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Author: Ossip Schubin

Translator: Sarah Holland Adams

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BLANCHE: THE MAID OF LILLE



tête de cire.

BLANCHE:

The Maid of Lille

Translated from the German of

OSSIP SCHUBIN

BY

SARAH H. ADAMS

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INTRODUCTION

A few years since we chose to spend the summer in a *châlet* among the Dolomites of South Tyrol. Weird, fantastic, inaccessible, mysterious, grotesque, and yet often wearing a jewelled crown of eternal ice, these peaks soared into the ether above and around us. "Nothing," says a recent traveller, "can surpass the majesty and beauty of the towers and ramparts, the battlemented walls, impregnable castles, and gracefully pinnacled cathedrals into the forms of which their summits are built up. Their colouring is another striking characteristic; many of them rivet the eye with the richness of the tints,—deep reds, bright yellows, silvery whites, and the dark blues and blacks of the rocks. But all these colours are modified and softened by a peculiar grayish white tint. The mountains look as if powdered over with some substance less hard and cold than newly fallen snow."

Although within a day's drive of *Pieve di Cadore*,—*Titian's* birthplace—and not far from *Cortina*, we could hardly have found a more isolated spot. It was a hermitage, and we knew literally no one within hundreds of miles.

Ossip Schubin, the popular German novelist at that time, had sent us a volume of stories, with the request that we would translate them. We selected the story now offered as being most in sympathy with our romantic surroundings.

A learned Englishman has said, "If histories were written as histories should be, boys and girls would cry to read them." But alas! how is the spirit, the tone, of a dead century to be made to breathe again and report itself? The landscape alone is permanent; new figures constantly fill the foreground. Poetry, legend, myths, help us to divine some of the strange chords in the human chant, which, heavily burdened with sorrow, come down to us through the ages.

In this twentieth century no one sentiment or emotion is allowed so far to dominate as to crush out all others. But how was it in the days of the Crusaders, of the *Minnesingers*, of the *Troubadours*? If we would realise the seclusion, the loneliness of many lives centuries ago, we have only to enter either "*The Wartburg*" or the castle of *Solmes Brauenfels* in the Rhine valley, which dates back a thousand years. Look into the gloomy keeps; hear the shrieking of the bars in the heavy portcullis; gaze down into the damp, ugly moats; or listen to the *soughing* of the stormy

winds in the branches of the tall forest trees which closely environ these grim abodes. It is conceivable that Elizabeth languished and died at "The Wartburg," when the chivalrous Tannhäuser no longer came to inspire with love and song. Could even Martin Luther have lived in these cold, black walls without his work which daily rekindled his soul as he studied the inspired pages of the Bible?

Among the annals of a wicked old past, this story appears as a legend dimly connected with the pathetic face of the "Maid of Lille" a copy of which is in the Boston Art Museum.

There is no appeal here to the modern girl. The word "altruism" had not been invented. Yet there was genius in loving as Blanche did--what trustful, boundless love, what exaggeration of the object loved! And while to-day we strive to master a useless sorrow by a useful activity, we can still appreciate the beauty and holiness of such love.

SARAH H. ADAMS.

BLANCHE

In the museum at Lille, somewhat aside from the bewildering mass of pictures, stands, in a glass case, a masterpiece of unknown origin--the "tête de cire,"--a maiden's bust moulded in coloured wax.

You will smile when you hear of a coloured wax bust and think of Madame Tussaud's collection, or of a pretty, insignificant doll's head; but should you ever see the "tête de cire," instead of laughing you will fold your hands, and, instead of Madame Tussaud's glass-eyed puppets, will think of a lovely girl cut off in her early bloom, whom you once saw at rest on the hard pillow of her coffin. Pale, with exquisite features, reddish brown hair, eyes slightly blinking, as if afraid of too much sun, a painfully resigned smile about her mouth, and with neck slightly bent forward, as if awaiting her death-stroke, full of touching innocence and of a languid grace, this waxen bust stands out of its dull gold case,--the image of an angel who had lived an earthly life and whose heart was broken by a mortal pain.

Whence came this masterly production? Nobody knows! One ascribes it to Leonardo, another to Raphael, while still others have sought for its origin in antiquity. Upon one point only all agree,--that the bust was made from a cast taken after death.

The painter, Wickar, brought it out of Italy into France. 'Twas said that he found it in a Tuscan convent.

* * * * *

The lovely girl smiles, pleased at the critical debates of the curious, who wish to attribute this graceful creation to one of the illustrious Heroes of Art: smiles and dreams!

I

No, it could not be--'twould be a sacrilege!

He was forty-five and she scarcely seventeen. It could not be!

After a series of adventurous campaigns, after mourning over many defeats and celebrating many victories, and finally losing his left leg in the memorable battle of Marignano, Gottfried de Montalme, finding himself disabled for the rough work of a soldier, had returned to France and to his father's castle, whose gates his brother, the duke, hospitably opened to him.

He found this brother a widower, and at the point of death; but beside the dying man's couch

was a lovely little maiden who offered her cheeks to be kissed in welcome to the wanderer. She was the Duke of Montalme's only child--Blanche, a heart's balm! the light of his eyes!

Leaving no male heir, the entire inheritance of the Duke of Montalme--his castle and lands, with all the feudal rights appertaining thereto,--would devolve upon the returned warrior, Gottfried. The little maiden was badly provided for, and this the duke knew full well, and it made his dying heart sad.

Gottfried sat by the bedside of his brother through the warm May nights. He heard the ticking of the death-watch in the wainscoting of the old walls, heard the dewdrops, as they slowly rustled through the leaves of the giant lindens outside, heard the laboured breath of the dying man--but more distinctly than all did he hear the beating of his own heart.

Toward morning, when the first slant sunbeams shed a rosy glimmer into the gray twilight of the sick man's room, this beating grew louder, for, with the early sun, Blanche slipped into the chamber, and, leaning compassionately over the sufferer, whispered, "Are you better, my father?"

Ah! for the Duke of Montalme there was no better, and one night he laid his damp, cold hand upon his brother's warm and powerful one, saying, with the directness his near relationship warranted, "Gottfried, it would be a great comfort to me if you would take Blanche for your wife."

At this Gottfried blushed up to the roots of his gray hair, and murmured, "What an idea to come into your head--I an old cripple, and this young blossom! It would be a sacrilege!"

"She does not dislike you," said the duke.

The brave Gottfried blushed deeper, and said, "She is but a child."

"Oh, these conscientious notions!" grumbled the exhausted man. But notions or not, Gottfried was firm, and of a marriage-bond with the child would not hear; he promised to afford the little maiden loving care and protection--promised to guard her as the apple of his eye--as his own child, until he could, with confidence, lay her hand into that of a worthy lover's.

And while he promised this, his voice sounded hollow and sad like the tolling of a funeral bell. The duke, with the clear-sightedness of the dying, cast a glance into his brother's heart, and discovered there a holy secret.

"You're an angel, Gottfried," he murmured, "but you make a mistake," and shortly after breathed his last.

On the day of the funeral Dame Isabella von Auberive, a distant relative whom Gottfried, for propriety's sake, had summoned hither, arrived at the castle to share with him in the care of the young girl. Beside her father's bier, surrounded by the dim, flickering candles, he kissed the sweet orphan reverently on the brow, as one kisses the hem of a Madonna's robe; and promised her his loving care. But when she, in a torrent of childish grief, wound her arms about his neck and pressed her little head against his shoulder, he became almost as white as the dead man in his coffin, and tenderly but firmly released himself from her.

It could not be--'twould be sacrilege.

II

During the brilliant period in the reign of King Francis I., it happened that in the marvellously fair, luxuriant Touraine, through whose velvet green meadows ran the "gay-jewel-glistening Loire,--the frolicsome, flippant Loire, "--there arose on its banks, one by one, the stately dwellings of many a proud lord.

Somewhat apart from the others, in a retired spot, where King Francis's elegant hunters seldom found their way, towered up the Castle of Montalme; large, massive, with gloomy little windows sunk into deep holes in the walls, and with a round turret on either wing. Stern and forbidding, it looked down into the moat in whose waterless bed toads and frogs revelled amid the moist green foliage; for the age was fast drawing to a close in which every nobleman had been a little king, and the simple heroic French feudality, blinded by the nimbus of Francis I., were rapidly being transformed into a mere host of courtiers.

The dull uniformity in the architecture of Montalme stood out in striking contrast to the rest of the castles of sunny, pleasure-loving Touraine. The internal arrangement corresponded to the

plain exterior, and to the naïve pretensions of a century when, even in Blois and Amboise, the favourite castles of the king, the doors were so low that Francis himself, who is known to have been of regal stature, had to stoop to enter them. The scantiness of the furniture in this huge Castle of Montalme added to its forlorn aspect; nor was the slightest deference paid to prevailing fashion. The ladies wore sombre-coloured dresses, cut high in the neck, and covering the arms down to the very end of the wrists; skirts hanging in long, heavy folds, allowing only the pointed toe of the leather shoe to peep out. The gentlemen wore the hair long, and their faces smoothly shaved; their doublets reached in folds almost to the knees, as had been the fashion under the simple, economical rule of the late king.

* * * * *

A year had glided by since the death of the duke. Blanche enjoyed the happiness of youth, free from care, and Gottfried the peace of honest, high-souled self-denial. A guardian angel, he limped about modestly at the side of his niece, rejoicing to be able to remove every stone which threatened to mar the smoothness of her path, or to scare away the hawks lurking in ambush to surprise her innocence.

And when considering the charms of his dear little niece, Gottfried thought of the orgies in the Amboise Castle, of the "petite bande" and the merry raids of the king, the real aim of which was nothing higher than some foolish love-adventure, he shuddered. Deeply and often he pondered the matter. Blanche was eighteen--it was time for her to be married--and yet his brave, faithful heart shrank with anguish at the bare thought of it. He would not hesitate (at least he believed this of himself) to part with her if only he could find a true-hearted, honourable man. But in this age of beauty and song--the age of King Francis such an one was hard to find.

Meanwhile Blanche was contented with her lonely, monotonous life, perhaps, in part, because she knew no other, yet, also, because a fountain of youthful gaiety was still unexhausted in her heart. There were many things to do in the daytime, and she played chess with her uncle in the long winter evenings, while sparks flashed out of the heavy oak logs in the chimney, and the single tallow candle in its artistically wrought iron candlestick wove a little island of light in the Cimmerian darkness of the monstrous hall.

Sometimes Gottfried entertained her with stories--the legend of Tristran and Iseult--or the pathetic tale of the Count of Lusignano and the fair Melusina; often, too, he told her of his own adventures in foreign lands.

But the happier Blanche made herself in this lonely life, the more furious became Dame Isabella. She was a worthy woman, but never could realise that her once distinguished beauty had long been buried under a weight of corpulence, and therefore did not restrain herself from putting on all sorts of ridiculous airs and graces, in order to attract the attention of the whole neighbourhood to her supposed charms. Out of sheer *ennui* she ogled even her page, Philemon, a boy of twelve years, although he cherished a modest but so much the more glowing adolescent passion for the lovely Blanche.

Whilst winding endless skeins of silk off the hands of the page, she sighed in a heart-breaking way, and made the most pointed remarks about the laziness and unmannerliness of those noblemen who purposely avoided any approach to the kind, chivalrous king.

Gottfried long forbore to respond to such innuendoes. Of what use would it be to try to explain to this silly old person that the court of King Francis was not the proper sphere for such a fat old woman as herself, or for a little maiden like Blanche, who would receive a kind of adulation before which the good, true-hearted warrior shuddered? Once, however, when Dame Isabella, more excited than usual, stormed in upon him and insisted that the young girl's future should be taken into immediate consideration, he gave her an angry answer. But it did not silence her, and though the worthy woman talked plenty of nonsense, yet she sometimes made a remark that Gottfried could not think wholly unjustifiable. "Blanche is eighteen years old!" stormed Dame Auberive; "if you do not wish her to marry you must resolve to place her in one of the nunneries, which are the only respectable refuge for unmarried women of her position."

"Who told you that I did not want Blanche to marry?" exclaimed Gottfried, with anger and agitation; "it is only that I have not yet found any one good enough for her." But Dame Isabella replied with cutting scorn, "No one will ever seem to you good enough for her!" and bounced out of the room the picture of righteous indignation.

Shortly after this it happened that a young knight was brought into the castle badly wounded; he had fallen among thieves, been robbed, and left unconscious by the roadside. He must be a man of rank, the servants thought who brought him in, for his dress, though soiled and torn, was of the finest material, and he wore the full beard with close-shaved hair which most of the courtiers wore in imitation of the king. Gottfried recognised in him a certain Henri de Lancy who, at the battle of Marignano, had fought beside him and won general admiration for his bravery, and had, more than all, dragged him--his old friend Gottfried--out of the thick of the battle after a ball had broken his leg.

As he bent over the handsome youth lying there before him with closed eyes, so pale and helpless, an emotion of deep pity overcame Gottfried, and he exerted himself to the utmost to

lavish on De Lancy all the comforts which the poor castle of Montalme could command.

The sight of the wounded knight roused the quiet castle out of its phlegmatic drowsiness, and the heart of Dame Isabella beat so wildly that her orders confused the heads of her servants. Even through the veins of the innocent Blanche thrilled a strange, dreamy unrest.

At that time there prevailed, together with a sultry kind of viciousness, compared with which modern profligacy appears petty and childish, a frank, genial naïveté, which is lost to our age with its prudish, artificial morality. The most delicate maiden did not hesitate, at that time, to lend help in nursing a sick man; and besides, women in that century--thanks to the rarity of doctors--found it necessary to acquire some knowledge of the healing art.

Hence it was that Blanche came to the assistance of Dame Isabella and her Uncle Gottfried in the care of De Lancy, and as her hand was the most delicate, it usually fell to her to loosen the bandages around the ugly wound on his head, and as she had the steadiest nerve, it was she who, with Gottfried's help, removed the splinter of a broken sword-point from his shoulder.

Quiet and helpful as an angel, she hovered about the unconscious man. But once, as she was bending over his couch to watch the breathing of the sufferer, a great abatement of the wound fever happily set in. De Lancy opened his eyes, which, though at times blue as the heavens above, were at others black as an abyss. The "petite bande" knew these eyes well.

Just now they were very blue and fixed with peculiar pleasure on the tender little maiden. But she drew back embarrassed. The strange, marvellous eyes had driven away his guardian angel, and from that hour she avoided the sick man's room.

* * * * *

We shall readily imagine that Henri de Lancy would not endure to be nursed like a sick woman, and, as soon as he could lift hand and foot, he dragged himself off his couch--possibly his impatience to see the pretty girl again had also something to do with this haste.

It provoked the young dandy that he could not introduce himself into the presence of the ladies in a more elegant costume; yet his comparatively simple travelling dress was becoming to him, and still more (at least in the eyes of the sweet Blanche) his paleness, his deep-sunk, feverish eyes, and the weakness in all his movements, which he strove to hide; for there is something which appeals to the sympathies of a true woman in seeing a strong, chivalrous man impatient and mortified at his weakness. Under her dropped eyelids Blanche watched all his movements, and was constantly considering how to remove what might interfere with the comfort of the helpless invalid. Yet she did not offer him the slightest service herself, only secretly made Dame Isabella acquainted with the need. Her sympathy and her charming bashfulness did not fail to touch the heart of the convalescent.

The "petite bande" would have laughed in scorn and right heartily, had they seen how modestly the audacious De Lancy exerted himself to please the unpretending little girl with the pale face of a novice.

And Lady Isabella neglected the page Philemon and adorned herself to such a degree that--well--it cost De Lancy all the trouble in the world not to laugh in her face. The finest part of her toilet was her "coiffure," which in style dated back at least thirty years. It consisted of a towering head-dress that ran up to a point, from which an enormous veil fluttered down to her knees.

* * * * *

The days came and went--the beautiful July days--flooding Touraine with golden sunshine from dawn to dewy eve. The air was heavy with the perfume of roses and linden blossoms. Henri's hollow face had regained its full, natural contour, and his arm had long been freed from the sling. He was able to travel--yet of his departure spoke never so much as a dying word.

He was only a merry-hearted, heedless fellow, but with a very attractive manner; when it pleased him he could assume toward women at once such a courteous, amiable, respectful manner that no one could long be vexed with him, even were she the proudest of the daughters of earth. He had so completely enchanted Dame Isabella that she spent whole nights pondering over the preparation of the most *recherche* viands. She served up to him the most skilfully made pies, capons dressed with spices after the Spanish custom, or young peacocks which she knew how to roast so artistically as not to singe a feather on tail or little crown; and when the dame saw with what love-intoxicated gaze he often fastened his eyes on the beautiful girl, she furthered his intercourse with her as only she could. It would have delighted her to win such an aristocratic connection as De Lancy.

But there was one person in Montalme who could not feel friendly toward the gallant young knight--and this was the lord of the castle himself.

"How long is he going to stay?" he growled out one day to Dame Isabella. "He has sent for his clothes and his pages, and next he will be inviting his friends here to display Blanche's charms to the whole country."

"Don't imagine this," said Isabella, with a shrewd smile; "lovers are miserly, and would, if possible, keep the joy of their heart out of sight of the entire world."

"The joy of his heart!" exclaimed Gottfried. "Then it is high time that I interfered and obliged him to declare himself!"

"Let nothing of the kind occur to you!" exclaimed Isabella, with a look of horror. "Spare the germ of his young love until it ripens into an earnest desire for the happiness of marriage."

Gottfried became gloomy. "If I thought that the man would woo the girl honourably! He is a most attractive fellow, but although brave and generous, the best among the young coxcombs of to-day are proud of transgressions which the worst in my day would have been ashamed of, and, in fact, they regard it only as a good joke, an aristocratic pastime, to seduce an innocent girl!" and he struck his brow with his fist.

"Such an idea should never come into your mind," said Isabella, passionately; "it is shocking in you to insult the man who saved your life, by such scandalous suspicions. You call your suspicions conscientious--they should properly bear quite a different name."

"What, then?" growled Gottfried. Dame Isabella stood on the tips of her toes, and hissed in his ear, "Jealousy!"

At this he ground his teeth,--his eyebrows contracted with pain;--he turned on his heels and left the room: determined to watch and be silent!

III

In the cool, lofty rooms of the Castle of Montalme Blanche wandered about all this time like one bewildered by a great joy. Her eyes were half-closed, as if dazzled by too clear a radiance, and her voice was full of plaintive rapture, like that in which the nightingale sobs his love through the warm summer nights, and all her motions had an added grace.

But one day Dame Isabella whispered to her, "He is desperately in love with you!"

And it awakened Blanche out of her sweet, unconscious ecstasy. She began to test it--to doubt! She noticed exactly how often he addressed a word directly to her, was sad if he passed her without seeking response; his glance to her glance--his smile to her smile!

IV

Dreamy afternoon stillness brooded over Montalme, the doves cooed monotonously on the roof. In one of the deep, oak-panelled window niches Blanche stood gazing down into the courtyard, which was full of dark shadows. There stood De Lancy in the picturesque costume Titian has immortalised in the portraits of Francis I., the puffed sleeves and high ruff under which the handsomest man in France was pleased to hide the stoop in his shoulders and the thickness of his neck.

To young De Lancy this costume was wonderfully becoming. With the black velvet bonnet at his ear, he was amusing himself with a falcon, which, perched on his shoulder, he alternately teased and soothed; then a greyhound stretched to full length came bounding forward with light, quick leaps, and sprang upon him. De Lancy slipped his thin, delicate hand behind his ear, and stroked him with all the tenderness which men of our day are accustomed to bestow on their dogs and horses, with a certain pride in their training. At this, however, the falcon became jealous, beat his wings, and pecked the hound with his beak. De Lancy enjoyed teasing the two animals, and when by alternate caresses he had made both positively unhappy, he pressed with one hand the head of the falcon against his cheek, and with the other the head of the hound to his

breast. Then the two creatures were contented, and he smiled--his eyes grew darker, and his white teeth glistened.

But the heart of the maiden, who, gazing down into the court, saw the pretty play, was convulsed with pain,--was it a kind of jealousy which agitated her--or simply a wish? Suddenly De Lancy glanced up, and espying the young lady of the castle, greeted her respectfully. Blanche thanked him somewhat bashfully, and drew back trembling from head to foot. When she ventured again to look down into the court, De Lancy was no longer to be seen.

But the wings of the gently moved afternoon air bore to her ear a little song which the gay youth trilled to himself as he strolled away:

"Ha! me chère ennemie
Si tu veux m'apaiser,
Redonne--moy la vie
Par l'esprit d'un baiser.
Ha! j'en ay la douceur
Senti jusque au cœur.
C'est une douce rage
Qui nous poindra doucement
Quand d'un même courage
On s'aime incessamment.
Heureux sera le jour
Que je mourrai d'amour!"

V

This audacious love-song at that time flitted from lip to lip at the court of King Francis, until about a year later the poet Ronsard sang it,--and after he had enriched it with two or three daintily elaborated verses it was incorporated with his works.

De Lancy had often hummed it when hastening through the gray corridors, or walking in the garden under the sombre boughs of the blossoming lindens. But never had Blanche heard it so completely and clearly. Warm and full the tones of his voice rang in her ears. Through this exuberant and frivolous nature passed the agitating sense of an almost pathetic tenderness.

Blanche stared before her into the empty air, and there came into her face a great terror--a mighty longing!

VI

Gottfried watched and suffered--each hour more suspicious and uneasy.

In the castle chapel of Montalme stood a narrow-chested saint with peaked beard,--St. Sebaldus,--who bore on his wooden forefinger an amethyst ring. With this ring was connected a legend,--viz.,--that whoever would have the courage to draw it off the finger at midnight and put it on his own--to him Heaven would grant the fulfilment of his wish, even were it the most presumptuous in the world. But should the one who took off the jewel let it fall from his linger ere returning it on the following night, as in duty bound, to the saint, some terrible misfortune would speedily overtake him.

It was midnight, and deathly stillness reigned; the moonlight played about the pointed roof and glittered in the deeply set windows of the old castle. Black and heavy, almost as a bier-cloth, the shadow of this gigantic old building spread over the ground. In the garden below, the

nightingales sobbed their sweet songs in the flowering lindens, sometimes interrupted by the weird screech of an owl. Then a slender figure glided softly through the echoing corridors of the castle--the figure of a love-sick girl. At times she paused and listened and laid her hand upon her breast. A vague, ghostly fear chilled the blood in her veins. Now she stepped through the high hall adjoining the chapel. She opened the door heavily weighted with its ornamental iron bands and rosettes. The moonlight glanced through the coloured windows and painted fantastic images on the brown church pews. Two long, brilliant streaks of light cut through the shadows which broadened out over the marble floor.

Above the altar hung a Madonna with attenuated arms and too long a neck, as the "Primitives" in their naïve awkwardness like to picture her. Blanche knelt before her and lisped an Ave and the Lord's Prayer; then turning to the saint who, stiff and complacent, gazed down from his pedestal, she drew the ring off his finger and put it on her own.

Just at this moment she heard a slight rustle outside, a confused feeling of dread and fear suddenly came over her--a vague, painful fear of all the mysterious powers of night and darkness. Quite beside herself, she was hurrying out of the chapel when, in her confusion, she almost rushed into the arms of a man who stepped toward her in the adjacent hall.

Although she had passed so softly through the house, one ear had recognised her step--Henri de Lancy--by whose chamber she was obliged to go in her way to the chapel.

And now he stood before her, and his blue eyes shone in the clear moonlight, and he bent over her smiling. She started back, but did not fly--only remained standing as if spellbound. When he seized her hand and she tried to free herself, however, he held her fast, whispering, "Stay only a little while, I pray you; I've so much to say to you!"

"Leave me! leave me!" she cried, timidly.

"Only a minute!" he begged of her. "You have always avoided me, I could never say it to you, but indeed you must long have known how infinitely I love you!"

He stooped over her--she trembled like a delicate rose-bud with which the spring wind plays. She thought of the saint's ring which she had on her finger for the purpose of conjuring Heaven to grant her Henri de Lancy's love. Had the conjuration then worked so speedily? Oh, measureless joy! Oh, never-anticipated blessedness!

And yet--

It was so still--so late! "Leave me! leave me!" she whispered. "Wait, I must ask Gottfried."

"And do you believe he will know better than yourself whether you love me?"

He laid his arm round her--his kiss hovered over her lips--when--the door was torn open, and, with drawn dagger and face distorted with rage, Gottfried rushed upon De Lancy. "Cowardly traitor!" he yelled, and stopped, for Blanche, uttering a hoarse shriek of anguish, stretched out her arms before the beloved man to protect him.

Woe! woe! in this moment the enchanted ring slipped from her finger!

VII

Angry men's voices echoed through the halls and galleries--then stillness reigned again.

Without, the dewdrops rustled in the leaves, but the nightingales were hushed. In her lonely chamber sat a pale, sad girl, tearless and comfortless. When the gray morning came a gloomy rider stormed out of the castle.

VIII

At that time,--in the beginning of the sixteenth century,--shortly after the battle of Marignano, and the great awakening at Wittenberg, there brooded over creation a sultry atmosphere, in which the thoughts and feelings of men frothed and raved with unbridled wantonness, stimulated by the storm-ridden air.

King Francis had brought back with him to his native land, after his sojourn in Italy and his conference with Pope Leo, a highly cultivated artistic taste, united with a certain subtle depravity of morals. Henceforth his court became an open field for the fine arts, and an arena for the most debauched, sensual orgies. And not merely owing to his high position, but also because he maintained in the midst of his wildest excesses the prestige of a magnanimous chivalry, his example influenced all the young people of France directly and irresistibly.

It was in the zenith of this regal frivolity and regal favour that Henri's voluptuous life was interrupted by the above-related intermezzo of sincere, honest love for this child of Montalme. But it was at the very time when King Francis, basely deserting his noble wife, the good Queen Claude, at the head of a jolly troupe of knights, accompanied by the most beautiful women of France, was roving from city to city, from castle to castle, from forest to forest, making the air resound with the clang of cymbals, the blowing of horns, and the baying of dogs; in summer dropping down on the fairest flower-strewn meadows, or near mossy-green woods to hold their revels, and in winter pelting each other with snowballs and filling the various castles with shouts and laughter.

Now here--now there--he appeared as in a fairy tale--like a vision--the impersonation of joy. Where one hoped to find him he had just vanished, and where he was not expected he came. This constant change of residence frequently embarrassed his ministers or those immediately responsible for affairs of state, as well as the foreign ambassadors. And whilst the most serious problems were perplexing their heads, he, with his knights and the "petite bande," was ranging all over the country in search of adventure, and when needed was never to be found.

It was as difficult to prevent one's self from being infected with the frivolity of the king's court--if living in the midst of it--as to keep one's health intact in a plague lazaretto. To have done it, one must have been peculiarly organised, and Henri de Lancy was not peculiarly organised.

IX

Weeks passed. Ever slower the time dragged on amid the aching stillness of Montalme. Blanche's trembling hope, which resolved itself at first into hot, feverish unrest, changed by degrees to stony despair.

She grew paler and paler--her languid steps ever more feeble--her talk abstracted and disconnected. With head slightly bent forward, her lips half-open, and her eyes fixed on vacancy, she watched and listened--in vain! He came not, and nobody came who could give her any knowledge of him. Once when Gottfried, who did not allow her to be out of his sight in this sad, sad time, sought for her in vain in castle and garden, led by a jealous suspicion, he climbed up into the tower chamber which De Lancy had occupied. Through the half-open door he espied Blanche. She was sitting at the foot of the bed upon which De Lancy had been laid when wounded. She smiled, and on her innocent lips trembled the words of his daring love-song:

"Si tu veux m'apaiser
Redonne--moi la vie
Par l'esprit d'un baiser."

She was dreaming!

Whole nights she sat up sleepless in her bed and murmured or sang softly to herself. And now many times through the stillness of night she heard the beat of a horse's hoof at full speed passing her window. Who could the rider be who thus hurried by Montalme at the dead of night?

There was one person in the castle whose faith was firm as a rock in De Lancy's truth. This was Dame Isabella. Daily she invented fresh excuses for his remaining away--daily arrayed herself in expectation of his return. For hours together she would grin and curtsy before the mirror, preparing for her advent at court.

One day when Blanche, with her hands in her lap, sat brooding, Dame Isabella rushed to her, exclaiming, "Blanche! Blanche! quick, the royal hunting party is coming by the castle!"

Blanche trembled, for she knew that he must be among the king's retinue. She stepped to the window.

Like a gold embroidered thundercloud, the hunting-party whirled out of the distance and drew nearer. Horns sounded and rapid hoof-beats vibrated on the air. As they approached, a good chance was afforded to see the costly apparel of the ladies, and also of the gentlemen, of whom an old chronicler of the times avers, not without point, that some among them wore their lands and castles on their shoulders.

They fluttered by like a glittering swarm of birds of paradise. Blanche stretched her little head forward--there he was--one of the first!

He did not even look up--but rushed by like a storm-wind, his face turned to a blonde, regal lady, and looking proud and imposing indeed. Blanche staggered back. What could there have been in that brilliant throng of further interest to her? Dame Isabella, however, lingered at the window, and grinned and bowed with might and main, while her huge head-gear rocked comically back and forth.

And now the king approached on a milk-white steed with scarlet velvet, gold-embroidered housings. He looked up, and was reminded of an amusing picture which De Lancy, on his return to court, when questioned by the ladies as to the adventure which had detained him so long away, had drawn of a worthy old scarecrow who tended his wounds in Montalme. The existence of the lovely maiden Blanche he had deemed it wisest to conceal. Stifling a laugh, Francis returned Dame Isabella's greeting with roguish exaggeration, then turning, whispered to those nearest him, whereupon they also looked up, and being greeted by her, the entire retinue stopped a minute to inspect the self-satisfied old monstrosity. But they did not all possess the amiable courtesy which distinguished the king even in his unrestrained naughtiness. One of the ladies smiled, another laughed, and, like a spark in a ton of powder, this laugh was enough to set off the kindling stuff of repressed hilarity which at once exploded.

So pointed were the looks--so hearty the laughter of the party--that even the self-admiring Isabella could not in the slightest degree be deceived as to the cause of their merriment. Mortified, she drew back out of sight, and the hunting party passed on. Yet at a distance the sound of the continued laughter was audible. Dame Isabella was furious. "They laughed at me, they pointed at me with their fingers!" she repeated, over and over again, her corpulent figure, and especially her double chin, trembling in a remarkable way; and utterly forgetting her former admiration of the court, she added, "The disorderly mob! the base women!"

Blanche, who, with her elbows in her hands, was staring straight before her like one stunned, thought, "Perhaps he is laughing at me too!" and thought these words aloud; since she had been so absorbed in sorrow and longing she had often uttered whole sentences like one in a feverish dream.

"That you may be sure of!" said Dame Isabella, in a huff, and rustled out of the room to lay aside once and for all the ugly headgear which she had had a chance to observe was in appalling contradiction to the prevailing style. She distinctly recalled Henri de Lancy's expressed admiration for this same head ornament. Now she knew that he had been making fun of her, and anger and resentment gnawed at her heart.

It chanced that on the following day two mendicant friars sought admission to the castle. Dame Isabella asked to have these bare-footed martyrs conducted to her room, welcomed them hospitably and in the most respectful manner; in the first place because she was pious, but in the second because these wandering monks served as a kind of peripatetic newspaper; for which their roving life afforded them sufficient variety of material. Thus the lady obtained the most precise information about the frivolities of the king and his rollicking companions, especially the handsome De Lancy, who, she was told, among all these lawless revellers was the worst. He was not only following the royal example to the last extent (the monks exaggerated perhaps a trifle, seeing how much it pleased their listener), but of late he had actually formed a liaison with a married woman, the Countess de Sologne, whom, as she was carefully guarded by her husband's jealousy, he visited secretly at night. And they ended by saying, "It would not surprise us if the castle lady heard the reckless knight ride by, since it was the shortest way to Laemort, the hereditary seat of the Solognes."

We may rest assured that Dame Isabella gave the monks for this precious communication plenty of money to spend on their way. Possessed of her glorious bit of knowledge, she was dying to tell it, and seeing Blanche at the chess-board, opposite her uncle, who exerted himself all the time to try to distract her thoughts, she began immediately to relate what she had heard. They were not prudish in those days, and if here and there one cared to preserve the innocence of a young girl, that blissful ignorance was by no means maintained which to-day is held peculiarly sacred and inviolate.

Dame Isabella repeated word for word all she had heard of the shameful proceedings which hourly went on in the Castle of Amboise, and of the startling depravity of Henri de Lancy. In vain Gottfried attempted, by his displeased looks, to silence her; she went on further, and advised Blanche to rejoice that she had escaped the danger of becoming the wife of this vicious fellow. Blanche sat stiff and straight, not uttering a word, and continued to shove the little ivory figures slowly over the board--that she made the castle execute the peculiar leaps of the knight, Isabella did not notice. But when she finished by saying that they might hear Henri de Lancy ride by nightly, since the nearest way to his beloved duchess led by Montalme, they suddenly heard a painful quiver like the dropping of a little bird which had been shot through the heart. Blanche had fainted and fallen.

"Cruel woman!" exclaimed Gottfried, furiously, "must you tell? I could be silent!"

He had long known of Henri's infidelity.

Consciousness soon returned to the poor girl, and with it the recollection of her sorrow. Blanche longed to lose herself again, but the blessing was denied her. Not even the repose of sleep did Heaven grant her. She would lie awake, listening feverishly the whole night; but no sound disturbed the deathlike stillness either the first or the second night. During the day Blanche dragged herself from room to room, as if her once flying feet were weighted with lead, but most of the time she sat stiffly erect with her hands lying helplessly in her lap, staring before her with glazed eyes.

The third day was drawing to a close. Gottfried came in, and, seating himself beside her, inquired after her health. She replied there was nothing the matter with her, but at the same time crept close to him like a very sick child, and he, who had usually repulsed her innocent caresses, now put his arm around her slender body and laid her little head tenderly on his shoulder; he no longer thought of his own pain, but of hers.

She begged him to tell her a story, as a sick child begs for a cradle-song.

He had told her many a tale in bygone days, yet of all she liked best to hear of his own adventures and what he himself had seen. Therefore he asked now, "A true story, my jewel?" She shuddered, "Oh, no! no! a fiction, my uncle, pray!"

He passed his hand thoughtfully over his brow. Nothing occurred to him but a little legend which had been told him by a half-crazy monk who was crouching on the steps of the Milan Cathedral, and with a somewhat tremulous voice he began:

"It happens occasionally that in the midst of the blessedness of heaven an angel looking down yearns for earth, which seems attractive in the enchantment of distance. Then St. Peter, at the Almighty's command, grudgingly opens the gates of heaven a little, and the angel slips through. But however much he exerts himself and beats his wings, the little fluttering things carry him up, and he cannot escape from the spheres of sinless purity which float around Paradise. St. Peter rattles his bunch of keys and again the gates of heaven open, and now on the threshold stands Jesus Christ, well-beloved Son of the Father, and infinitely compassionate Son of Man, who knows the earth thoroughly. And when the lovely, unwise rebel turns his gold-encircled little head to question him concerning it, he beckons him to come nearer, and smiling lays a warm beating weight on his breast. Then he says, 'Try it!'

"And lo! when now the angel attempts to lift his wings the little weight which Jesus Christ has laid on his breast draws him down to earth--for the weight is a human heart. Slowly, slowly he descends from the spheres until he lands on a green meadow. There he sinks into a deep, dreamless sleep, and when he awakes he has lost his wings, forgotten his heavenly origin, and has become a man--only with an intense longing in his soul for virtue and purity, which he is not himself aware is homesickness; holiness, happiness, heaven, and home being to him unconsciously one and the same thing. Yet but now howe'er much his yearning may hurry him upward again, his heart chains him fast to the earth and he cannot return to his radiant home until a great human grief has broken the heart which was laid on his breast. Then our Lord Jesus Christ glides downward to earth--takes the poor rebel in his arms and carries him back to Paradise."

Gottfried paused. Blanche was silent a moment, then she sighed, "Your story is sad, almost as sad as if it were a true one!"

To which Gottfried replied, "But it has a lovely ending!"

The sad maiden, however, was perfectly silent, and looking into her melancholy eyes he discerned a doubt in them if even the joy of heaven could compensate for that which we suffer and are deprived of on earth.

After a little while Blanche began, "Is the dear God then displeased if an angel looking down yearns for the earth?"

"No," murmured Gottfried, "but he is sad, very sad!"

X

For two nights she had had no sleep; on the third she was exhausted and slept soundly, and dreamed a sweet--wonderfully sweet dream.

It seemed to her that she met her beloved in the garden. A delicious perfume was wafted from the crown of the lindens, soft greenish shadows spread twilight over the earth, and all nature, as in measureless rapture, held its breath, no lightest touch of air stirred--she lay in his arms, love-enchanted and his lips closed her mouth.

Thus she dreamed--when suddenly she sprang up as if one had struck her heart with an iron hammer.

Was not that the sound of a horse's hoof which broke on the stillness of night? In her long white nightdress she flew to the window.

She recognised him, notwithstanding the speed of his horse, and in spite of the curtain of darkness with which midnight sought to veil his figure. She bent far over the window-breasting and stretched out her arms; a frightful longing confused her senses, and she sang--poor child!--without knowing what the words meant:

"Si tu veux m'apaiser
Redonne--moi la vie
Par l'esprit d'un baiser.

"Heureux sera le jour
Quand je mourrai d'amour!"

Louder and louder the voice swelled out, piercing as a cry of anguish; yet full of a powerful sweetness the song echoed through the sultry stillness of night. It struck the ear of the rider. He checked his horse, looked around him, and then spurred the animal anew until he leaped wildly on.

She bent forward--farther forward,--"Plus d'espoir!" she groaned. Her heart was so heavy, so heavy! Beneath, the dew glistened like a silver sheen over the azure fields, out of which an angel seemed calling her to "Cool rest--cool rest!"

She bent forward--forward! and then fell many, many fathoms deep into the moat below.

* * * * *

The heavy fall was heard in the castle, and soon the servants with torches hurried forth to see what had happened.

There, below, glimmered something white as a blossom broken off by the storm. They climbed down. The light of the torches played over a pale, lovely face which smiled in death. She was not disfigured, not a particle of dust, not a speck of mud or soil of earth, adhered to her white garment, although she had fallen among plants growing in the mud. In spotless purity the white folds wound about her beautiful limbs. And when the people saw this, they marvelled, and said, "A miracle!" Then one pressed through the throng, deathly pale with distorted face--Henri de Lancy!

But Gottfried coldly turned him away from the dead maiden.

Right tenderly the old soldier lifted the lovely body in his arms, murmuring:

"Her heart was broken--she is released!"

XI

It was an age full of horrors, when the noblest blood of illustrious Hellenism rose up to face a background of battles, orgies, and pulpit harangues. It was not only a period in which Lorenzo de' Medici, in disguise and at the head of a bacchanalian troop tore through the streets of Florence; Benvenuto Cellini stabbed his enemies at the street corners; Pope Leo at a cardinal's supper presented a sacrifice of doves to the Goddess of Love upon a white marble altar, and offered to his favourite, Raphael, a cardinal's hat in payment of his bills--but a time also when Savonarola preached the loftiest asceticism; Rabelais, in the midst of his obscene rhapsodies, created the wonderful idyl of l'Abbaye de Telesme; Fra Angelico on his knees painted his picture of Christ, and the triumphal procession of an emperor ended in a monastery!

A time full of enigmas! and among the many enigmas which lived in it, was one of a sad, silent monk, of whom his cloister-brethren asserted that he once had led a very dissolute life, but now was the most absorbed *dévoté*.

And whilst King Francis, at variance with himself and the world, tried to maintain, even to the end, the appearance of ostentatious levity, and to win fresh renown as a patron of art, and to console himself for his lost self-respect with the flatteries of the Duchess d'Etampes, this monk devoted every single hour which remained to him, after the barest satisfaction of his physical needs, and the fulfilment of his religious duties, to one and the same work,--a sweet girl's head,--which he, with his slender, effeminate, courtier's hand, formed out of wax after a death mask, and ever again re-formed, and could never finish to his own satisfaction. Discouraged, disappointed, he destroyed each day the work of the preceding until finally, in the very last year of his life he became more tranquil, and then under his never-weary hands arose an exquisite maiden's head with a sweet, thoughtful expression of face,--the little head bent forward as if listening to a great joy, yet weighed down by the presentiment of a terrible pain!

And he worked at the head on his knees, like Fra Angelico at his ecstatic pictures of saints, and he coloured it most beautifully--but still, not as if it were the head of a living maiden, but as of one who had died in the freshness of youth. When he succeeded, he smiled and closed his eyes for ever.

XII

After long wanderings, the bust has found a resting-place in the museum at Lille. Full of a dreamy pathos, it stands in its glass case--an atonement for Love betrayed--in memory of the bitterest repentance.

As the embodiment of an old legend, it interests us and seems to say: "A tear for Blanche of Montalme; for Henri de Lancy--a prayer!"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BLANCHE: THE MAID OF LILLE ***

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