

Quite a Lost Art

Table of Contents

Quite a Lost Art.....1

Quite a Lost Art

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"What have you there?" said Robinson. "The draft of a deed or of a last will and testament?"

"Nothing of the sort," replied Brown, "but an odd sort of story in manuscript."

"Ancient?"

"By no means. When I took these lodgings I found it in the cupboard, which had not been opened for several months, and the landlady recognised the handwriting of a former occupant, who, constantly kept at home by stress of weather, was driven to amuse himself by reading all day long the books of an old-fashioned circulating library. The library is now shut up, but I found the catalogue in company with the manuscript. Here it is."

"Ah, I see! Manfrone, the One-handed Monk—Romance of the Pyrenees. The books belong clearly to what may be called the fag-end of the Radcliffe school," observed Robinson.

"Precisely; and it is my opinion that the author of this manuscript, having nothing else to occupy his mind, wrote under the immediate inspiration of those remarkable works," replied Jones.

"Will you lend it to me?"

"Certainly. Keep it as long as you like. The landlady would only use it to light her fire, and I assure you I don't want to read it twice."

So Robinson took the manuscript home and read the following tale, entitled:

THE LAST OF THE COMNENI

The heart of the young and noble Prince Astolfo was ill at ease, as, without fixed purpose or destination, he strode mournfully along the lone path near the summit of Monte Salveggio. His beloved Bandelora had been ruthlessly torn from his arms, and carried he knew not whither by a band of ruffians, and her piercing shrieks seemed to be still ringing in his ears. Nor though the scene spread beneath his feet was curious, did it present many objects likely to cheer the pensive mind. At the mountain's foot, near the Lago Doloroso, stood the deserted abbey of San Corcoro, the windows of which, reddened by the light of the setting sun, showed that the hour was approaching when, if the wild tales of the peasants were true, the ghost of the lawless abbot, with his ribald monks, would rise anew to repeat the hideous orgies that had brought them to destruction. Further onward, on the plain, was the strange mound, with the dark aperture near its base, which had so often awakened the curiosity and awed the soul of the traveller, who, as he saw the Moorish minarets protruding through the earth, as if a building had been buried by some ancient convulsion, could scarcely conjecture whether they had been produced by art, or were the fantastic result of some demonic freak of nature. This mound, too, had been endowed with preternatural awe by the wild tales of the peasants, who regarded it as the abode chosen by the Evil One when he sought to work mischief in the hills and vales of lovely Italy. If to vary his sensations the young prince looked upwards, he saw perched on a sharp crag a small edifice of an almost cubical shape, a rude opening in the upper part of which served for a window, but which presented no appearance of a door. He had heard of this edifice from the peasantry. It was the reputed home of a being simply designated as the Mysterious. And the designation was not ill-chosen, for no one had ever seen him, or heard him, or could say anything about him whatever.

Sometimes as he wandered onwards, the mind of the prince, when not occupied with the fate of his Bandelora, would stray to the strange story he had heard of the dreadful Tebaldo della Crusca, who, when about to be decapitated to satisfy the offended laws of his country, had declared that his head, when severed, would work more mischief than ever it had devised while attached to his shoulders. On this subject, however, he was not allowed to dwell long, for a shout arose beneath so loud and so hideous that, valiant as he was, it caused his heart to quail within him. Looking over the precipice he perceived on a path some twenty feet below him, a repulsive figure, who, with strange antics, roared and howled at the sky, across the slope, which, by a not very abrupt

Quite a Lost Art

declivity, descended to the mountain's foot. The only habiliment worn by this hideous creature was a bottomless sack, fastened round its waist with a thick cord, which left the legs and arms free to disport themselves in the most reckless gesticulations, while the spectral aspect of the figure was heightened by the long dishevelled black hair that hung over its shoulders. Reverting once more to the wild tales of the peasantry, Astolfo had no difficulty in recognising in this miserable being the maniac of the Valle della Bomba, who frequently tore to pieces the children of the mountaineers when he met them in some secluded glen, and then bounded away beyond the reach of their infuriated parents. Nor, though he was richly endowed with the valour of his proud lineage, did Astolfo at all regret that he stood on a spot inaccessible to the maniac, whose contortions and shouts denoted the most ferocious condition of insanity.

The bounds of the monster increasing in height and violence, and therefore threatening to bring him near to the level of Prince Astolfo, the latter involuntarily hastened his steps, and with a smile that ill accorded with his deep melancholy, observed that the maniac did not advance along the path, but confined his leaps to one point. Still pursuing his course, he came to a small ruined chapel, the interior of which was easily visible, and in which he perceived a venerable hermit, deeply engaged in the study of a vellum scroll, while on the rustic table by his side lay a few roots and a skull, apt symbols of the mortality of earthly things. Deeply read in the philosophy of his time, Astolfo was aware that he too had a skull, and therefore his heart yearned with sympathy for the lost possessor of this poor relic of humanity. Still more was he struck with the tranquil appearance of the hermit, and as he yet heard the maniac's voice in the distance, he could not help exclaiming to himself:

"How unlike is the senseless noise of insanity that rendeth the air to the calm silence of wisdom that openeth not the lips!"

Scarcely had he made this profound reflection, when the hermit bounded from his seat, dashed his scroll to the ground, and uttered a savage yell, compared to which the loudest shout of the maniac was but as a whisper.

"Comnenus!" he said. "Comnenus! Rather had I perished in the lowest depths of Vesuvius—" And he sank back upon his seat exhausted.

"Pardon a stranger, Holy Father," said Prince Astolfo, gracefully stepping into the chapel—"pardon a stranger, if he ventures to ask the cause of this strange excitement."

The hermit would probably have repelled him with anger, but the polished manner which had made Astolfo the favourite of every court in Europe was not lost even upon the mountain recluse, and, calming his violent emotion, he answered:

"Welcome, stranger. Sit thee down, and hear the tale of my sorrows and my crimes."

"Crimes!—nay, Holy Father," said Astolfo, with an air of courteous disbelief.

"Ay, crimes, young man," interposed the hermit. "I recognise thy charitable spirit, and I perceive by thine air that thy education hath comprised every branch of knowledge. Still thy intimacy with my affairs is less than mine own. As the tale is somewhat long, first refresh thy mortal frame."

And placing a root in the hands of Astolfo, with a grasp that slightly crushed it, thus causing a damp, unpleasant sensation, he proceeded:

"Being a native of Andalusia, and a descendant of the old Gothic Kings of Spain, I naturally took an interest in the affairs of the Greek empire."

Astolfo did not exactly follow the chain of the hermit's reasoning, but he was too courteous to interrupt him with impertinent questions. The speaker, however, interrupted himself, for again bounding from his seat, he repeated the yell with a violence which made Astolfo place his hands against his ears, and then exclaimed:

"No—I will not relate the story of my grief in the presence of my dead and deadliest foe; for learn, young man, that this skull, which I heedlessly selected as a companion in my retirement from a hated world, is shown by this manuscript to be— But no matter. Thus I cast it from me."

And seizing the skull, he tossed it into the air with a vigour that would have done honour to that thrower of the discus, whose strength is immortalised by the master of sculptural art. A yell from below, louder than any that had been heard before, immediately ensued, and was followed by a profound silence.

"Ha, ha! Then thou heardest plainly the voice of the Comnenus," cried the hermit.

"Something indeed I heard," replied Astolfo, who had a heart that could endure unmoved every shock not immediately concerning himself; "but as I am not personally acquainted with the Comnenus, pardon me if I do not commit myself to a hasty and inconsiderate judgement. Indeed, if it is to that skull that thou givest the name of

Quite a Lost Art

Comnenus, I would rather attribute the cry to some other source, for Professor Esculapio di Galeno, under whom I studied anatomy at Padua, taught his admiring pupils that the human head, severed from the body, is not capable of uttering a whisper, much less a shout like that."

The conjecture of the hermit was indeed incorrect; but the skull, though it had uttered no sound, had been the indirect cause of the terrific yell. The maniac, lured by the first shout of the hermit, had stealthily advance along the lower path, but was suddenly checked by the descending skull, which alighted with such violence upon his head, as to make him lose his footing, and roll down the slope upon the plain, till, accompanied by the ghastly missile, he almost reached the deserted abbey of San Corcoro. The yell heard by the hermit and the prince had been the maniac's expression of pain on receiving the blow.

While these strange events were occurring on the mountain, the spirit of evil had been active on the plain. The abbey was tenanted, not, as the peasantry supposed, by the ghosts of its former occupants, but by the band of ruffians who had carried off the peerless Bandelora, and who had made it their home, well knowing that popular superstition would shield them from all chance of intrusion. On the evening to which we now refer, a wild orgie was held by the marauders. At the head of a table which groaned beneath the weight of solid viands, and flagons filled with the inebriating juice of the grape, sat the leader of the lawless band, Ruggiero del Torrente, the terror of the Alps, the Appenines, and occasionally of the Pyrenees; while on each side were his reckless followers, who, heated with the generous liquor, shouted forth ribald jests, scarcely intelligible save to those who respectively uttered them, inasmuch as scarcely two of the ruffians came from the same land, or spoke the same tongue. At the further extremity of the hall sat a lovely female, whose hands were bound behind her, and who, with the fixedness of despair, watched the proceedings of the revellers. We need scarcely say that this was Bandelora.

"Hast thou reflected maturely on my proposal, coy lady?" said the terrible captain, after draining a vast golden goblet richly studded with diamonds. He then repeated the question in all the languages of his followers, that they might understand his meaning, for he had travelled in many lands, and was master of many tongues.

"I have only," said Bandelora, "to repeat my declaration of that hatred and contempt which I have already expressed till my tongue is weary. Sooner would I be the spouse of the malefactor whose gibbeted remains scare the mariners of the Adriatic than the bride of Ruggiero del Torrente. In that case, she added, with little scorn, "I should at any rate be a widow."

This reply was translated into the various languages by the captain, who, however, with the craftiness incident to his nature, took care to soften those expressions that might possibly have humiliated him in the eyes of his band, and perhaps have raised a laugh at his own expense.

"Night approacheth," he then proceeded, "and no marvel, for the mode in which we are compelled to converse causes small matter of discussion to fill up much time. Let that lamp, which suspended from the ceiling affordeth as much light as our dark souls desire, be kindled without delay." This done, he again addressed the fair captive. "Mark that flickering flame. Unless before it expires thou hast given thy consent to be united to me by the hermit of the Ruined Chapel, ay, and at tomorrow's dawn, thine obstinacy shall be punished with thy life."

The translation of this dreadful menace into the required languages gave Bandelora time for deliberation. When the polyglot speech was ended, she mentally folded her arms—the circumstance that her hands were tied behind her prevented her from doing so bodily—and looking full in the face of Ruggiero, she said in an unshaken voice:

"Miserable ruffian! Were my hands at liberty, I would instantly dash out the light with the contents of yonder flagon. As this is not the case, thou mayst, as the ignoble vulgar say, take the will for the deed, and, considering the lamp morally extinguished already, execute they foolish menace at once."

The captain was too much enraged to think of translation now, so merely exclaiming, "I take thee at thy rash word," he drew a pistol from his girdle, and pointed it towards Bandelora. The ruffians, rising from the table, retired to the opposite side of the hall, and watched the proceedings with fixed attention. Alas! the hard hearts of these rugged men were slightly moved by the sufferings of the lovely captive, but they felt deeply interested in the correctness of their captain's aim. As for Bandelora, she stood unmoved, like one for whom life has lost its every charm.

Quite a Lost Art

Ruggiero was, however, spared the commission of another crime. Just as he was about to fire, a missile flew into the hall through the window fronting him with a fearful crash, and extinguishing the lamp in its course, struck him violently in the middle of the face, causing him to fall backwards with a shriek of pain, while the contents of his pistol, discharged as he fell, were received in the bosom of the first lieutenant, who expired on the spot. All were enwrapped in the sable mantle of darkness.

The first impulse of Bandelora, when she had recovered from the surprise occasioned by the unexpected turn which affairs had taken—apt symbol of human mutability!—was to attempt flight. This appeared the more easy as the band were engaged with the fallen captain and the deceased lieutenant, their assistance to whom was greatly impeded by the darkness, so that in spite of their well meant efforts their energies were chiefly expended in jostling each other. But as she advanced towards the door, rendered unable to grope her way by the inconvenient position of her hands, she accidentally set her foot upon a small round body, which, rolling beneath her, caused her to fall backwards, knocking her head so sharply against the table that she was well-nigh stunned. She was, however, sufficiently sensible to appreciate the kindness of a voice, which gently whispered into her ear:

"Be not afraid. Consent to accompany Ruggiero to the Ruined Chapel, and deliverance will be at hand. Astolfo to the rescue!"

Thus solaced, and favoured by the darkness, Bandelora composed herself to sleep, as well as her position would allow.

The strange events which we have just recorded may easily be explained. Recovering from his torpor when the sun had set, the maniac, who had lain extended upon the plain near the abbey, had felt the skull by his side, and, with that shrewdness which not unfrequently accompanies insanity, conjectured that this round object, revealed to his touch though not to his sight, had caused his rapid descent from the lower mountain-path. In an access of mad wrath he vengefully snatched it from the ground and hurled it before him. It passed through the abbey window, breaking the glass and striking down the captain of the robbers, while the crash which it produced so greatly alarmed the maniac that he at once fled from the spot. It is scarcely necessary to state that the missile which had struck Ruggiero was the round body on which Bandelora had heedlessly set her foot.

Return we to Astolfo and the hermit, whom we left at sunset conversing in the Ruined Chapel. The holy man, freed from the presence of the offending skull, had gradually resumed his composure, and thus recommenced his narrative:

"Being a native of Andalusia—"

"Exactly. You took an interest in the Greek empire," said Astolfo, with some impatience.

"True," returned the hermit. "Another prevailing sentiment I had inherited from my noble ancestors was hatred of the Moors, who, infidel dogs as they were, oppressed my suffering land."

"But that was a long time ago," interposed Astolfo.

"Young man," said the hermit, mournfully, "when the number of thy years is as that of mine, thou wilt know that hatred is not measured by lapse of time. Still I must confess that in the case of my ancestors the tyranny of the Moors was not altogether intolerable. For an estate that covered many fair acres they merely required to pay to the Moorish king of Cordoba the annual tribute of an ivory bandelore for the amusement of the royal children. But night is approaching—nay, already begins to enfold us—so let me illumine my humble dwelling by lighting this candle end, and placing it in the neck of this bottle of stone."

Having performed this act, and reduced the wick to its proper dimensions by a dexterous application of his thumb and middle finger, the hermit continued, not discovering the increased mournfulness that had overspread the already melancholy face of Astolfo:

"The bandelore, as perchance thou art not aware, is an ingenious toy, which derives its origin from the East. It is composed of two small discs, connected by an axle, to which a cord is attached."

"Like this?" inquired Astolfo, drawing from his bosom a bandelore of exquisite workmanship.

"That! That!" ejaculated the recluse. "Thou must have obtained that from the fiend himself."

"Nay, calm thyself, holy man," cried Astolfo. "Seeing that thou leadest so strict a life, I marvel that thou art so quick in temper. This toy belonged to the being whom I love more than anything on earth."

Quite a Lost Art

"The young and inexperienced often love that which is evil," said the hermit, with a sneer.

"But this belonged to an innocent child."

"Whose name was—"

"Nay, her true name I know not, as I am ignorant of her parentage. She was found in infancy with this toy suspended round her neck, and has in consequence been called Banelora."

"Let me look at it more closely," cried the hermit, snatching the toy from the hand of his guest. "Yes—true—the crest of the griffin! Ha, ha! the fates pursue me; but I will escape them yet!"

So saying, he rushed out of the chapel and hurried down the mountain path, approaching a point where in its descent it joined the lower path, whence the maniac had fallen. Climbing from the plain beneath after his hurried flight from the abbey, the maniac from below reached this point at the same time with the hermit. Involuntarily they were locked in each other's arms, and then rolled together down the slope into the plain until they passed through the aperture in the strange-looking mound to which we have already referred.

Astolfo, grieved as he was at the loss of the precious toy, felt rather gratified than otherwise by the sudden departure of the hermit, of whose unaccountable ebullitions of temper he had become somewhat weary. Still he wishes to know something more about him, and to that end picked up the scroll that had been thrown down on the ground, on the occasion of the apparent discovery that the skull ought properly to be called "Comnenus." Reducing the candle's wick by the process already employed by the hermit, and moving the stone bottle to a position which rendered study as easy as possible, he read as follows:

"Gomez del Valparaiso, born on the banks of the Guadalquivir, held a high office at the Byzantine Court."

His farther progress was checked by the sudden pressure of his hat over his eyes, apparently by the action of a human hand, while a breath, apparently from a human mouth, extinguished the light. Almost immediately afterwards his hands were seized and bound behind the back of his chair, and a voice whispered:

"Fear not; this is all for thy good. The Mysterious is thy friend."

The hermit on recovering his senses, after his involuntary passage with the maniac through the aperture, found himself in a spacious hall lit by coloured lamps, placed at distant intervals from each other, and inferred from the architectural ornaments which he saw around him that the building had originally been the work of the Saracens. He could the more readily devote his attention to these details, as he had frequently beheld his strange companion performing frantic feats on the mountain-path, and therefore felt no curiosity concerning him. As for the maniac himself, as he had not any senses to recover, he drew no inference whatever.

The pair had not remained many minutes in the hall, when a stately person, attired after the Oriental usage, advanced from a recess, his swarthy countenance beaming with a courtesy which vanished when, as it seemed, he recognised the features of the hermit.

"Thou art Sancho del Valparaiso, and that is mine," thundered forth the stranger, snatching the bandelore, which the recluse had retained during his descent. The hermit sank trembling on his knees, but, quick as thought, his head fell to the ground severed from the trunk by the scimitar of the Moor, with the exclamation, "Thus perish the foes of Abderrahman!"

A short silence ensued, and then the Moor again lifted his voice, crying:

"Where is thy vile comrade?"

But the maniac, instinctively detecting the approach of danger, had stealthily stolen away through the aperture, and was now wildly leaping on the plain without, though he refrained from his wonted practice of yelling, lest his voice might attract the attention of the Moor.

The course of the night appeared tardy to Astolfo as he sat bound in the Ruined Chapel, and at last yielding to nature's gentlest summons, he fell fast asleep. In the morning he was awakened by the sound of military music, and was pleased to find that he could stretch out his arms. His hat was also removed from the position in which it had so much embarrassed him, and sat in seemly fashion on his head. On the table lay the scroll, with its back

Quite a Lost Art

towards him, inscribed, "Push the wall," in words that had evidently been but lately written.

Wondering what this could mean, he now looked towards the direction of the mound, and saw ascending the steps towards the point where the lower and upper paths joined, a procession, led by a male and a female figure, and ending with two men, carrying what was apparently a lifeless body. We need scarcely explain that this procession was formed by Ruggiero's wild troop, and that the two leaders were the stern captain himself and the fair Bandelora, who, dissembling her hate, had unwillingly accompanied him to the Ruined Chapel. The body, which was that of the lieutenant, bore witness to the captain's regard for the treasury of the band. By requesting the hermit to bury the deceased as soon as he had joined the hands of the living, he hoped to obtain an abatement of the remuneration commonly demanded for the performance of two ceremonies so distinct from each other.

When the procession reached the junction point, Astolfo at once recognised with ecstatic joy the form of his lost bandelora. He at once rushed down the upper path, snatched her in his arms, and rushed back to the Ruined Chapel. Ruggiero, stirred by the unlikeness of the stranger to the recluse, whom he had expected to find, was too much astounded to make any resistance, but in a few seconds he loudly called on his men to follow him, and hurried up the path. No sooner, however, had he reached the front of the chapel, than the wall fell with a terrific crash, overwhelming the marauders in its ruin. Some of them, including Ruggiero, were killed by their precipitate fall upon the lower path, some rolled, or ran unscathed, into the plain. But these had small cause for exultation, as a stately figure, dressed in Oriental fashion, appeared on the plain, and hurrying now in this direction, now in that, decapitated them one by one with a large scimitar. While this carnage was proceeding, the maniac on the lower path was whirling round and round with the most frantic shrieks, till at last, rushing to the brink of an abyss, which we have not mentioned, he leaped into the darkness, and never was heard of more.

When Astolfo and his rescued Bandelora, having left the scene of so many horrors, were resting at an humble but hospitable village inn, a boy of dark complexion, dressed in the Moorish habit, presented to them a small box, and then, with a graceful salaam, retired. On opening the box, they found the skull that had been so intimately connected with their fortunes, and likewise a vellum scroll, thus inscribed:

"The Moor, Abderrahman, sends to Theodora, wrongly called Bandelora, this precious relic of her father Isaac, wrongly called Tebaldo della Crusca, but really the last of the Comneni, and rightful Emperor of the East."

(end)