

La Tarantula

by Giddings Hyde Ballou, 1820-1886

Published:

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Chapter I

IT was scarce past the meridian of a warm summer's day, when from the inn of old Gaspar Varni, underneath the heights of Sorrento, might have been heard the sound of viols, and the deep notes of the bassoon ringing clear from amidst the clash of merry voices. Music and careless mirth, the never failing concomitants of an Italian holiday, were here in full ascendancy; for the birthday of the portly host happening to fall on the anniversary of St. Geronimo, the yearly festival which served to celebrate the two in one, was a matter of no small interest to the villagers. The dining room was filled almost to suffocation, and it were a matter admitting of doubt, whether the chagrined few who chanced by lateness of arrival, or other causes, to be excluded from seats at table, were not to be envied rather than pitied in the endurance of their deprivation.

Such a doubt, perhaps, was entertained by an individual dressed in a peasant's frock and a slouched hat, who, pausing in the open doorway, regarded the mixed assembly with a half smile, not wanting a certain superciliousness which in other circumstances would have provoked instant observation. Now, however, the full swing of common enjoyment rendered every one blind to what the looker-on took no trouble to conceal. Nor did he at all lower his disdainful regard, when a veteran clad in a sort of military undress, arose from the opposite side of the tables, and waving a wine-cup in his hand, drew on himself the general attention.

„Comrades,“ he said, „I give to you, Napoleon! my noble master, who, six years ago, delivered me with his own hand the shoulder-knot of a sergeant of the guard. Napoleon!—the soldier's true friend, and the greatest man on earth. Green be his memory forever!“

The words were scarce out of his mouth, when a youth, some twenty years of age, sprang up and hastily replied:

„What right hast thou, Jean Maret, thus to celebrate in our midst, the praises of our tyrant? Dost thou deem our spirits dead to all generous emotion? A curse on the usurper who burned our country with fire, and poured out the blood of its children like water! May just Heaven pour down indignation on his head!“

This speech produced an instant commotion. Angry words were bandied back and forth, and bright steel already flashed in the light, when the sturdy voice of old Gaspar surmounted the din.

„What means this tumult?“ he cried. „Shall a few wine-warmed words thus set you all agog, my merry men? Come, you forget yourselves in giving way to such causeless rage. And thou, Gulielmo, leave thy saucy quips. How darest thou thus spoil good cheer?“

The youth, with a grieved countenance, turned to go.

„Tis not,“ he said, „that I fear for threats, especially from Master Jean. Yet since thou commandest, I needs must yield.“

So saying, he passed out of the door, while the tumult having ceased, a whisper went round the room:

„Gaspar has a fine daughter; 'tis she who commands through him.“

The mirth, for a moment rudely stayed, again proceeded. Goblets clinked and wine flowed merrily, till the host, striking his hand on the table, again addressed the company:

„Good people and neighbors all,“ he said, „I pledge you here my future son-in-law. Drink deep then; the wine is good, I trust, and at all events the toast merits our good will.“

The wine was forthwith lifted to lip, and at the word, the generous liquid, blushing with deeper hue than even did the landlord's jolly nose, was drained to the uttermost drop, and the cups, turned bottom up, were replaced on the board. As the ring of the metal ceased, Master Jean, grizzle-haired and scarred with the marks of war, rose up and grimly smiled around.

„Mates,“ he said, „I am not apt at making fine speeches, though I can feel as many thanks as another. I'll give you then, our jolly host and his sweet daughter. Than he, no better rules the roast between here and the salt sea. And what maiden can compare with her in loveliness?“

This speech was received with the most decided applause by the rest of the company, who seemed eager to evince their approbation of all things at present said and done, by steadfast application to the festivities of the occasion.

Meantime, far removed from their boisterous cheer, sat within her little chamber the maiden, weeping at thought of the dreaded marriage-day, towards which the hours were rapidly hastening.

„O, Gulielmo!“ such were the thoughts which she murmured, „shall I be able to support life forever removed from thee? Alas! the fate which so ruthlessly severs our mutual loves!“

Meanwhile, Gulielmo roamed the hills, his heart swelling with sadness. What use in longer adherence to home and the lowly shepherd's lot? No, he would no longer tamely submit to poverty and the contempt which it entailed on its victim. The moment was now arrived when he must bid adieu to Rosa, loved in vain, and to Sorento, spot hitherto so loved and lonely. Thus musing, he began to trace on the sandy soil a rude outline, which certainly bore a striking resemblance to Rosa's pretty features.

„Well done, Master Gulielmo!“ suddenly exclaimed a strange voice.

The startled youth looked up, and in so doing cast his eye on a face which seemed not altogether unknown to his remembrance. The stranger possessed a visage bold and finely formed, a piercing eye, and a strongly-marked mouth set beneath a classic nose; while his tawny color told a life exposed to daily wind, and sun, and rain.

„Art thou a student of the art which is our country's pride?“ continued the latter, „or does love inspire the skill which thou hast here displayed?“

„I am no student,“ Gulielmo replied; „and yet I daily try, in my unknowing way, to counterfeit the forms which I see.“

„It were pity then,“ rejoined the other, „that such as thou should idly waste those talents which when duly trained would surely bring their owner fame and wealth. Suppose for instance that some great lord, or other noble patron of the arts, should send thee a couple of years to Rome—but I forget. Perchance the maid whom thou hast pictured here, might interpose her pretty face to spoil so fair a plan?“

„Alas!“ said Gulielmo, quickly, „she is not for me. And though I see that you are jesting, I tell you truly that I would go where any chance might lead me, so that I might never see her or Sorento again.“

„I do not jest,“ answered the stranger. „Indeed, I know your story already. I was present just now at the inn, when you and Jean Maret fell at variance. And, friend Gulielmo, I know of a certain lord who I am confident will do you the office which your talents require. He is a Russian prince, of generous hand, although of a somewhat rough exterior. Take courage; perchance affairs may have a better turn. And if the Russian, as no doubt he will, shall take thee under his wing, mayhap old Gaspar’s purpose may yield some grace to thy ill-prospered love. Hie home then, and wait a little for the flood of fortune. I’ve faith that thy ill-luck will shortly change to good.“

The stranger turned away. Gulielmo, in mute surprise, watched his steps a while, and then hastened along the winding path which led him back to his own cottage door.

Chapter II

Pas Seul by Moonlight.

The moon hung high in silver light above the village and the quiet fields which lay beyond, when a gallant train came in order down the unfrequented street. Appareled gaily, each cavalier wore roquelaure and belt, and in their midst they bore a prisoner—the veteran Jean. Reaching at length the grassy market-place, they halted and formed a ring, in the midst of which they placed their captive. Some of the number drew from underneath their short cloaks instruments of music, while others cleared their throats as if about to sing. Presently there stepped apart a masked form, who thus gave command in a rude sort of rhyme:

„Hola, my merry mountaineers,
Prepare a festive lay;
Our gallant friend will measure trip
While we a song essay.“

Each other masker thereupon drew a rapier, and turned its point to centre.

„Unbind the captive, give him room;
Now, friend, pray mind your play.
Strike up, my lads, and heed your time,
And merrily troll away.“

At the word, the others commenced in deep, hoarse voices:

„An old graybeard a wooing came,
Ha! ha! ha!
With plenty of brass, but little brain,
Tira la la!

Merrily round we go,
Merrily.

All in a circle O,

Cheerily!
Right joyful was the gaffer gray,
La la la!
And who so blithe as he I pray?
Tira la la!

Merrily round we go.
Alas! the change of time and tide,
Ah! ha! ha!
That gaffer's joy to grief should glide,
Tira la la!

Merrily round we go.“

„Trip on, friend Jean,“ the leader said; „thou laggest wretchedly. Let me spirit thee with this good steel rod; 'twill move thee most famously.“

Jean Maret, in spite of himself, discovered great agility on this occasion. He could hardly have moved with more readiness in the rustic cotillon among the village lads and lasses. Nevertheless, not a few oaths escaped him, doubly provoked as he was by the composure of his tormentors, and the laughter of the surrounding spectators. But swifter still flew the brisk burden, „Tira la la.“

„Good people all,“ the chief now said, „we have piped this man to play, and now that we the pipes have tuned, 'tis fair his purse should pay.“

„Villain!“ replied the veteran, testily, „ye shall not have a doit!“

„Good luck, our friend's not satisfied,“ returned the mask. „And yet we've done our best. Well then, Jean Maret, we will offer you a change. Doubtless you have seen the dance which is inspired by the bite of our famous black spider. Let us see if our good steel may not be able to supply the place of the spider. Come then, my lads, strike up ›La Tarantula‹.“

Again Jean was forced to display his powers of agility, as flew the music and the accompanying voices, onward and still on, with ever-increasing rapidity. At length his obstinacy was overcome, as much by the absurdity of the affair as its personal inconvenience.

„Cease, cease,“ he cried; „have done with this, and the money you demand shall be forthcoming. A pack of fiends were better companions, I trow, than your blackamoor troop. Let me on, then, and I will lead you to my cash-box, and after you have there satisfied yourselves, I pray you to go your ways like honest thieves, as you are.“

„Take heed what you say, Jean,“ replied the chief masker. „We are honest, that is true enough, and we only want a fair payment for our services. Our band never performs for a less price than a thousand crowns, nor will we ask more than this of a worthy soldier like yourself. So lead the way, my friend, we follow close on your steps.“

With jingling steel and shrilly pipe, the troop retraced its course, till on arriving at the lodging-place of Jean Maret, the latter paid down the needful scot, indulging himself while counting out the coin in various hearty objurgations which seemed to add no little to the amusement of his hearers.

Meanwhile, from mouth to mouth, among the villagers, who gathered round the scene, passed the whispered murmur:

„Sartello, the bandit chief, and his followers!“

The person thus indicated turned to the shrinking crowd, and lifting the mask from his face, he addressed them thus:

„Good friends, our play is finished. The players through me, desire to make you their most respectful bow, thanking you for your good company. We rejoice to see that you are pleased with our endeavors for your amusement, and will hope that when next we chance to meet, we may therein be as fortunate as now.“

At the word, each of the troop made a low obeisance, and with their leader, quickly retreated from the village. By slow degrees, the streets were cleared, though here and there a few lingered along to talk over the occurrences of the night. It was not till near the dawn of morn that the village again became quiet, when in the early dew, a carriage drove swiftly up to the inn, the door of which the coachman, having leaped from his seat, banged with might and main. At length old Gaspar thrust his night-capped head from an upper window.

„What means this cursed din?“ he angrily exclaimed.

„Come down—come down!“ the coachman replied, in a gruff voice. „Here is Prince Reklövstt waiting at your door.“

„Good Heaven!“ exclaimed the landlord, withdrawing his head in a fluster. „It can be no common prince, this, with such a jaw-breaking name. Here Francesco, Rosa, wife, all of you! hurry, haste down stairs as quickly as you can!“

The household were quickly astir, the doors were unbarred, and Gaspar presented himself before the prince, who had just descended from the carriage. The Russian lord—for any one would have known him as such by his appearance—possessed a long beard, thick eyebrows, and eyes, whose look was chiefly a chilly and impenetrable stare.

„He must be monstrous rich,“ thought Gaspar; „he has such a bearish way with him.“

The coachman, who seemed also to serve as interpreter, now addressed the host in tolerable Italian, easy enough to be understood, though interspersed now and then with some queer sounding words.

„The prince wishes to breakfast. Quick then! bring a turkey, a quart of brandy, a cup of fat, a good cheese pie, and a reindeer’s tongue.“

The landlord was filled with astonishment and respect.

„O, servant of a mighty lord!“ he said, „our larder is to-day somewhat scant, for crowds of guests have scoured our house of all its choicest fare. But we will give you the very best we have, if you will deign to accept it.“

The coachman seemed disturbed, but consulted the prince, who answered him with a frown and a growl of foreign words.

„Mine host!“ rejoined the interpreter, „the prince doth condescend to accept. But be sure, whatever else fails, that the brandy is good.“

The coachman and his master now engaged themselves in a harsh-sounding conversation, wherein one would have judged that the vowels were far less plentiful than the consonants. Near half an hour thus passed, when—wondrous speed!—a half cooked fowl was placed on the table, together with olives, grapes, and sour brown bread. The Russian lord upon seeing this rare repast spread before him, gave vent to what sounded very like a Slavonic invective, but

nevertheless plunged his knife into the midst of the fowl, and carved and growled, and growled and eat, apparently bent on the most murderous havoc. Meantime, his servant turned to Gaspar.

„The prince hath heard one of your village youths, by name, Gulielmo Massani, commended much for his high talent and great pictorial skill.“

„Ah!“ murmured Gaspar, to himself, „heard one ever such elegant discourse?“

„The prince last evening met upon the road an old acquaintance, who told him much concerning this lad; recounted his whole history, and told how he drew wonderful resemblances of birds, and beasts, and men.“

„Tis true,“ replied Gaspar. „Strange that I should never have thought of it before.“

„So, therefore, the prince offers to patronize the gifted youth, and send him a couple of years or more to Rome, where he will be able to make himself a perfect artist, and get fortune at such a rate that he can soon roll in gold.“

„San Dominic!“ said the host; „surely Gulielmo’s luck has turned. They say that Jean, last night, was robbed of more than half his store, and so, I do not know—but Rosa—“

„You’re right,“ interrupted the other speaker. „Two hundred crowns are yours, provided Rosa waits two years against Gulielmo’s safe return.“

„Ahem!“ exclaimed the somewhat surprised landlord. „How comes it that you know of this? And yet the girl grieves sorely. I will take you at your word.“

The courier nodded and spake to his master, who, with a pompous air, told in his open hand the glittering gold, which was seen transferred to Gaspar’s eager grasp.

„And now where is this same Gulielmo?“ inquired the courier. „Bring him hither as quickly as possible. I doubt not, when he hears of his advancement, that he will leap for joy.“

The youth presently arrived. The courier informed him of the matter in hand, while the prince nodded his head most graciously, and smiled so grim a smile that all the servants looked on dismayed.

„Haste,“ said the courier to Gulielmo, „pack up your knapsack as quickly as may be, and bid Rosa adieu, for it is time that we were on the road for Rome. There thou shalt undertake the painter’s art, and work for fame and bread. And, if all works prosperously, you shall soon be able to wed the fairest maid of all the land.“

An hour passed; the carriage drew up before the inn door, the host delivered his most obsequious bow, fair Rosa bade farewell to her lover, the prince and Gulielmo entered the stately vehicle, and, with a loud crack of the coachman’s whip, the travellers set out for Rome.

Chapter III

The Student’s Return.

THE two years had elapsed, when on a bright June afternoon, a weary pilgrim halted within a grove which overlooked the village of Sorrento. He gazed

around for a moment, as if in expectation of some one, and then sat down upon a mossy stone.

„It was here,“ said he, „that he bade me wait on my return. And yet—“

„He is with you,“ said Sartello, leaving the scraggy laurel behind which he had concealed himself. „What cheer brings thou from Rome, my gallant lad? Certes, thy look is loftier and manlier now, whatever fortune thou hast had.“

„Kind friend,“ replied the youth, „I may say that I have had both good and ill fortune; though mostly good, if thou dost agree with my opinion. I bring, through intercession of the pope, a pardon from our king. And thou and thine, if henceforth ye are pleased to remain at peace, will be accepted by the law which now holds your lives forfeit.“

Sartello grasped with a vice-like pressure the hand which the youth held out.

„I am well repaid, Gulielmo, for what little I have done in thy behalf, since thou hast thus brought me my heart's desire. No more will we roam the land, outlaws from honest men. We will till and toil, and freely live, scathless and void of care. But of thyself, what speed? say quickly.“

The youth frankly smiled.

„My pocket is rather low,“ he said, „although my hopes are not. I have gained some honor, whatever its worth may be. And now, how fares the gentle maid whom I so long to see?“

„Ah,“ replied Sartello, shaking his head sadly, „these women are indeed a puzzle. I fear much that Rosa's mind has changed since your departure. Absence, as the poets say, is love's worst bane. But let her go, Gulielmo; fairer charms than hers will soon ease your pain.“

Gulielmo stood for a moment as colorless as marble.

„Is this the reward,“ he said, at length, „of all my weary toil?“

„Pray comfort yourself,“ replied his friend. „I may as well tell you the worst at once. They say that her wedding-dress is prepared. Jean Maret's gold, and the importunities of old Gaspar, have been too much, fancy, for her fickle resolution.“

A single tear fell from Gulielmo, notwithstanding the proud compressure of his lips.

„Let it be so,“ said he. „I will make no words about it. Neither will I shun her sight. I will face it out, and shame them who think to flout me thus.“

„Bravo, my lad!“ exclaimed Sartello. „I find that you are of the true stuff. So come along; the hour is already near, when she is to change her name. I feared at first to tell you the tale, but am glad to learn that my fears were needless.“

Gulielmo's burning cheek might have sown the pain which raged within his breast: but, nevertheless, he accompanied Sartello with a firm and confident step till they reached the inn where the guests had already begun to assemble. In the porch, by the side of Jean Maret, sat Rosa, with a few flowers in her hair, her countenance as sweet to view as the first blush of a May morn. But when she met the fiery glance which Gulielmo cast upon her, she seemed abashed, and half turned toward her companion, with a silent appeal of the eyes. The priest now arrived, and all was made ready, Gulielmo looking on with a heated brain, and a feverish sickness gnawing at his heart. He was only able to see a single lovely face, in which a sudden sadness seemed to dim its former smiling grace.

„Why wait we?“ bluffly exclaimed Jean Maret. „The priest awaits, the bride is ready. Gulielmo Massani, come forward; Rosa has chosen you as bridesman.“

„Scoundrel!“ replied Gulielmo, „dare no jests with me, else your life may fail you before your wedding is over.“

„My wedding may be near at hand,“ returned Jean; „but I fear much that Rosa will hardly be my bride. Go, fair maid, and lead this stubborn youth hither. If all else fail, I think that thou wilt be able to hold him captive.“

Rosa sprang from the porch to meet Gulielmo. Flinging her lily arms about his neck, her head reclining on his breast:

„Thou art mine,“ she said; „whether poor or rich, it is the same to me. Pardon this deceit; it was not my will to give thee needless pain.“

„How is this?“ Gulielmo was with difficulty able to say. „Your bridal—“

„Come, your place!“ interrupted Jean. „There, take her hand. How dull you are! It seems to me that after all I should make the readiest groom of the two.“

„Not so!“ exclaimed Gulielmo. „But I must not allow you to be deceived, however little my tale may profit me.“

„Hold then a moment,“ Sartello cried. „Your hand, friend Jean; I think you bear no ill-will. Or if you do, the settlement we’ll postpone, till this present affair shall be concluded. Here, then, in this bag which I deliver you, you will find a thousand crowns, a forced loan to aid Gulielmo’s studious years; and with the sum, five hundred crowns by way of interest. I enacted the Russian on a certain occasion—a counterfeit lord—and yet not altogether so, as you will own when you have heard my story. Four years ago, I held the title of Prince of Cornaro, where I, in the midst of a beautiful country, upheld the privileges of a lord. But one luckless day I joined a secret band, which sought to change the rule by which Italy was swayed. We failed, and I was forced to fly my native towers, to roam the mountain depths as the chief of lawless men. My wide estates were confiscated to the service of the crown. But this noble youth has now obtained for me a full pardon from the king for all past misdeeds. The sovereign also freely restores me to my former rank and possessions.“

He ceased, and every voice was raised in applause.

„Hail, Prince of Cornaro!“ was the general exclamation.

„Prince,“ cried Jean Maret, „I give you thanks for the thousand crowns. The odd five hundred I will give towards Rosa’s dowry.“

„Nay,“ rejoined the prince; „the half thou mayst; it is all that thou canst be permitted, for I desire to find some room to add to Rosa’s store.“

„Ha!“ said old Gaspar, with a laugh. „Although not rich, her suitor is yet certain he brings her riches.“

„Good sir,“ replied Gulielmo, „I can show you but little coin, it is true; yet you may perceive some gain will be mine if you but choose to read this obligation.“

Thereupon he delivered a slip of parchment into the hand of the host, who turning it once or twice round in the vain attempt to decipher its intention, passed it to the prince, saying:

„I pray your excellency to read it. My eyes are somewhat weak, and indeed my scholarship is not so good as it once was.“

„Know all (read the prince, after naming the date), that I will pay to order of Gulielmo Massani, or his lawful heirs, four thousand crowns, with interest, as soon hereafter as demand may be made. BENVOLIO.“

„The Cardinal Benvoglio,“ said the prince. „Indeed, the lad hath prospered well. But come, the wedding lags. First, let us tie this youthful pair, and after that we’ll join the revel on the green, where Jean and I will teach you all how to dance ›LA TARANTULA‹.“

