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SICILIAN

A
ROMANCE

Ann Radcliffe



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ANN RADCLIFFE

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Preface

On the northern shore of Sicily are still to be seen the magnificent remains of a castle, which formerly belonged to the noble house of Mazzini. It stands in the centre of a small bay, and upon a gentle acclivity, which, on one side, slopes towards the sea, and on the other rises into an eminence crowned by dark woods. The situation is admirably beautiful and picturesque, and the ruins have an air of ancient grandeur, which, contrasted with the present solitude of the scene, impresses the traveller with awe and curiosity. During my travels abroad I visited this spot. As I walked over the loose fragments of stone, which lay scattered through the immense area of the fabric, and surveyed the sublimity and grandeur of the ruins, I recurred, by a natural association of ideas, to the times when these walls stood proudly in their original splendour, when the halls were the scenes of hospitality and festive magnificence, and when they resounded with the voices of those whom death had long since swept from the earth. 'Thus,' said I, 'shall the present generation—he who now sinks in misery—and he who now swims in pleasure, alike pass away and be forgotten.' My heart swelled with the reflection; and, as I turned from the scene with a sigh, I fixed my eyes upon a friar, whose venerable figure, gently bending towards the earth, formed no uninteresting object in the picture. He observed my emotion; and, as my eye met his, shook his head and pointed to the ruin. 'These walls,' said he, 'were once the seat of luxury and vice. They exhibited a singular instance of the retribution of Heaven, and were from that

period forsaken, and abandoned to decay.' His words excited my curiosity, and I enquired further concerning their meaning.

'A solemn history belongs to this castle, said he, 'which is too long and intricate for me to relate. It is, however, contained in a manuscript in our library, of which I could, perhaps, procure you a sight. A brother of our order, a descendant of the noble house of Mazzini, collected and recorded the most striking incidents relating to his family, and the history thus formed, he left as a legacy to our convent. If you please, we will walk thither.'

I accompanied him to the convent, and the friar introduced me to his superior, a man of an intelligent mind and benevolent heart, with whom I passed some hours in interesting conversation. I believe my sentiments pleased him; for, by his indulgence, I was permitted to take abstracts of the history before me, which, with some further particulars obtained in conversation with the abate, I have arranged in the following pages.

I

Part One

Chapter I



Towards the close of the sixteenth century, this castle was in the possession of Ferdinand, fifth marquis of Mazzini, and was for some years the principal residence of his family. He was a man of a voluptuous and imperious character. To his first wife, he married Louisa Bernini, second daughter of the Count della Salario, a lady yet more distinguished for the sweetness of her manners and the gentleness of her disposition, than for her beauty. She brought the marquis one son and two daughters, who lost their amiable mother in early childhood. The arrogant and impetuous character of the marquis operated powerfully upon the mild and susceptible nature of his lady: and it was by many persons believed, that his unkindness and neglect put a period to her life. However this might be, he soon afterwards married Maria de Vellorno, a young lady eminently beautiful, but of a character very opposite to that of her predecessor. She was a woman of infinite art, devoted to pleasure, and of an unconquerable spirit. The marquis, whose heart was dead to paternal tenderness, and whose present lady was too volatile to attend to domestic concerns, committed the education of his daughters to the care of a lady, completely qualified for the undertaking, and who was distantly related to the late marchioness.

He quitted Mazzini soon after his second marriage, for the gaieties and splendour of Naples, whither his son accompanied him. Though naturally of a haughty and overbearing disposition, he was governed by his wife. His

passions were vehement, and she had the address to bend them to her own purpose; and so well to conceal her influence, that he thought himself most independent when he was most enslaved. He paid an annual visit to the castle of Mazzini; but the marchioness seldom attended him, and he staid only to give such general directions concerning the education of his daughters, as his pride, rather than his affection, seemed to dictate.

Emilia, the elder, inherited much of her mother's disposition. She had a mild and sweet temper, united with a clear and comprehensive mind. Her younger sister, Julia, was of a more lively cast. An extreme sensibility subjected her to frequent uneasiness; her temper was warm, but generous; she was quickly irritated, and quickly appeased; and to a reproof, however gentle, she would often weep, but was never sullen. Her imagination was ardent, and her mind early exhibited symptoms of genius. It was the particular care of Madame de Menon to counteract those traits in the disposition of her young pupils, which appeared inimical to their future happiness; and for this task she had abilities which entitled her to hope for success. A series of early misfortunes had entended her heart, without weakening the powers of her understanding. In retirement she had acquired tranquillity, and had almost lost the consciousness of those sorrows which yet threw a soft and not unpleasing shade over her character. She loved her young charge with maternal fondness, and their gradual improvement and respectful tenderness repaid all her anxiety. Madame excelled in music and drawing. She had often forgot her sorrows in these amusements, when her mind was too much occupied to derive consolation from books, and she was assiduous to impart to Emilia and Julia a power so valuable as that of beguiling the sense of affliction. Emilia's taste led her to drawing, and she soon made rapid advances in that art. Julia

was uncommonly susceptible of the charms of harmony. She had feelings which trembled in unison to all its various and enchanting powers.

The instructions of madame she caught with astonishing quickness, and in a short time attained to a degree of excellence in her favorite study, which few persons have ever exceeded. Her manner was entirely her own. It was not in the rapid intricacies of execution, that she excelled so much in as in that delicacy of taste, and in those enchanting powers of expression, which seem to breathe a soul through the sound, and which take captive the heart of the hearer. The lute was her favorite instrument, and its tender notes accorded well with the sweet and melting tones of her voice.

The castle of Mazzini was a large irregular fabrick, and seemed suited to receive a numerous train of followers, such as, in those days, served the nobility, either in the splendour of peace, or the turbulence of war. Its present family inhabited only a small part of it; and even this part appeared forlorn and almost desolate from the spaciousness of the apartments, and the length of the galleries which led to them. A melancholy stillness reigned through the halls, and the silence of the courts, which were shaded by high turrets, was for many hours together undisturbed by the sound of any foot-step. Julia, who discovered an early taste for books, loved to retire in an evening to a small closet in which she had collected her favorite authors. This room formed the western angle of the castle: one of its windows looked upon the sea, beyond which was faintly seen, skirting the horizon, the dark rocky coast of Calabria; the other opened towards a part of the castle, and afforded a prospect of the neighbouring woods. Her musical instruments were here deposited, with whatever assisted her favorite amusements. This spot, which was at once elegant, pleasant, and retired, was embellished with many little ornaments of her own invention, and with some drawings executed by her sister. The closet

was adjoining her chamber, and was separated from the apartments of madame only by a short gallery. This gallery opened into another, long and winding, which led to the grand staircase, terminating in the north hall, with which the chief apartments of the north side of the edifice communicated.

Madame de Menon's apartment opened into both galleries. It was in one of these rooms that she usually spent the mornings, occupied in the improvement of her young charge. The windows looked towards the sea, and the room was light and pleasant. It was their custom to dine in one of the lower apartments, and at table they were always joined by a dependant of the marquis's, who had resided many years in the castle, and who instructed the young ladies in the Latin tongue, and in geography. During the fine evenings of summer, this little party frequently supped in a pavilion, which was built on an eminence in the woods belonging to the castle. From this spot the eye had an almost boundless range of sea and land. It commanded the straits of Messina, with the opposite shores of Calabria, and a great extent of the wild and picturesque scenery of Sicily. Mount Etna, crowned with eternal snows, and shooting from among the clouds, formed a grand and sublime picture in the background of the scene. The city of Palermo was also distinguishable; and Julia, as she gazed on its glittering spires; would endeavour in imagination to depicture its beauties, while she secretly sighed for a view of that world, from which she had hitherto been secluded by the mean jealousy of the marchioness, upon whose mind the dread of rival beauty operated strongly to the prejudice of Emilia and Julia. She employed all her influence over the marquis to detain them in retirement; and, though Emilia was now twenty, and her sister eighteen, they had never passed the boundaries of their father's domains.

Vanity often produces unreasonable alarm; but the marchioness had in this instance just grounds for apprehension; the beauty of her lord's daughters has

seldom been exceeded. The person of Emilia was finely proportioned. Her complexion was fair, her hair flaxen, and her dark blue eyes were full of sweet expression. Her manners were dignified and elegant, and in her air was a feminine softness, a tender timidity which irresistibly attracted the heart of the beholder. The figure of Julia was light and graceful—her step was airy—her mien animated, and her smile enchanting. Her eyes were dark, and full of fire, but tempered with modest sweetness. Her features were finely turned—every laughing grace played round her mouth, and her countenance quickly discovered all the various emotions of her soul. The dark auburn hair, which curled in beautiful profusion in her neck, gave a finishing charm to her appearance.

Thus lovely, and thus veiled in obscurity, were the daughters of the noble Mazzini. But they were happy, for they knew not enough of the world seriously to regret the want of its enjoyments, though Julia would sometimes sigh for the airy image which her fancies painted, and a painful curiosity would arise concerning the busy scenes from which she was excluded. A return to her customary amusements, however, would chase the ideal image from her mind, and restore her usual happy complacency. Books, music, and painting, divided the hours of her leisure, and many beautiful summer-evenings were spent in the pavilion, where the refined conversation of madame, the poetry of Tasso, the lute of Julia, and the friendship of Emilia, combined to form a species of happiness, such as elevated and highly susceptible minds are alone capable of receiving or communicating. Madame understood and practised all the graces of conversation, and her young pupils perceived its value, and caught the spirit of its character.

Conversation may be divided into two classes—the familiar and the sentimental. It is the province of the familiar, to diffuse cheerfulness and ease

—to open the heart of man to man, and to beam a temperate sunshine upon the mind.—Nature and art must conspire to render us susceptible of the charms, and to qualify us for the practice of the second class of conversation, here termed sentimental, and in which Madame de Menon particularly excelled. To good sense, lively feeling, and natural delicacy of taste, must be united an expansion of mind, and a refinement of thought, which is the result of high cultivation. To render this sort of conversation irresistibly attractive, a knowledge of the world is requisite, and that enchanting ease, that elegance of manner, which is to be acquired only by frequenting the higher circles of polished life. In sentimental conversation, subjects interesting to the heart, and to the imagination, are brought forward; they are discussed in a kind of sportive way, with animation and refinement, and are never continued longer than politeness allows. Here fancy flourishes,—the sensibilities expand—and wit, guided by delicacy and embellished by taste—points to the heart.

Such was the conversation of Madame de Menon; and the pleasant gaiety of the pavilion seemed peculiarly to adapt it for the scene of social delights. On the evening of a very sultry day, having supped in their favorite spot, the coolness of the hour, and the beauty of the night, tempted this happy party to remain there later than usual. Returning home, they were surprised by the appearance of a light through the broken window-shutters of an apartment, belonging to a division of the castle which had for many years been shut up. They stopped to observe it, when it suddenly disappeared, and was seen no more. Madame de Menon, disturbed at this phaenomenon, hastened into the castle, with a view of enquiring into the cause of it, when she was met in the north hall by Vincent. She related to him what she had seen, and ordered an immediate search to be made for the keys of those apartments. She apprehended that some person had penetrated that part of the edifice with an

intention of plunder; and, disdaining a paltry fear where her duty was concerned, she summoned the servants of the castle, with an intention of accompanying them thither. Vincent smiled at her apprehensions, and imputed what she had seen to an illusion, which the solemnity of the hour had impressed upon her fancy. Madame, however, persevered in her purpose; and, after along and repeated search, a massey key, covered with rust, was produced. She then proceeded to the southern side of the edifice, accompanied by Vincent, and followed by the servants, who were agitated with impatient wonder. The key was applied to an iron gate, which opened into a court that separated this division from the other parts of the castle. They entered this court, which was overgrown with grass and weeds, and ascended some steps that led to a large door, which they vainly endeavoured to open. All the different keys of the castle were applied to the lock, without effect, and they were at length compelled to quit the place, without having either satisfied their curiosity, or quieted their fears. Everything, however, was still, and the light did not reappear. Madame concealed her apprehensions, and the family retired to rest.

This circumstance dwelt on the mind of Madame de Menon, and it was some time before she ventured again to spend an evening in the pavilion. After several months passed, without further disturbance or discovery, another occurrence renewed the alarm. Julia had one night remained in her closet later than usual. A favorite book had engaged her attention beyond the hour of customary repose, and every inhabitant of the castle, except herself, had long been lost in sleep. She was roused from her forgetfulness, by the sound of the castle clock, which struck one. Surprised at the lateness of the hour, she rose in haste, and was moving to her chamber, when the beauty of the night attracted her to the window. She opened it; and observing a fine effect of moonlight

upon the dark woods, leaned forwards. In that situation she had not long remained, when she perceived a light faintly flash through a casement in the uninhabited part of the castle. A sudden tremor seized her, and she with difficulty supported herself. In a few moments it disappeared, and soon after a figure, bearing a lamp, proceeded from an obscure door belonging to the south tower; and stealing along the outside of the castle walls, turned round the southern angle, by which it was afterwards hid from the view. Astonished and terrified at what she had seen, she hurried to the apartment of Madame de Menon, and related the circumstance. The servants were immediately roused, and the alarm became general. Madame arose and descended into the north hall, where the domestics were already assembled. No one could be found of courage sufficient to enter into the courts; and the orders of madame were disregarded, when opposed to the effects of superstitious terror. She perceived that Vincent was absent, but as she was ordering him to be called, he entered the hall. Surprised to find the family thus assembled, he was told the occasion. He immediately ordered a party of the servants to attend him round the castle walls; and with some reluctance, and more fear, they obeyed him. They all returned to the hall, without having witnessed any extraordinary appearance; but though their fears were not confirmed, they were by no means dissipated. The appearance of a light in a part of the castle which had for several years been shut up, and to which time and circumstance had given an air of singular desolation, might reasonably be supposed to excite a strong degree of surprise and terror. In the minds of the vulgar, any species of the wonderful is received with avidity; and the servants did not hesitate in believing the southern division of the castle to be inhabited by a supernatural power. Too much agitated to sleep, they agreed to watch for the remainder of the night. For this purpose they arranged themselves in the east gallery, where they had a view of

the south tower from which the light had issued. The night, however, passed without any further disturbance; and the morning dawn, which they beheld with inexpressible pleasure, dissipated for a while the glooms of apprehension. But the return of evening renewed the general fear, and for several successive nights the domestics watched the southern tower. Although nothing remarkable was seen, a report was soon raised, and believed, that the southern side of the castle was haunted. Madame de Menon, whose mind was superior to the effects of superstition, was yet disturbed and perplexed, and she determined, if the light reappeared, to inform the marquis of the circumstance, and request the keys of those apartments.

The marquis, immersed in the dissipations of Naples, seldom remembered the castle, or its inhabitants. His son, who had been educated under his immediate care, was the sole object of his pride, as the marchioness was that of his affection. He loved her with romantic fondness, which she repaid with seeming tenderness, and secret perfidy. She allowed herself a free indulgence in the most licentious pleasures, yet conducted herself with an art so exquisite as to elude discovery, and even suspicion. In her amours she was equally inconstant as ardent, till the young Count Hippolitus de Vereza attracted her attention. The natural fickleness of her disposition seemed then to cease, and upon him she centered all her desires.

The count Vereza lost his father in early childhood. He was now of age, and had just entered upon the possession of his estates. His person was graceful, yet manly; his mind accomplished, and his manners elegant; his countenance expressed a happy union of spirit, dignity, and benevolence, which formed the principal traits of his character. He had a sublimity of thought, which taught him to despise the voluptuous vices of the Neapolitans, and led him to higher pursuits. He was the chosen and early friend of young

Ferdinand, the son of the marquis, and was a frequent visitor in the family. When the marchioness first saw him, she treated him with great distinction, and at length made such advances, as neither the honor nor the inclinations of the count permitted him to notice. He conducted himself toward her with frigid indifference, which served only to inflame the passion it was meant to chill. The favors of the marchioness had hitherto been sought with avidity, and accepted with rapture; and the repulsive insensibility which she now experienced, roused all her pride, and called into action every refinement of coquetry.

It was about this period that Vincent was seized with a disorder which increased so rapidly, as in a short time to assume the most alarming appearance. Despairing of life, he desired that a messenger might be dispatched to inform the marquis of his situation, and to signify his earnest wish to see him before he died. The progress of his disorder defied every art of medicine, and his visible distress of mind seemed to accelerate his fate. Perceiving his last hour approaching, he requested to have a confessor. The confessor was shut up with him a considerable time, and he had already received extreme unction, when Madame de Menon was summoned to his bedside. The hand of death was now upon him, cold damps hung upon his brows, and he, with difficulty, raised his heavy eyes to madame as she entered the apartment. He beckoned her towards him, and desiring that no person might be permitted to enter the room, was for a few moments silent. His mind appeared to labour under oppressive remembrances; he made several attempts to speak, but either resolution or strength failed him. At length, giving madame a look of unutterable anguish, 'Alas, madam,' said he, 'Heaven grants not the prayer of such a wretch as I am. I must expire long before the marquis can arrive. Since I shall see him no more, I would impart to you a secret which

lies heavy at my heart, and which makes my last moments dreadful, as they are without hope.' 'Be comforted,' said madame, who was affected by the energy of his manner, 'we are taught to believe that forgiveness is never denied to sincere repentance.' 'You, madam, are ignorant of the enormity of my crime, and of the secret—the horrid secret which labours at my breast. My guilt is beyond remedy in this world, and I fear will be without pardon in the next; I therefore hope little from confession even to a priest. Yet some good it is still in my power to do; let me disclose to you that secret which is so mysteriously connected with the southern apartments of this castle.'—'What of them?' exclaimed madame, with impatience. Vincent returned no answer; exhausted by the effort of speaking, he had fainted. Madame rung for assistance, and by proper applications, his senses were recalled. He was, however, entirely speechless, and in this state he remained till he expired, which was about an hour after he had conversed with madame.

The perplexity and astonishment of madame, were by the late scene heightened to a very painful degree. She recollected the various particulars relative to the southern division of the castle, the many years it had stood uninhabited—the silence which had been observed concerning it—the appearance of the light and the figure—the fruitless search for the keys, and the reports so generally believed; and thus remembrance presented her with a combination of circumstances, which served only to increase her wonder, and heighten her curiosity. A veil of mystery enveloped that part of the castle, which it now seemed impossible should ever be penetrated, since the only person who could have removed it, was no more.

The marquis arrived on the day after that on which Vincent had expired. He came attended by servants only, and alighted at the gates of the castle with an air of impatience, and a countenance expressive of strong emotion.