocket, and turning to an old *escritoire*, opened a drawer and took therefrom a paper. He then reseated himself at the table. “I should not have known,” said he to himself, “what was in my father’s will if I had not bribed the notary to break the seals and make me a copy. It is well to know what the future has in store for you—and for others. My father executed a document by which I was made guardian of my brother Julien and my sister Vivienne, until they became of age, I to supply all their wants as their father would have done. By a strange coincidence, my brother Julien is exactly seven years older than

my sister. In a few months he will be twenty-five and she eighteen. The will must then be opened and what I alone know—I do not count the notary, for I have paid him his price—all will know.” Then he read the document carefully:

“If my daughter Vivienne marries Count Mont d’Oro’s son Napier, on or before her eighteenth birthday, as he will be wealthy in his own right, and I wish the marriage to be one of love, my estates shall be divided equally between my two sons, Pascal and Julien, if both are living; if but one be living, then to him, and if both should die and my daughter live, all shall go to her. If she does not marry Count Mont d’Oro’s son Napier for lack of love of him, half of my estate shall become hers. As Pascal will have had the entire income of my estate for eighteen years, he will be worth much, and the other half of my estate shall go to Julien, if living; if not, all shall go to Vivienne.”

“A very unfair will,” said Pascal, as he replaced the document in the escritoire. “If the dead could come back, such injustice would probably be remedied.”

There was a tap at the door, which opened almost immediately and Adolphe, Pascal’s valet, entered.

“The Count Mont d’Oro.”

“Admit him,” said Pascal, and a moment later the young Count advanced with outstretched hand, exclaiming even before their hands met:

“What news? What news? What does she say?”

“Oh, the impatience of you young lovers!” cried Pascal. “I think the leaven of love must have been left out of my composition.

I have never yet met a woman who could put such fire into my blood as there seems to be in yours, my dear Count.”

“No more about me. Let us speak of her. What does she say?”

“Do not be too impatient. Even if I could repeat her very words, I could not say them just as she did. I can but translate them into a cold, formal phrase. She will see you.”

“I thought she would,” cried the young Count, “and when I kneel and lay my love at her feet, she will accept me and make me the happiest of men.”

“Be not too confident,” said Pascal; “she is young and wilful. You know the Batistellis are a determined race. I did not try to plead your cause. I am not used to love-making, and I felt that I should injure your prospects if I spoke in your behalf. But I warn you that you must use your eloquence and not appear too confident at the first.”

The Count laughed. It was not an honest, sincere laugh. A good judge of human nature would have detected in it a hollow sound—more of mockery than of true passion.

“One can see by looking at you, Pascal, that you are not an Adonis. You are not to blame if you have not the graces of Apollo. I have not descended from the ancient gods of Greece, but I have had an experience which even they might envy. I have run the gamut of Parisian society from the ante-chamber of royalty to the gutter, and in Paris there are beauties to be found even in the gutter.”

“I would not tell Vivienne that,” suggested Pascal.

“Of course not,” said the Count; “she is young and inexperienced and would not understand.”

“She might not understand,” said Pascal, “but on the other hand she might imagine more than the truth, and that would be fatal to your prospects, for I warn you, Count, that she is a woman who will not marry a man she does not love, and she will insist that he love her and her only.”

Again the Count laughed. “Why, even the King of France cannot command so much as that. I suppose I must bury the past. She is worth it. By the way, my dear Pascal, I think you told me that in case she marries me before her eighteenth birthday, the estates go with her.”

“My father made a most foolish will,” said Pascal, guardedly.

“That is what troubles me,” said the Count. “I feel like a robber; as though I had placed a pistol at your head and said, ‘Pascal Batistelli, give me your sister and your estates or you are a dead man.’” Then he added, after a moment’s thought: “I do not think that I can do it, after all. I think I shall go back to Paris.”

“Then you do not love my sister?” queried Pascal. He did not think the Count meant what he said, but it suited his purpose to take the remark seriously.

“When I am with her, yes,” said the Count; “then your sister Vivienne is the divine She; but, as I told you, there are beautiful women in Paris.”

Pascal felt the ground slipping from under his feet. “When you are married, Count, you can go to Paris; you are not obliged to live here in this dull place.”

“Oh, yes, but they will know that I am married.” Then, with a conceit which did not seem particularly offensive on account of the manner in which it was spoken, he added: “And, you know, I am quite a catch myself.”

“Certainly,” said Pascal, “and when the estates of Mont d’Oro and Batistelli are united, I have no doubt that many a fair eye in Paris will be wet with tears.”

“Well spoken, my dear Pascal,” cried the Count, as he threw his arm about the neck of his prospective brother-in-law.

Pascal did not appreciate the caress, but the urgency of the situation prevented his refusing it. “But you will see her?” he asked.

“Oh, yes!” cried the Count. “My father wished this marriage to take place; my mother does not think that I am good enough for your sister. That is one reason why I am determined to marry her. To-morrow?”

“Yes, to-morrow,” said Pascal; “any hour in the morning. We breakfast at eight; no earlier than that, of course.”

“Don’t worry,” said the Count, “I do not rise until nine. By half-past ten she may expect her ardent suitor.” He flourished his hat through the air, bowed low to Pascal before placing it on his head, and a moment later was gone.

Pascal walked to the window and looked again upon the far-reaching acres of the Batistelli estate. “She must marry him; then I shall have half. That precious brother of mine will be killed in some drunken brawl or die a sot, then all will be mine.”

CHAPTER II.

“A MAN MUST HAVE A WIFE.”

THE Countess Mont d’Oro and her son Napier sat at dinner together. They rarely spoke on such occasions, and the meal was nearly over before the Countess looked at him inquiringly and said:

“I saw you go over to the Batistelli house this morning. Some business matter, I presume.” After a pause, she asked, “Were you successful?”

“It was connected with my own personal affairs,” replied the Count, curtly.

“I suppose from your answer that you mean it is none of my business.”

“The inference is your own,” was the reply.

Both were silent for a while, then the Countess resumed: “Did you see Vivienne?”

“She was in the house; you can infer again.”

The Countess was cut by the last remark. Her manner of speaking had been pleasant, but there was a tone in her son’s reply that fired her Italian blood.

“I believe I have the most impudent son in Corsica.”

“I am sure that I have the most loving mother in all France,” said the Count, calmly.

To equalise a quarrel, when one of the participants is angry the other should also be angry. It is unfair for one to remain cool, calm, and collected, while the other is worked up to a fury of passion. If two soldiers meet in battle, one with a sword four feet long and the other with one but half that length, the contest is unequal; the one with the long sword keeps the other contestant at a distance, though the latter makes vain attacks upon his well-protected adversary. So in a lingual battle, the one who keeps his temper, who does not allow his voice to rise above an ordinary pitch, is the soldier with the long sword.

It must not be supposed that Countess Mont d'Oro allowed these thoughts to pass through her mind. She replied promptly to her son's sarcastic allusion to her love for him.

"Why should I love you?" she cried. "Even when a child you had an ungovernable temper, and since you have grown up—I will not say since you became a man—your extravagance, your disregard of my wishes, even the slightest of them—has driven from my heart any love that I might have had for you. I am glad that your father lived long enough to understand you. He did wisely in leaving all to me. I was to make you an allowance at my discretion. I have paid your debts—gambling debts, I suppose they were principally—until my own income is greatly impaired."

"And why have you been so generous?" asked her son.

"To avoid scandal. I did not wish our family affairs to become a subject for Parisian gossip. I do not care for what is said here in Corsica, but such news travels fast."

"I presume from what you have said that you intend to cut off my allowance?"

“I do, as soon as you are married to Vivienne Batistelli. You must remember that I am not yet forty—I may marry again, and I do not wish my husband to have a dowerless bride.”

The Count smiled grimly. “It is all right for me to become a pensioner on my wife’s bounty?”

“Under the circumstances, yes,” said the Countess. “She will have enough. She will have all, and it is right she should. The property has been in Pascal’s hands for the past eighteen years, and a man of his disposition has not let any of it slip through his fingers, of that you may be sure. He has enough to set up for himself, and I suppose there are plenty of women who would have him, disagreeable as he is.”

“Why not marry him yourself?” asked the Count. “You would then be placed above all possible fear of want.”

The Countess arose from her chair. She did not speak until she reached the door of the dining-room; then she turned: “It is some time since you asked your last question, but I suppose you would like an answer. Considering my experience as your mother, I have no desire to become your sister-in-law.”

As his mother closed the door Count Napier sprang to his feet and began whistling the melody of a French *chanson*. “I may have a bad temper, but I think I know where I got it,” he muttered, as he made his way to the stables.

His favorite saddle-horse, Apollo, was soon ready, and making a cut at the stable-boy with his whip to reward him for his tardiness, and bestowing another upon the animal to show him that a master held the reins, he dashed off towards Ajaccio.

When he returned, several hours later, the fire of his mother's wrath, to a great extent, had burned out. She was in a more complacent mood and asked, naturally: "Where have you been, Napier?"

"Perhaps Apollo could tell you. I really cannot remember."

He went up to his room.

The night of the same day brought little sleep to the eyes of Vivienne Batistelli. She would doze, and in the half-sleep came unpleasant dreams. A dozen times during the night she was led to the altar by Count Mont d'Oro, but just as the words were to be spoken which would have united their lives forever, he changed into the form of a dragon, or something equally frightful, and she awoke with a scream to find herself in bed, her heart beating violently, and the room filled with shadows which carried almost as much terror to her heart as the visions which she had seen in her dreams.

At last her mental torture became unbearable. She arose and dressed herself. Drawing aside the heavy curtains, she saw that the sun was nearly up. She went into the garden. The dew lay thick upon the grass. She knelt down upon the green carpet. How cool it seemed to her hands, which were burning as with fire. She walked along one of the paths and the cool morning breeze refreshed her. Hearing the sound of a spade against a rock, she turned into a side path.

"It's early ye are in gettin' up," said Terence, the gardener. "Ye may belave me or not, but whin ye turned into the path I thought the sun was up for sure."

Vivienne could not help smiling. “Ah, Terence, you are a great flatterer, like all of your countrymen. Do you say such pretty things to Snodine, your wife?”

“Well, I did before we wuz married and some time aafter, but to spake the truth, I sometimes think that Snodine’s good-nature sun has set and I’m afeared it’ll never come up again.”

“Oh,” said Vivienne, “Snodine is not such a bad wife. She has a sharp tongue, to be sure.”

“Ah, ah, that she has; and if she wud only use it in the garden instid of on me, your brother would not have to buy so many spades.”

Vivienne was not disposed to continue the conversation, and after walking to the end of a long path, made her way back without again coming in contact with Terence. As she approached the house she found that her old nurse, Clarine, was up. She must have seen Vivienne, for she threw open the window of her room, on the ground floor, and gave the young girl a cheery good-morning.

“May I come in?” asked Vivienne.

Clarine ran to open the door, and as Vivienne entered she took the young girl in her arms and kissed her. “Can you come in? You know you can. Whenever you wish to see Clarine, you may always come without the asking. I served your father and your grandfather, and I will serve you as long as I live,” and the old lady made a curtsy to intensify the effect of her words.

“I want to talk with you, Clarine,” said Vivienne. “I am in great trouble.”

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