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The Mystery of the Black Convent. An Interesting Spanish Tale of the Eleventh Century.

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THE
MYSTERY
OF THE
Black Convent.

AN INTERESTING
SPANISH TALE
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ELEVENTH CENTURY.



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MYSTERY

OF THE

Black Convent,

&c. &c.

IN a remote part of Old Castile, surrounded by lofty mountains, and begirt with shadowy groves, stood the once stupendous monastery of St. Lawrence, a pile of gloomy architecture, inhabited by Monks of the order of Carthusians. This fabric, from its retired and solitary situation, as well as from the peculiarity of its structure, was well adapted to the purposes of monastic life, and became the rigid manners of the melancholy devotees it secluded.——Its walls were built of grey stone, which in time assumed so dark a hue, that it acquired the appellation of the *Black Convent*. The windows were so thickly adorned by the pencil of the artist, that the light could scarcely be said to penetrate the building; whilst the gloomy pines which darkened its avenues, considerably heightened the solemnity of this sequestered scene.

The traveller who now pursues his route through the neighbouring vallies, scarcely perceives a vestige of this once celebrated edifice ; and the events which took place in it would have been equally veiled in oblivion, had not the fair pen of Alberto de Riga, one of its residents, recorded and transmitted them to posterity. It is to the page of Alberto we are indebted for the following narrative :

ON the eve of the festival of the Epiphany, in the year 1140, a period marked by the deepest superstition, and deformed by the most atrocious cruelty, a young man, of elegant and engaging manners, entered the Carthusian monastery of St. Lawrence, with a view, as he stated, of secluding himself wholly from the world, and of preparing for the perfections of a future state, by a strict and implicit adherence to the duties enjoined by that pious Order. The letters of recommendation he produced contained such testimonies in his favour, as to procure him the unlimited patronage of the superior, Father Fernando, and the confidence of every other Monk esteemed for his piety or celebrated for his learning.

The prepossession which the first appearance of St. Almé had excited, was fully justified by his subsequent demeanor ; and the reputation for learning which report had assigned to him, was confirmed on a variety of occasions. He displayed, on the most abstruse subjects, an extent of information which frequently astonished his auditors, and evinced a degree of knowledge in theological matters, which appeared altogether incompatible with his youth. The lethargic friar, who had been dozing so many years over the intricate page of science, without obtaining the object of his research, was surprised to find that a mere stripling, unassisted by long experience and the aid of retirement, had so far exceeded his own exertions, as to have achieved difficulties which he had deemed insurmountable ; and, in the superstitious

temper of the times, was half disposed to attribute such talent to the possession of preternatural endowments.

Three years had elapsed since the introduction of St. Alme to the monastery of St. Lawrence, and during that period he had manifested the utmost serenity and composure of mind. He had discharged the duties allotted to him with alacrity, and had conformed to the several rituals, without murmuring, when, all at once, his native cheerfulness forsook him; a cloud of discontent settled on his brow, and absorbed every thought in melancholy abstraction!—He was no longer anxious to display the lustre of his talents, or to obtain the applauses of the brotherhood; his eloquence slept in silence, and his devotion became rather characterized by the gloominess of penitence than the fervor of religion.

The first person to whom this change in the manner of St. Alme became apparent, was the Superior.—Father Fernando, who had ever admired his exemplary conduct, and had from his talents and conversation derived considerable gratification, beheld this sudden transformation with regret; and as he reflected on the probable cause of his present dejection, it occurred to him that St. Alme had, on two or three occasions, during illness, officiated for him as Confessor at a neighbouring convent of Nuns, and he concluded that the youth had been weak enough to suffer his mind to be enslaved by the fascinations of beauty.

“ So,” said the Superior, one morning, looking earnestly at the recluse, “ I have made a discovery; love is the cause of your dejection!” At these words, the palid cheeks of St. Alme were suffused by a tint as vivid as shame can kindle. He endeavoured to conceal the emotion which this observation had evidently excited, by glancing on some indifferent subject; but the Abbot, convinced that he had in his

penetration discovered the latent secret which interfered with his repose, now began to caution his pupil against the indulgence of his passions, and pointed out to him the evils which result from neglecting to regulate our appetites. —“ If you persist,” said he, “ to cherish this idle impulse of imagination, it must tend to the disgrace of our sacred order, and terminate in your own wretchedness and ruin. Is it possible,” continued the devotee, “ that you who came into this hallowed abode with the most pious sentiments, and actuated by the most laudable of purposes, (for I will not believe, ’spite of your evident confusion and embarrassment, that you entered these walls with any dishonourable view) is it possible, I say, that you can have so far forgotten the inspiration which first prompted you to embrace our vows, as to yield to the delusive dreams of sensuality!—What earthly charm can compensate ethereal joy!—Oh! son, you now totter on the brink of an abyss, into which your passions soon must plunge you. Shun, then, the frightful precipice; repel, with the aids of reason and reflection, the insidious advances of bewitching temptation, and resist the allurements of pleasure, that you may avoid the atonement of despair.”—The Abbot would have proceeded with his pious exhortation, had not St. Alme interrupted him, by the most earnest protestations of his innocence, and by an assurance that whilst he remained a member of that sacred order, he would never disgrace it by the commission of any unworthy act.

“ Then,” said the Superior, “ if guilt has no connection with your despondency, why will you not reveal the cause?”—“ To mention the cause of our sorrows,” said the young anchorite, “ is but to lacerate anew those wounds which, if left to the influence of time and patience, may perhaps be healed again. The compassionate can surely take no pleasure in witnessing the overwhelming anguish of the grief-fraught bosom.”—“ Yes,” said the Abbot,

“ the bosom that is capable of sympathy, “ may even from that source derive a melancholy pleasure, since it affords him an opportunity of sharing the miseries of a friend, and of imparting the consolation his unbiassed judgment is capable of affording. But your inflexibility is useless. Have-I not divined the real cause of your distress? Yes, I can perceive you now regret your seclusion from the busy world; you lament the former pleasures of your giddy youth, and sigh for the absence of the dear object who awakens in your bosom the transports of passion—that object who fills your imagination with impious thoughts, and tears you from the altars of offended Heaven.”

“ Oh, father, urge this theme no longer,” said St. Alme; “ this advice partakes rather of austerity than kindness, and wears more the shape of reproof than consolation. Whatever is the cause which robs me of repose, be assured I never will reveal it: solitude and silence only can allay my pangs, death alone can terminate them.”——“ This obstinate adherence to your follies,” said the Abbot, “ reminds me of the conduct of the Carthusian who was this morning interred in the Abbey cemetery. During the first year of his residence in the monastery, he was ever brooding over some secret sorrow, and indulging a train of melancholy reflections: he would, like yourself, resist the consolations of friendship, and spurn the advice of experience; but he lived to repent of his contumacy; for, at a period when he discovered that the effect of time had obliterated the impression of his woes, and the complacency of his mind had returned, he found he was no longer in the possession of health to enjoy it. The ravages of disease, brought on by the indulgence of despair, terminated prematurely his existence. He spoke formerly with the same unconcern as you do of the approach of death, and even impiously invoked his presence; but I sincerely believe he never valued life more than at the period he parted with it.”——

Here St. Alme heaved a deep sigh; and turning aside to wipe away a tear which trickled down his cheek, he abruptly left the presence of the Superior.

As soon as St. Alme had quitted the Abbot, Father Martinez, a man of the most subtle and inquisitive temper, entered the chamber. "So," said the Superior, "I have been in conversation with St. Alme on the subject of his melancholy, and have endeavoured, by friendly advice, to assuage it, but to no purpose; he is as insensible to consolation as the cause of his grief is mysterious. Has his abstraction escaped your observation?"—"I have remarked it," replied Martinez, "but I noted it only as a matter which concerned himself."

"To what source do you attribute his sadness?" said the Abbot.—"The mind of man is a labyrinth," said Martinez, "which I have long ceased to explore. I have drawn so many fallacious conclusions from appearance, that I should be sorry to impute the feelings of St. Alme to any unjustifiable cause; and yet the sentiments of the heart are sometimes so strongly depicted in the countenance, that a conjecture is almost as satisfactory as a proof. But I will not judge by this criterion of St. Alme."

"In speaking of the melancholy of St. Alme," said the Superior, "I am rather disposed to consider it as a matter of regret, than as a subject for reprehension; for when I reflect upon his hitherto blameless conduct, his gentleness of temper, his suavity of manners, I cannot for a moment connect with it the idea of guilt."—"Nor I, be assured," said the crafty Friar.—"Then let us drop the subject," said the Abbot, "and leave this mystery to the interpretation of chance."—"I forego the investigation most willingly," said Martinez, and quitted the chamber of the Superior.

This Friar had been long jealous of the attention which the Superior had paid to the opinions of St. Alme; and the reputation which that youth had ac-

quired for talent and extensive learning, had, in no small degree, wounded his proud and ambitious spirit. Notwithstanding the indifference he professed on the subject of St. Alme's melancholy, it was to him a source of continual reflection; and in his determination to sift into the motive of it, he anticipated the possibility of discovering some blemish in his moral character, which might considerably lower him in the estimation of the Abbot, and tarnish the lustre of his talents.

"If," said the Friar, "I could get an opportunity of remarking his conduct in the moments of privacy, I might perhaps discover some clue to assist me in my inquiries; he might probably disclose some unguarded expression which would reveal at once the secret I am so anxious to unravel."

For that purpose, on the same evening, when all had retired to rest, Martinez stole from his cell, and cautiously entered the gallery which communicated with that occupied by St. Alme. He approached the cell, and through a narrow casement perceived the melancholy youth, who reclined on his couch in extreme dejection. The tears now streamed down his cheeks; and now he sighed as if his heart were bursting; he now drew from beneath his habit a portrait, on which he fixed his eyes with wild emotion; now he started suddenly from his couch, and rent his garment in a frenzy of despair!—When this paroxysm had subsided, he again gazed intently on the portrait. As he held it before the lamp, which cheered the darkness of his cell, Martinez endeavoured to discriminate the features, but in vain; he perceived, however, that it was not the semblance of a female. "The Abbot, then," said the Friar to himself, "is mistaken; love is *not* the cause of his perturbation. This must be the portrait of some regretted relative, some invaluable friend, of whose decease he may have lately gained intelligence; or it may be, perhaps—horrible suggestion!—the image

of some murdered wretch!—the victim of impetuous rage—a sacrifice to jealous fury! What could occasion else this wild despair, these transports of unbounded sorrow!—Yes, these are the racks of ever wakeful conscience, which agonize the bosom of the murderer!—He has sought to bury in these awful glooms the throbbings of that guilt which the busy eye of the suspicious world have soon detected; and yet the complacency of temper, the serenity of mind which, till of late, have marked his conduct, puzzle my investigation, and must forbid me to rely on this conjecture.”

St. Alme continued to gaze on the picture with uninterrupted attention, till his sight became dimmed by the tears which gradually suffused his eyes.—When again concealing it under his garment, he uttered some exclamation which was unintelligible to the listening friar, and threw himself on his couch in wild despondency!—As the mourner lay extended on the pallet, the inquisitive Monk observed, with increased astonishment, the throbbing bosom of a Woman, revealed through the aperture which her unguarded desperation had occasioned!—This discovery gave birth to a new mystery; and the longer he endeavoured to explore it, the more bewildered he became in his research.

The Friar, in ascribing to the despair of the fictitious Saint Alme a criminal motive, had only imagined a degree of guilt from which he had himself with difficulty escaped. During his intercourse with the world, he had been the slave of headlong passion and ungoverned appetite; he had ever indulged his inclinations without restraint, and had plunged into a thousand excesses without reflection; till at length, aroused by the suggestions of remorse, and apprehensive of incurring greater crimes, he fled from the lures of temptation, by embracing a monastic life. Here his passions had only slumbered; they were not exterminated. At many an interval, when duty

only should have claimed his thoughts, would the busy whispers of imagination recall the airy forms of pleasures past, and hope illude him with delights to come.—As he gazed on the recumbent female, he saw a thousand beauties which had hitherto escaped his observation; he felt that the resolution of the puritan was fast receding; and shuddering at the idea, sought in repose to lull the turbulence of passion.

Three days had now elapsed since the Friar's first discovery, and during that period no other subject had employed his thoughts. At one moment he had been elated by hope, at another dejected by doubt; at one interval, the voice of fancy awakened and warmed his passions; at another, the stern mandates of conscience chilled and repressed them; till at length, wearied with the conflict, he determined to seek the gratification which reason and religion strove in vain to counteract.—He sought the cell of the fair incognita; he there avowed his knowledge of her sex, and declared himself the slave of her attractions. He protested to preserve the discovery an inviolable secret; but the condition of that secrecy proposed such terms, as awakened the indignation of the fair recluse. Thus, the illusions of hope were in a moment destroyed, and the emotions which lust had excited were now succeeded by those of revenge. He had observed that the stranger held frequent conversations with the sexton of the Abbey, and that the approach of a third person evidently alarmed and disconcerted them; that the place of their conference was usually in a gloomy recess, contiguous to the chapel, and the period of assignation about an hour before vespers.—Anxious to discover the purport of these meetings, Martinez determined to conceal himself near the spot. At the usual hour the fair stranger arrived, and was soon joined by the sexton.

The Friar had placed himself in such a situation, as not to be liable to detection, and yet sufficiently near, as he imagined, to overhear their conversation;

but several minutes elapsed before Martinez could correctly distinguish the subject of their discourse.— At length, the following words were audible :

“ He lies,” said the sexton, “ in the furthest vault west of the Abbey ; you will have no occasion to carry thither a torch ; for when you have opened the iron gate at the entrance, (of which this is the key) and descended a few steps, you will perceive a lamp, which has been burning for the last ten years over the remains of one Genariello, a rich merchant of Barcelona, who left a considerable bequest to the monastery for that purpose. About an hour after vespers the Monks will have retired to their cells ; then, when all is still and silent, you may fulfil your awful purpose ; and St. Anthony prosper you with it !—Thank Heaven, I have no such commission to execute ; for I would not visit a church-yard after dark, to buy the blessings of a Popedom !—But be sure you are unobserved.”——“ I shall obey your caution,” said the female.

The bell now tolled for vespers ; and the sexton and his companion separated. Martinez hastened to the chapel, where his devotions were interrupted by his unceasing rumination on the mysterious words he had overheard, and his conjectures as to the motives of the stranger’s intended visit to the charnel house. Before he had drawn any satisfactory inference from his reflections, the evening service was at an end.

The Friar retired to his cell, and having remained there till near the appointed time, he cautiously stole into the Abbey church-yard, where placing himself behind a yew-tree, he anxiously awaited the arrival of the lady.—About half an hour passed in tedious expectation ; when at length a foot-step beat the path ; some one approached the place of his concealment, and passed on towards the spot the sexton had described. Martinez followed in cautious silence.

A person, whom the Friar concluded to be the fair stranger, now stopped before the sepulchre ;

she gently opened the gate, and descended the steps.—The Friar had now arrived at the entrance of the vault; the stranger was no longer in sight.—Here Martinez paused for a moment. A suggestion of the most atrocious nature crossed his mind. “Here,” said he, “all is hushed in gloomy silence—no listening ear to catch the moans of supplicating beauty—no interposing arm to snatch her from my wild embrace.—Yes! imperious passion points the way, and reason vainly interposes.”

With a palpitating heart the Friar closed the gate, and descending the steps which led to the vault, he perceived the fair adventurer, who proceeded along with slow and solemn pace. He was on the point of rushing towards her, when he saw, as he imagined, a third person cross the extremity of the vault. The female shrieked aloud, and swooned in terror on the earth.

With new astonishment the Friar fled, and sought the concealment of his cell. Here he renewed his conjectures as to the extraordinary conduct of the stranger, and the mysterious incident he had just witnessed. In the first suggestions of jealousy and disappointment, he concluded the object who had occasioned his flight to have been some favoured rival; yet a little reflection refuted the probability of the supposition; for he recollected, that the sudden terror which actuated the lady, must have arisen from the unexpected appearance of the person who crossed the vault.

Again, however, deliberating on the subject, his first conjecture was renewed. He imagined that she might have overheard his footsteps, and that the dread of being detected in her wanton purpose, had inspired her with terror.

The last interpretation he considered to be a just solution of the mystery; and, influenced by jealousy and revenge, determined to make her guilt the sub-

ject of public investigation ; not recollecting, in the moment of frenzy, that his own conduct might be implicated in the accusation of the fair one.

He therefore again entered the church-yard, with an intention of preventing the escape of the culprit, by locking the gate of the sepulchre. As he approached it, he imagined that he heard her voice ; and, with the conviction that she was still in the vault, immediately secured the entrance.

Martinez now hastened into the monastery, and communicated to every Friar he met his suspicions of the criminality of the supposed St. Alme. In a few minutes the revengeful Monk was surrounded by a throng of devotees.

Martinez, bearing a torch in his hand, led the way to the cemetery. It was agreed, that only he and Father Siffred should enter the vault, and that with caution, lest any subterraneous passage, unknown to them and communicating with this place of sepulture, might favour the escape of those they sought to detect. The rest of the fraternity who had assembled on this occasion, were to await the signal of Friar Martinez, and then to rush into the vault, and assist in the apprehension of the offenders.

Martinez and his associates accordingly descended into the catacomb, where, by the feeble light of the lamp suspended there, they perceived the female who had assumed the title of St. Alme, folded in the embrace of one, whose features they could not now distinguish.

On the signal of Martinez, a host of Carthusians entered the vault, and dragged from this receptacle of death the astonished female and her suspected paramour.—[*See the Frontispiece.*]

Father Siffred proposed to conduct them immediately into the presence of the Superior ; but, on the suggestion of Martinez, it was agreed that it would be more prudent to let the Abbot examine them separately, as any prevarication in their evidence would

be then more easily detected. The fair delinquent, therefore, was dragged into the presence of the Abbot, surrounded by her accusers, who, with all the eloquence which enthusiasm inspired, and all the virulence their malice dictated, arraigned her conduct.

“ Here is one,” said Martinez, “ who has violated the peaceful recesses of the dead by unholy obtrusion ; one who has profaned the sanctuaries of religion, by committing the foulest of crimes !”

“ How ! is it possible,” exclaimed the Superior, in surprise, “ that I behold in the pious, the learned Saint Alme, a criminal like what you have described !”

“ The pious, the learned St. Alme,” said the infuriate bigot, “ is all a fiction ! His actions form a system of deliberate fraud ; his very semblance is the prototype of falsehood ! But why do I keep you longer in suspense ! The impostor who stands before you, thus unawed, thus insolent in vice, is one who has disguised her sex, for the most flagrant of purposes.—This is no longer the demure, the insinuating Saint Alme, who has hitherto mocked our investigation, and sported with our credulity ; but a vicious, an abandoned woman !—a woman, who has, by the most artful means, obtained access to that asylum which she has degraded by the worst of crimes !”

The indignation which now flushed the cheek of the Superior, for a few moments prevented him from giving utterance to words. At length recovering his composure, he commanded Martinez to detail the particulars which constituted the guilt of the accused.

The Friar immediately obeyed the requisition of the Abbot, by relating the adventures he had witnessed in the vault ; annexing to his description such circumstances as might tend to aggravate her offence in the eyes of the Superior.

The malice of Martinez had its intended effect ; for such was the abhorrence it excited in the mind of the Abbot towards the conduct of the prisoner, that he refused to listen to her defence.

“ If I am not allowed to vindicate myself,” said the female, “ suffer me at least to do justice to the conduct of another.”

“ A proper advocate, truly,” said Martinez, “ to plead for the companion of her guilt !”

“ You allude, doubtless, to the party who is implicated in your crime,” said the Superior. “ We can listen to nothing *you* can urge in extenuation of his offence.”

“ Then, father,” said the lady, “ I will not speak of him. I shall perhaps only injure his cause. He has claims to your attention which I own I do not possess. I own I am not spotless ; but I am guiltless, at least of the crime imputed to me.”

“ It is unnecessary,” said Martinez, “ to take up the time of the Superior, in obliging him to listen to the apologies which one offender makes for another.”

“ I speak not of the offending,” said the female, “ when I refer to him you have dared to slander.— Were guilt my theme, I should chuse another subject to descant on : I would point out to the attention of the Superior one whose hypocrisy hath hitherto concealed his crimes ! — Yes, father ; the man who is thus vehement in his accusation of me, is one who would have dishonoured this sanctuary more by his own profligate conduct. As soon as he discovered my sex, which he owns to have effected by meanly prying into my hours of retirement, he avowed himself the slave of appetite, and sought to lure me, by professions of secrecy, to his vile embrace. With indignation I spurned his advances, and treated his propositions with the contempt they deserved.— This is the mode he has adopted to re-

quite his disappointment, and avenge his injured pride."

These words produced an evident degree of embarrassment in the countenance of Martinez, which, fortunately for the hypocritical friar, was relieved by the interference of Father Siffred.

"Is it possible," said the latter, "that guilt can be possessed of so much assurance?—Unpardonable presumption! to cast so foul an imputation on a member of this Order! a man who has hitherto defied the voice of calumny, and smiled at the insinuations of slander."

"We have never, it is true," said the Superior, "observed the slightest deviation from duty in the person of the Father she accuses; and therefore we are obliged, from impartial justice, to suppose that it proceeds from a desire to criminate another, as the best means of lessening her own guilt."

"A judicious decision!" exclaimed the accuser.

"But even admitting such to have been really the unworthiness of Father Martinez," said the Abbot, "does that in any measure palliate your first offence? You came into this asylum to practise a deliberate deception and impose upon the unsuspecting temper of our Order, by assuming a garb incompatible with your sex, and thus counteracting the designs of Providence!—What construction can we put on such duplicity? The intent appears too obvious. Then, as the scene of your pollution, you impiously invade the sacred repository of the dead!—O! monstrous guilt!"—

"Ah! Father," exclaimed the accused female, "little did I imagine to find in the person of the Superior so inflexible a judge, so inveterate an enemy!"

"Away with her!" exclaimed Martinez, "her tongue becomes slanderous."

“Hear me, Father Fernando,” again exclaimed the persecuted female. “Listen to my exculpation, nor prejudice my crime.” — “Away with her!” vociferated the surrounding Friars.

In vain did the delinquent attempt to assert her innocence; in vain did she appeal to the mercy of the Abbot; her feeble exclamations were drowned by the clamours of reproach, and the accents of despair lost in the tumultuous threats of her enemies.

Being removed from the presence of the Abbot, she was conducted to a subterraneous chamber, there to abide the sentence of the rigorous law.

After the dismissal of the imaginary Saint Alme, the Superior required her accomplice to be brought before him. Father Siffred was deputed to obey the mandate.

After a short interval, the Friar returned, with a countenance indicating strong symptoms of terror!

Martinez questioned him as to the cause of his agitation. — “Holy St. Francis!” exclaimed the friar, “what a sight have I beheld! — As I entered the dungeon which contained, as I supposed, the criminal we recently secured, the ghastly apparition of the buried Anselm met my startled eyes!”

“Psha!” interrupted the Abbot, “this must be the illusion of your imagination.”

“I protest, by all good angels,” said the Friar, “what I have advanced is true.”

“Father Nicholas and I,” said Martinez, “will solve this riddle. We’ll to the dungeon straight.”

In a few minutes Martinez and his associate returned, leading in a man of a pale visage and emaciated appearance, habited in sepulchral clothes.

“Gracious God!” exclaimed the Superior, as he gazed on the person of the prisoner, “do I, indeed, behold the image of Father Anselm, whom we some days ago consigned to the jaws of the sepulchre, as the victim of insatiate death! For Heaven’s sake, speak — unveil the mysteries which confound us.”

“ Alas ! ” replied Anselm, “ I am now unequal to the task ;—let me retire to my cell, to recruit exhausted nature—and on the morrow, with the indulgence of Heaven, I will reveal to you the origin of the mysterious incidents of this eventful night.”——Here the debilitated prisoner fainted in the arms of the friar who supported him.——In a few moments he revived, and was conveyed to his cell ; where every consolation was administered to him which his situation demanded.

The night being far advanced, Father Fernando retired to his couch ; but his reflections upon the extraordinary occurrences which had lately engaged his investigation, prevented him from enjoying the blessings of repose.

Early on the morning succeeding the crimination of the supposed St. Alme, the Superior received an epistle to the following effect :

“ Deaf as you have hitherto been to the pleadings of an injured woman, obstinately as you have refused to listen to the defence of a supposed criminal, (a privilege which is rarely denied even to the guilty) I shall make one more appeal to your humanity.——What, in the capacity of a judge, you have resisted, you may, perhaps, accede to, in the character of a friend ; or if friendship is silent in my behalf, let the mere impulse of curiosity induce you to a perusal of the subsequent detail :

“ I am the daughter of Don Raymond de Spalanza, who formerly resided at Madrid. At an early period of life I was sent to the convent of Ursulines in that city, where I made such acquirements as my father thought necessary to my introduction into the world. I returned to his residence at the age of eighteen, initiated in all those superficial accomplishments which are too often considered as equivalent to more solid attainments. The reputation I acquired in the exercise of the fine arts, and my acquaintance with the belles lettres, soon obtained me a crowd of ad-

mirers. Among those who offered incense at the shrine of my vanity, was Don Alphonso de Malazzo, a young nobleman of considerable birth and accomplishments. His attentions flattered me more than all the rest of my suitors: there was in his language something much superior to the unmeaning strain of compliments I had been accustomed to; and his assiduities differed materially from that common-place ceremony which in general passes for politeness. I considered every compliment he paid to my beauty, to be the sincere tribute of his feeling, and his estimation of my talent as a proof of his refined judgment.—Unfortunately, the good opinion I entertained of Don Alphonso's qualifications, led me insensibly to admire his person, and to lay the foundation of those misfortunes which have eventually brought me to the disastrous state I am now exposed to. I had treated the advances of the throng who daily surrounded me with so much coolness, that the difference of my reception of Don Alphonso was soon obvious to the eyes of the inquisitive and the envious. Babbling report soon gave publicity to my passion; it reached the ears of Don Gregorio, the father of Alphonso, one of the proudest grandees in Spain: he had long sought for his son an alliance with one of the principal families in Madrid. At this intelligence his pride took alarm; he remonstrated with my father on the impropriety of suffering his son's visits; and the consequence of that remonstrance was, that my father forbade any further communication between me and Don Alphonso.

“ Thus deprived of the society of the man I loved, I became wretched; for my father's decree, instead of suppressing, only heightened the vehemence of my passion. At length, by the means of a confidential servant, I baffled the vigilance of my parent, and continued to meet my lover, without suspicion. Our vows of affection were renewed; and the continual protestations Alphonso made of inviolable regard,

were to me sources of ineffable delight. Such was my reliance on the honour of Alphonso, such my unshaken opinion of his integrity, that all the efforts which his enemies made to prejudice him in my esteem, were without effect. One described him as inconstant, another as a profligate ; but still I reposed in him my entire confidence—a confidence which I have long had reason to repent.

“ With a solemn promise, which, as soon as an opportunity offered, he protested to fulfill, did he enthrall me in the snares of his treachery. Yes, in spite of the rigid notions of honour which my father had industriously inculcated in me, I fell a victim to the wiles of artifice, to the fascinations of a villain ! Is it possible that I can bestow that epithet on one I have loved so well ! Yes, *he was* a villain—for we had continued our endearments but a few weeks, before Alphonso left me to lament my fond credulity, and weep at the recollection of my crime !

“ A few months revealed my guilt and my shame. The exasperation which my incontinence produced in the mind of my father was dreadful ; he cursed the hour that gave me birth ; and in the wild ebullitions of his rage, sought to destroy the offspring who had disgraced his name !

“ I was snatched from his fury by the interceding arm of his Confessor, Father Pascal, who endeavoured by his counsels to appease his indignation and allay his despair, but to no purpose ; every day seemed to aggravate his feelings, and render my crime more odious in his sight.

“ It was at length judged prudent to remove me from his house. I took apartments a few miles from Madrid ; where I gave birth to a son, who did not live to corroborate the shame of his mother ; and soon after, I learnt that my father’s life was endangered by the illness which my misconduct had brought on.

“ I now wandered like a maniac through woods and wilds, imploring Heaven for the restoration of my father’s health, and imprecating vengeance on the faithless Alphonso! For several days I rambled in this state of distraction, till worn out by anguish, and exhausted with hunger, I sunk to the earth, and welcomed that fate which I now conceived to be at hand.

“ But I was disappointed in my melancholy hopes. A messenger, who had been sent in quest of me by my aunt, who resided on the borders of Madrid, had traced my route and discovered my seclusion.

“ He raised me from the ground; and placing me on his horse, conducted me to the residence of Donna Sabina de Saspello. My aunt sought, by every means in her power, to divert me from my sorrows; she assured me of my father’s perfect recovery, and promised that she would use her intercession with him in my behalf, and that she entertained little doubt of the success of her negotiation.—Convinced of her influence over Don Raymond, from the proofs she had afforded on a variety of former occasions, I readily listened to her proposition; and relying on the fond suggestions of hope, I endeavoured to compose the agitation of my mind, and to prepare myself for the interview I so eagerly, so anxiously expected.

“ But week after week elapsed in unsatisfied solicitude; and I began now to suspect that my aunt had deceived me in her professions, and that her promise to intercede with my father was meant merely to assuage that anguish which threatened to prove fatal to my existence. Again I imagined that her exertions had been ineffectual, and that she preserved her failure a secret, from the dread of reviving my despair.

“ I now reflected upon my father’s indisposition when I left his house, and, notwithstanding my aunt’s assurance, formed the most melancholy conclusion as to the effect of his distemper. Impatient to satisfy

my doubts, and relieve my suspense, I arose early one morning, with an intention of knocking at my father's gate, and learning from old Jerome, the porter, the intelligence I sought.

"I arrived at the mansion of Don Raymond; but the faithful Jerome no longer gave me admittance! A man of a sullen aspect and forbidding manner opened the door. "Where is Jerome," said I? "is he no longer in the service of Don Raymond?" "I know nothing of this Jerome, nor Don Raymond," replied the surly vassal.—"Gracious Heaven!" exclaimed I, "are then my fears verified—does he exist no more!—Have my vices cut short the period of his years!—Has my profligacy then sealed a parent's doom!"

"So, so," said the porter, "you are then the wanton daughter of Don Raymond de Spalanza, who formerly kept this house."—"Does he still exist?" said I, impatiently. "He may for aught I know," replied the churl; "but at all events he is far out of your reach."—"Speak," said I, "for Heaven's sake! where is he?" "Why, if report lies not," said the dependant, "he is immured in the gloomy cloisters of the Black Convent in Castile, where, if you would find him, you must seek him."

"I left the late residence of Don Raymond, and returning home in dejection to my aunt, acquainted her with my father's retirement. I accused her of insincerity, and ascribed the melancholy resolution Don Raymond had adopted to the want of that intercession she had falsely promised to employ. She, in her turn, accused me of ingratitude, and protested that she had omitted no endeavour to palliate my conduct in the eyes of my father; but that he continued as inflexible to her entreaties as he had been deaf to my excuses; that she had forborne to communicate to me that intelligence, which would only aggravate the sorrow it could not alleviate.

“ I now resolved to seek the place of my father’s retreat, and notwithstanding the distance of the Black Convent from the residence of Donna Sabina, determined to proceed thither on foot, as a sort of penitential pilgrimage, which I conceived my sins demanded, and, on my arrival there, to solicit an interview with Don Raymond de Spalanza.—“ Ere this,” said I, “ the solace of religion must have lulled the storm of passion, and the resignation which solitude inspires may perhaps dispose him to listen to the compunctions of a daughter, and bestow on her supplications that blessing which can alone retrieve her peace.

“ On preparing to quit the abode of Donna Sabina, my aunt solicitously endeavoured to detain me; protesting that she foresaw a variety of dangers likely to befall me on my way; and as the means of inducing me to relinquish my intention, in prophetic language foretold a most melancholy sequel to my adventures. But her advice was fruitless; I entertained no dread of danger; for the idea of again beholding a parent, inspired me with a degree of courage more than natural to my sex.

“ I travelled for two days without meeting with any material adventure. On the third morning, as I crossed the confines of a forest, through which I had with difficulty explored my way, I observed a grey-headed old man emerge from the thicket, who eyed me with an inquisitive look, and appeared half inclined to address me.—There was an air of respectability in his appearance which prejudiced me in his favour, and induced me to speak first.

“ I am on my way, friend,” said I, “ to the Black Convent; may I enquire if I pursue the direct route?”

“ This is the road to the Convent of St. Lawrence,” said the old man; “ but thus unattended, fair lady, have you no alarms for your safety?—Let me dissuade you from continuing your course without

a guide ; you may be provided with one in the neighbouring village."

" I assured him that I travelled alone by choice, and besought him to acquaint me of the dangers likely to occur on my way.—" About four miles hence, in the most lonely part of the road," said the hoary stranger, " stands a coppice, which conceals the mouth of a cavern, inhabited by a horde of desperate robbers—wretches, who to the guilt of plunder add the foulest crimes which stain the human race. Proceed not, lady, or you may repent."

" Spite of the dangers that threaten me, I should be loth," said I, " to delay my course. I have an errand at the Abbey of the most urgent nature."—

" Perhaps," said the old man, " I shall be deemed too inquisitive, if I ask the object of your visit there, but I have a motive for the question, which, when explained, will perhaps justify my curiosity."

" Then, to be ingenuous," said I, " I have a father who resides in that monastery, and whose retreat may in a great measure be ascribed to my errors. I am anxious to obtain his blessing and forgiveness."

" Then, lady," said he, shaking his head, " let me assure you that your journey thither will be useless."—" How!" replied I, with trepidation; " what is your meaning?"

" Your visits there will not be received."—" What!" rejoined I, " are you then acquainted with Don Raymond de Spalanza?"

" Not so," said the venerable stranger; " I am acquainted with none of the present residents of the Convent; but I had a brother who there terminated his days, and from his intelligence I have a knowledge of the principal regulations and restrictions adopted in that sanctuary; and among the rest, in order to obviate the impositions which have been practised in former times, under the pretence of consanguinity, the brotherhood are forbidden to hold any

communication with your sex, either personally, by epistolary correspondence, or through any other means whatever. Your journey, therefore, lady, I repeat, will be of no avail."

"Then," said I, "I am truly unfortunate. I had set my sum of happiness on the gratification of this wish. But may I confide in your representation? are you not trifling with my credulity?—But I will not wrong you by suspicion."

"Madam," said the old man, "were you acquainted with my real character, you would not suspect my veracity; falsehood assimilates but little with the habits I pursue. For the last fifty years I have been the pensive tenant of these solitary wilds, where, far secluded from the busy haunts of men, I pass my hours in penitence and prayer, forgetting and forgotten by the world. As I sat ruminating in my cell, I observed you passing through the neighbouring thicket, and dreading that your youth and beauty might expose you to the rude insults of the banditti I have described, I arose, and endeavoured to overtake you.—The lusty pace of youth in general mocks the efforts of enfeebled age; but temperance has given a vigour to my limbs, which I scarcely knew till now they had possessed. Thus, lady, have I, on your account, strayed further from the limits of my cell, than I have been wont to do for fifteen summers past.

"Now, lady, return to your peaceful home; submit with cheerfulness to the dispensations of Providence; learn to stifle that impetuosity which I can perceive too often influences you in the exercise of your passions; and let the conduct of the future expiate the defections of the past."

"I was about to reply, but waving his hand courteously, he bade me farewell, and sought the covert of the neighbouring wood.

"In dejection I retraced my steps to the abode of Donna Sabina.—My aunt was considerably surprised

at my unexpected return, and congratulated me on my providential escape from the robbers the hermit had spoken of.—“ Now,” said she, “ were my prognostications ill founded?—Can you ascribe my warning to the mere effect of superstition?”

“ I now incessantly employed my thoughts in projecting some means of procuring access to my father. At length, the expedient I have adopted occurred to me; and, blind to every other consideration but the affection I entertained for my parent, and actuated by no other impulse but compunction for my crime, I determined to conceal my sex, and in the garb of a youth to seek admission into the monastery. I revealed to my aunt my resolution, which she at first strongly dissuaded me from, but finding her efforts to divert me from my project ineffectual, she promised to lend me her assistance towards accomplishing it.

“ As the means of enabling me to support my character with more propriety, she procured a tutor for me, who instructed me in the learned languages, and made me acquainted with the principles of abstruse science.

“ So eager was I to qualify myself for the task I had undertaken, that I devoted every portion of my time to the improvement of my intellects and the acquisition of knowledge.

“ I considered also that every hour I consecrated to study, was, in effect, a step towards the accomplishment of my object; and thus the impulse of filial piety effected, on this occasion, much more than the lesson of my preceptor. Thus qualified, I solicited and obtained access to the monastery of St. Lawrence. On the day after my arrival here, I had the gratification to behold again my parent, and saw with delight that these features which had formerly been ruffled by the impetuosity of passion, wore now the complacency of contentment and the serenity of resignation. I sought every opportunity of being in his presence; and fre-

quently at vespers, favoured by the glooms of the evening, have I placed myself by his side, and mingled the fervours of my devotion with those of a father.

“ I remarked that he often fixed his eyes intently on me, and no doubt thought of that daughter whose presence he never suspected! Disguised as I was, I never dreaded detection, but I was cautious to conceal from him my voice.—The pleasure I had of daily beholding a parent, made the austerities I was obliged to submit to comparatively easy, and the rigours of duty became materially relaxed, by the reflection that a father shared them with me; but the moment I became acquainted with his indisposition, my fortitude forsook me; the fear of betraying myself by my sorrow, and of embittering perhaps the last moments of a father, prevented me from visiting his cell. When the report of his death confirmed my apprehensions, I became inconsolable; I dared not even indulge the melancholy pleasure of gazing on his remains, lest the violence of my grief should have revealed the mystery of my sex.

“ On the evening of the day of my father’s interment, the paroxysms of my sorrow amounted to desperation. In the silence of my cell I gave full scope to the violence of my feeling.

“ I had an extreme desire to see my father after death, and to drop on his pale corpse the tears of my affection, sorrow, and remorse.—For that purpose, I solicited the sexton to acquaint me in what part of the cemetery father Anselm (for that was the name of my parent assumed) lay interred. To that question he readily replied; but my inclinations to visit his remains he strenuously resisted. I entreated, with tears his acquiescence, but to no effect. Hopeless of succeeding by any other means, I revealed to him my melancholy tale; the influence that produced on his feelings, induced him to accede to my prayer.

“ I accordingly last night sought the church-yard, and entered the vault described to me by the sexton. Before I arrived at the awful spot where reposed, as I imagined, a father’s remains, the form of a man passed before my startled sight ! I shrieked, and swooned with horror. When I awoke from my delirium, I had at first forgotten the cause of my alarm ; but the appearance of a scull which lay at my feet soon recalled my terrors ! “ Do not be alarmed,” said a voice. I started from the earth, and turning round, O, God ! I perceived the pallid features of my father.—With tears of joy I clasped him in my arms ; he folded me in his embrace !

“ You have not forgotten me ?” said I. “ Till this moment,” said my father, “ I never recognized you ; your womanish fears betrayed you.” “ And can you then forgive the disobedience of your child ?” said I. “ O, yes ! I have long learnt forgiveness,” said he ; “ and should any portion of my former frailty still remain, the indignation excited by the errors of the child, would soon be forgotten in the gratitude due to a preserver. But for you I had inevitably perished.”—Here he again embraced me.

“ At this period the impetuous Martinez, and his fanatical associates, rushed into the vault, and put an end to an interview of the most interesting nature that can occur in human existence.

“ Now, Sir, where is the foundation on which that evidence rests, which induced you to shut your ears against the appeals I made to your justice ? On the mere assertion of a prejudiced designing man ; on the suggestions of appearance, and the grounds of supposition.

“ Thus, Sir, the father whom you had deemed dead, and committed to the cold confines of a sepulchre, was merely entranced ; and the vile impostor who sought to profane this sanctuary by the most atrocious deeds, proves to be a disconsolate daughter, who,

in the anguish of her heart, sought to bedew the corpse of a parent with the tears of her contrition and regret !”

“ Whatever punishment you may inflict on me, be assured that I shall submit to it without a murmur ; for the end of my ambition is now obtained.—I have procured the forgiveness of a father ; and should your sentence embrace the utmost severity within your reach, I shall die with the pleasing reflection that it is not in the power even of malice to include a parent in the penalty of my crimes.

“ BEATRICE DE SPALANZA.”

As soon as the Superior had perused this statement he communicated the contents of it to father Martinez ; who treated the whole as an imposture, as an artful fabrication to evade the punishment that threatened her.—“ The same ingenuity,” said the bigot, “ which has hitherto sustained her, will, no doubt, still furnish her with the means of imposing on your credulity.”

“ But we may,” said father Fernando, “ detect any falsehood in her asseverations, by the examination of friar Anselm, who has been suffered no communication with her since her apprehension. Should his account of these extraordinary transactions vary from her detail of them, I shall concur with you in opinion ; but should his testimony corroborate her representation, will you still believe me credulous, if I assert her innocence ?”

The friar was silent ; he now foresaw that his caution had defeated its own ends, and that his disgrace was likely to be the issue of his malevolence.—In gloomy disappointment he left the presence of the Superior.

Father Fernando now visited the cell of the friar ; whom he found considerably improved in health, and put such questions to him as he conceived necessary to authenticate the evidence of Donna Beatrice.

The result of this interview was, that the Superior acquitted the daughter of Don Alberto of the principal crime alledged against her; and as to the charge of having gained admission into the convent by clandestine measures and surreptitious means, although it was fully established by her own confession, yet in consideration that her conduct had been influenced by the strength of her attachment to her parent, he consented to pardon that likewise.

Beatrice was accordingly liberated from her confinement, and restored once more to the embraces of a father. When the emotions of mutual joy had subsided, father Fernando acquainted her, that the regulations of their order made it necessary that she should quit the convent as soon as she conveniently could. The next ~~month~~ day was therefore appointed for her departure.

During this interview, the porter of the convent entered, and acquainted Beatrice that a young man, who came, as he stated, from Madrid, had enquired for her, under the appellation of Leopold St. Alme. "This must, doubtless, be some messenger from Donna Sabina," said Beatrice.—No other person there is acquainted with my retreat. With your permission, father, I will speak with him.

Beatrice entered the convent parlour, when a young man, eagerly advancing towards her, prostrated himself at her feet.—It was Don Alphonso!—The surprise and indignation which the unexpected appearance of this cavalier excited in the mind of Beatrice, deprived her for a moment of the power of speech. At length, recovering her composure, she desired that the author of her misfortunes would instantly quit the monastery. "I am resolved," said Beatrice, to hold no communication with a man, whose form is now as loathsome to my sight, as his guilt and hypocrisy are hateful to my recollection."

“Hear me,” said Alphonso, “before you adopt a resolution which must embitter every succeeding moment of my existence; hear the vindication of a man who has been the victim of foul aspersions, and a sacrifice to cruelty and avarice.”

“Hold, Alphonso,” said Donna Beatrice; “cease to insult my understanding with protestations which dissimulation dictates and artifice promotes. Who taught you to think so meanly of my discernment, as to induce you to attempt a second time to impose on my credulity?—Do you rely on the success of your former machinations? No, Alphonso; I have now seen the world, I know how to estimate the worth of virtue, and have learnt to detect the specious arts of villainy. To confide in thy assertions, were to pity the tears of the treacherous Hyena. Persecute me longer, and by all the saints above I vow”—“O, for Heaven’s sake, desist!” exclaimed Alphonso, as he again threw himself at the feet of Beatrice; “pronounce not the awful sentence. Your injunction shall be obeyed; no longer shall this hateful form offend your sight. Far from observation will I vent my sorrows, and in solitude regret that cruelty I am now hopeless of assuaging. Beatrice, farewell!”

On the morning succeeding the departure of Alphonso, Beatrice received the following letter:

“Beloved Beatrice,

“Not long after the arrival of this, expect the presence of Don Alphonso!—Ever since the period of your departure, I have been tormented by his continual importunities to discover the place of your seclusion. I can no longer resist his anxiety, or suffer him to indulge the melancholy which affects his health, and have at length revealed to him the pilgrimage of the pious Leopold St. Alme! You have wronged him in your suspicions of his infidelity; he has been the dupe of misrepresentation. At the time he abandoned

you, as you supposed, he was actually thrown into prison, under a pretended accusation of treason, at the instigation of his own father; who was induced to this step, from the dread of Alphonso's marrying you, and disappointing the ambitious views he had entertained of an alliance with the family of Don Juan de Velasco. From the place of his confinement he continually wrote to you, and entrusted his letters to a servant of his father's, who abused his confidence. The fellow, in compunction, has since confessed his treachery, and I have now in my possession a packet of the most doleful manuscripts despairing love can dictate. The father of Don Alphonso is now no more; there remains, therefore, no bar to your union but the want of your father's consent; and I should imagine, that under the circumstances I have stated, it will be easily obtained.

Your's, faithfully,

SABINA DE SASPELLO."

The perusal of this letter produced a material change in the sentiments of Beatrice towards Alphonso; and in reviewing her late conduct, could not altogether acquit herself of cruelty. She communicated the contents of this epistle to father Fernando, who regretted that it did not arrive before her interview with Alphonso.

The Abbot sent for the porter; and enquired what road Alphonso had pursued. "Did he take the way of Madrid?" said Beatrice. "If Madrid be his destination," said the porter, "In faith he is not likely to complete his journey in a hurry. I have noted him ever since the lark proclaimed the approach of day, wandering to and fro, with his arms folded, before the convent gate; then every now and then fixing his eyes in melancholy on the gloomy walls, and mingling his sighs with the mournful breeze which sweeps along the avenue." To Beatrice this intelligence was far

from unwelcome. "Tell the youth, good Conrad," said the Abbot, "I would fain speak with him."

The disconsolate Alphonso once more entered the walls of St. Lawrence. The Superior now undertook, on the part of Beatrice, an explanation, which her own feelings rendered her less competent to; and in persuading that lady to pardon the transgressions of Alphonso, he did not find her altogether inflexible.

Having the same morning procured the assent of father Anselm to the nuptials of his daughter, the Superior, by way of reparation for the unjust suspicions he had once entertained of her, united Beatrice in the chapel of the convent to the object of her affections. The happy couple now prevailed upon Father Anselm to quit the Convent, and again join with them in the pleasures of that society from which he had intended to seclude himself for ever.

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