The Vendetta

GUY de MAUPASSANT

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PAOLO SAVERINI'S WIDOW LIVED ALONE WITH HER SON IN A poor little house on the ramparts of Bonifacio. The town, built on a spur of the mountains, in places actually overhanging the sea, looks across a channel bristling with reefs, to the lower shores of Sardinia. At its foot, on the other side and almost completely surrounding it, is the channel that serves as its harbour, cut in the cliff like a gigantic corridor. Through a long circuit between steep walls, the channel brings to the very foot of the first houses the little Italian or Sardinian fishing−boats, and, every fortnight, the old steamboat that runs to and from Ajaccio.

Upon the white mountain the group of houses form a whiter patch still. They look like the nests of wild birds, perched so upon the rock, dominating that terrible channel through which hardly ever a ship risks a passage. The unresting wind harasses the sea and eats away the bare shore, clad with a sparse covering of grass; it rushes into the ravine and ravages its two sides. The trailing wisps of white foam round the black points of countless rocks that everywhere pierce the waves, look like rags of canvas floating and heaving on the surface of the water.

The widow Saverini's house held for dear life to the very edge of the cliff; its three windows looked out over this wild and desolate scene.

She lived there alone with her son Antoine and their bitch Semillante, a large, thin animal with long, shaggy hair, of the sheep−dog breed. The young man used her for hunting.

One evening, after a quarrel, Antoine Saverini was treacherously slain by a knife−thrust from Nicolas Ravolati, who got away to Sardinia the same night.

When his old mother received his body, carried home by bystanders, she did not weep, but for a long time stayed motionless, looking at it; then, stretching out her wrinkled hand over the body, she swore vendetta against him. She would have no one stay with her, and shut herself up with the body, together with the howling dog. The animal howled continuously, standing at the foot of the bed, her head thrust towards her master, her tail held tightly between her legs. She did not stir, nor did the mother, who crouched over the body with her eyes fixed steadily upon it, and wept great silent tears.

The young man, lying on his back, clad in his thick serge coat with a hole torn across the front, looked as though he slept; but everywhere there was blood; on the shirt, torn off for the first hasty dressing; on his waistcoat, on his breeches, on his face, on his hands. Clots of blood had congealed in his beard and in his hair.

The old mother began to speak to him. At the sound of her voice the dog was silent.

“There, there, you shall be avenged, my little one, my boy, my poor child. Sleep, sleep, you shall be avenged, do you hear! Your mother swears it! And your mother always keeps her word; you know she does.”

Slowly she bent over him, pressing her cold lips on the dead lips.

Then Semillante began to howl once more. She uttered long cries, monotonous, heart−rending, horrible cries.

They remained there, the pair of them, the woman and the dog, till morning.

Antoine Saverini was buried next day, and before long there was no more talk of him in Bonifacio.

He had left neither brothers nor close cousins. No man was there to carry on the vendetta. Only his mother, an old woman, brooded over it.

On the other side of the channel she watched from morning till night a white speck on the coast. It was a little Sardinian village, Longosardo, where Corsican bandits fled for refuge when too hard pressed. They formed almost the entire population of this hamlet, facing the shores of their own country, and there they awaited a suitable moment to come home, to return to the maquis of Corsica. She knew that Nicolas Ravolati had taken refuge in this very village.

All alone, all day long, sitting by the window, she looked over there and pondered revenge. How could she do

it without another's help, so feeble as she was, so near to death? But she had promised, she had sworn upon the body. She could not forget, she could not wait. What was she to do? She could no longer sleep at night, she had no more sleep nor peace; obstinately she searched for a way. The dog slumbered at her feet and sometimes, raising her head, howled into the empty spaces. Since her master had gone, she often howled thus, as though she were calling him, as though her animal soul, inconsolable, had retained an ineffaceable memory of him.

One night, as Semillante was beginning to moan again, the mother had a sudden idea, an idea quite natural to a vindictive and ferocious savage. She meditated on it till morning, then, rising at the approach of day, she went to church. She prayed, kneeling on the stones, prostrate before God, begging Him to aid her, to sustain her, to grant her poor worn−out body the strength necessary to avenge her son.

Then she returned home. There stood in the yard an old barrel with its sides stove in, which held the rain−water; she overturned it, emptied it, and fixed it to the ground with stakes and stones; then she chained up Semillante in this kennel, and went into the house.

Next she began to walk up and down her room, taking no rest, her eyes still turned to the coast of Sardinia. He was there, the murderer.

All day long and all night long the dog howled. In the morning the old woman took her some water in a bowl, but nothing else; no soup, no bread.

Another day went by. Semillante, exhausted, was asleep. Next day her eyes were shining, her hair on end, and she tugged desperately at the chain.

Again the old woman gave her nothing to eat. The animal, mad with hunger, barked hoarsely. Another night went by.

When day broke, Mother Saverini went to her neighbour to ask him to give her two trusses of straw. She took the old clothes her husband had worn and stuffed them with the straw into the likeness of a human figure.

Having planted a post in the ground opposite Semillante's kennel, she tied the dummy figure to it, which looked now as though it were standing. Then she fashioned a head with a roll of old linen.

The dog, surprised, looked at this straw man, and was silent, although devoured with hunger.

Then the woman went to the pork−butcher and bought a long piece of black pudding. She returned home, lit a wood fire in her yard, close to the kennel, and grilled the black pudding. Semillante, maddened, leapt about and foamed at the mouth, her eyes fixed on the food, the flavour of which penetrated to her very stomach.

Then with the smoking sausage the mother made a collar for the straw man. She spent a long time lashing it round his neck, as though to stuff it right in. When it was done, she unchained the dog.

With a tremendous bound the animal leapt upon the dummy's throat and with her paws on his shoulders began to rend it. She fell back with a piece of the prey in her mouth, then dashed at it again, sank her teeth into the cords, tore away a few fragments of food, fell back again, and leapt once more, ravenous.

With great bites she rent away the face, and tore the whole neck to shreds.

The old woman watched, motionless and silent, a gleam in her eyes. Then she chained up her dog again, made her go without food for two more days, and repeated the strange performance.

For three months she trained the dog to this struggle, the conquest of a meal by fangs. She no longer chained her up, but launched her upon the dummy with a sign.

She had taught the dog to rend and devour it without hiding food in its throat. Afterwards she would reward the dog with the gift of the black pudding she had cooked for her.

As soon as she saw the man, Semillante would tremble, then turn her eyes towards her mistress, who would cry “Off!” in a whistling tone, raising her finger.

When she judged that the time was come, Mother Saverini went to confession and took communion one Sunday morning with an ecstatic fervour; then, putting on a man's clothes, like an old ragged beggar, she bargained with a Sardinian fisherman, who took her, accompanied by the dog, to the other side of the straits.

In a canvas bag she had a large piece of black pudding. Semillante had had nothing to eat for two days. Every minute the old woman made her smell the savoury food, stimulating her hunger with it.

They came to Longosardo. The Corsican woman was limping slightly. She went to the baker's and inquired for Nicolas Ravolati's house. He had resumed his old occupation, that of a joiner. He was working alone at the back of his shop.

The old woman pushed open the door and called him:

“Hey! Nicolas!”

He turned round; then, letting go of her dog, she cried:

“Off, off, bite him, bite him!”

The maddened beast dashed forward and seized his throat.

The man put out his arms, clasped the dog, and rolled upon the ground. For a few minutes he writhed, beating the ground with his feet; then he remained motionless while Semillante nuzzled at his throat and tore it out in ribbons.

Two neighbours, sitting at their doors, plainly recollected having seen a poor old man come out with a lean black dog which ate, as it walked, something brown that its master was giving to it.

In the evening the old woman returned home. That night she slept well.