

CARMELA.

BY EDMONDO DE AMICIS.

LIVING about midway between Sicily and the point of Africa nearest to it, is a small island called Pantelleria. There is but one town upon it, and that contains nearly two thousand inhabitants, among them being some two or three hundred under police surveillance. On this account there used to be stationed on the island a company of forty soldiers, under the command of a lieutenant, which was relieved every three months. Their duties were neither arduous nor confining, consisting only of standing guard at the barracks and prison, with an occasional drill; and the cheapness of good wine, which could be had for twenty centimes a bottle, added not a little to their comfort. The lieutenant, as sole commander of the military forces of the island, had none to dispute his authority. There were two orderlies to attend him, and a large apartment in the centre of the town was placed at his disposal. The mornings were often spent in hunting on the hills, and after dinner he sat in a little reading-room smoking with the worthies of the village. Absolutely free, he had no disagreeable thought or foreboding, save that of being obliged in each short time to yield his place to another.

The village lies upon the shore, and in its harbour the steamer plying between Tunis and Trapani used to stop every fifteen days. It was seldom that any other boat anchored there, and such a rare occurrence was the approach of a vessel, that it was heralded by the tolling of the church bell, and crowds would rush to the shore as if to witness some great event. To a stranger the village seemed quiet and reposeful. In its centre was a large plaza sloping toward the shore, which was finally reached by a road not a stone's throw in length. The shops and stores, as well as the Government buildings, were grouped about it. There also, or at least were then, two cafés—one patronised by the mayor, the officials of the village and gentlemen; the other by the common people.

The officer had his quarters in a house that was situated at the upper end of the plaza fronting the water. At this slight elevation you had stretched before you the whole harbour, the sea, and far in the distance, dimly seen, were Sicily and its mountains lining the horizon. Behind rose lava-made hills partly covered with woods.

Three years ago, upon a beautiful April morning, the steamer from Trapani stopped at Pantelleria. From its first appearance the bell had rung in its fullest and richest tones. Many hurried to the shore, and among others might have been seen the lieutenant, the mayor, the justice, the priest, the receiver of taxes, the pilot and the doctor, who was officially charged with the health of those under police restriction.

Two boats kept for the purpose put out to the steamer and brought back thirty-two infantry soldiers and an officer, a handsome young fellow, who, after having saluted his predecessor and bowed to the village dignitaries, made his way at the head of his division, through crowds of curious on-lookers to the barracks. After having provided for his men, he returned to the plaza to be formally received by the mayor; during this ceremony he displayed a natural cordiality that did not lessen his dignified bearing. After dining with his colleague he was escorted to his new home, where his predecessor's orderly was packing the trunks and cases, while one of his own men was assisting at the work.

The departing division started at eight o'clock, escorted by the new arrivals; farewells were said, salutes fired, and our officer hastened back to his rooms.

At sunrise the next morning he left the house, but he had not gone ten paces before he felt his coat gently tugged at. He turned quickly and saw standing a few feet from him a girl, slight, tall, and of exquisite beauty, with hair and dress in disorder, looking earnestly at him.

"How may I serve you?" he asked in astonishment.

She did not answer, but smiled and, raising her hand to her forehead, made the military salute. The lieutenant shrugged his shoulders and turned away when he felt another tug at his coat. Once more he faced about and found her in the same position as before.

"What do you want?" he asked again.

The girl pointed toward him and answered with a smile:

"I want you."

Not knowing what to do, and noticing that he was the innocent cause of much amusement for one of the villagers, he

started to go on; then, changing his mind, he pulled some silver out of his pocket and offered it to her. With a movement of her hand she indignantly refused the money, and repeated:

"I want you."

And she stamped her feet, and shrieked as a small child might when denied something it had been begging.

He now saw that there were several bystanders, all laughing, and, looking at them, then at the girl, then again at the crowd, he understood and continued on his way. He rapidly crossed the plaza; but just as he reached the end of it, he heard behind him the quick steps of some one running on tiptoe, and as he was about to turn around he heard the same sweet voice with its strange accent murmur: "My treasure!"

He felt a shiver run over him, but he kept on at a faster gait than before, but once again he heard:

"My treasure!"

Turning toward the girl, he exclaimed in annoyance:

"Leave me alone! Go away! Do you hear!"

She looked hurt at first, then smiled and moved a step forward extending an arm, as though to caress him; but he promptly dodged, and she murmured:

"Don't get angry, my little lieutenant."

"Go away, I tell you!"

"My treasure!"

"Go away, or I shall call a soldier and have you arrested," and he pointed to some of his men who were standing near. She waited no longer but started slowly away, repeating sadly:

"My treasure!"

"What a pity!" said the officer to himself, as he walked toward the shore; "she is so lovely."

Small wonder that he thought so, for she was a handsome type of the strong and noble beauty of the Sicilian women—a beauty such that love is, in a subtle way, unconsciously inspired by it. Before those dark and under eyes self-reliant manhood is in the most imminent danger—they seem to possess themselves of the soul's secret.

Her soft, wavy black hair was blown about a face that was open and thoughtful. The movements of her brows and lips seemed full of strength and life, but her voice was veiled, as though veiled. Her convulsive smile was succeeded by a sad expression of vacancy, which showed that she neither heard nor saw.

"I cannot understand why she is allowed her liberty. Something might happen to her," the officer remarked to the doctor, as they sat together smoking their cigars in the café that night, after he had related his experience of the morning.

"Where could they confine her?" he replied. "In the hospital in Sicily? She has been there and the town paid for her, but finding that it was only money thrown away, they brought her back. There was little to hope for. The first to say so were the specialists who examined her. Here, at least, she is as free as the air, poor thing, and she annoys no one but the soldiers."

The officer wished to know why the military were the only objects of her attention.

"Well, you see, the particulars of the story are a little uncertain. Every one tells it in his own way, especially those to whom the pure and simple truth is never sufficient—those who wish to add something of their own invention. But the facts, as they are believed by the few gentlemen here, are these. Three years ago an officer who commanded here, as you do now—a fine looking fellow, who played the guitar well and sang well—fell in love with this girl, who was then, as she is even now, the handsomest in the village."

"Very handsome, indeed," the officer interrupted.

"And the girl, naturally, partly for his fine voice, because here they are wild or singing and all music, partly for his brass buttons and gold lace, and especially as he was a handsome fellow, the girl, I say, fell in love with him. But such love! Love as it is understood here! Love in comparison to which the flowing lava seems cold—with a furious jealousy that you would only expect in a tragedy. Of her family the mother alone remained; a poor woman, who only saw through her daughter's eyes, and was ruled by her. You can imagine the liberty she had. It occasioned talk in the village—mere baseless rumours, that never had the slightest foundation. A strange character is here, and rarely met with, in which a delicate modesty and vestal-like virtue are intermingled with peculiar forwardness. Well, the substance of the story, it appears, is that one day the officer promised to marry her, and she believed him and went into raptures of joy. There were days, it is said, when they doubted that her brain could stand the strain; and I believe it, for who can tell to what point such a love cannot be brought? One day, if they had not taken from her hands a girl of whom she was jealous (I do not know why), she would have handled her very roughly. Exactly

opposite the café here she got hold of her, right in the public square; it was a tremendous scene, and it was not the only one. A woman could not pass her officer's quarters and lift her eyes to the windows, without completely upsetting her. At last the day came for the company of soldiers to leave and give place to another. The officer promised to return in a couple of months, but he never saw him again. The poor girl fell ill. Her recovery was very slow; but perhaps she might not have lost her reason had she not learned in some way that her lover had married another. The shock was unexpected and she became insane. That is the story."

"And then?"

"And then, as I told you, she was sent to the hospital in Sicily. She was returned in a few months, and has now been back over a year."

"At that moment a soldier entered, looking for the doctor."

"I will tell you the rest later," and, so saying, the doctor hastily left.

As the officer arose to go, he knocked his sword against the table, and a moment afterwards a voice was heard from without:

"I heard him! I heard him! He is there," and at the same moment the girl appeared at the door.

"Send her away," cried the officer, and a soldier obeyed his order.

"I shall go and wait for him at home," she was heard to say as she walked away.

"I shall go and wait for my little officer at home."

Carmela's mother lived in a small house at the end of the village with two or three families of peasants, and she managed with great difficulty to earn a living by sewing. During the first months of her daughter's misfortune she received help now and then from the wealthier families on the island, but they had contributed nothing to her support of late; for they found that their assistance did the girl no good, as she would neither eat nor sleep at home, and her mother was unable to control her. She would wander about the hills and among the rocks, and could be seen gestulating, talking to herself, and laughing. Boys passing over those roads would see her in the distance busy building small forts of stones, or seated on a rock looking sadly out upon the sea. If they attracted her attention her eyes followed them until they had disappeared, without replying either by voice or gesture to anything that they had said. At the very utmost she would sometimes, when they were a considerable distance away, point an imaginary gun at them, though this was invariably done in all soberness. She acted in the same way towards the soldiers, with none of whom had she ever been seen to speak. She passed in front of them or among them without seeming to hear their words, without turning her head, or ever looking them in the face.

Whenever she might be she would always hasten to the plaza when he heard the sound of the drum. The soldiers used to drill upon the shore and she would follow them there, and from a little distance watch them while the sergeant gave orders and the lieutenant superintended the manoeuvres. Then, when their work was over, she would approach the lieutenant, and, smiling lovingly upon him, use those terms of endearment with which he became so soon familiar, but in a low voice, covering her mouth with her hand, that the soldiers might not hear what she said. When in the village she could often be seen on the plaza in front of the officers' quarters in the centre of a circle of boys, who were much interested in all her actions.

Upon rare occasions she went to church, kneeling and joining her hands with the others as if in prayer, and with the others appeared to utter the sacred words; but once she broke out into hysterical laughter, and since then the aged ecclesiast had refused her admittance.

In other days she had a soft sweet voice, and sang as merrily as the birds; but now she only hummed over and again a few bars of a song her lover used to sing to her—hummed them at the foot of the stairway leading to the lieutenant's room, as she ate a few figs. She had her hours of pensive sadness when she neither spoke nor smiled, nor moved for any sound, even though her mother called her.

To the soldiers, as has been said, she paid no attention; whatever her attention was reserved for the officers; nor was she equally lavish with her favours to all of them—she had preferences. From the day on which she returned from the hospital,

the company had been changed six or seven times, and there had been officers there of every age, temper and appearance. The younger and better-looking ones she was particularly partial to, though they were all her "loves," all her "treasures."

The doctor was absent only a few moments, and returned before the lieutenant left. He then told all that has just been narrated. As the officer arose once more to go, he said, thoughtfully:

"Too bad; it is sad, indeed—she is so lovely!"

"I grant you that she is lovely," replied the doctor; "and what a noble and beautiful character she must have had."

The lieutenant left. It was late at night and the plaza was deserted. His quarters were only a short distance away, but he walked in that direction slowly and unwillingly. "She will be there," he thought, and he looked intently into the darkness, bending his head forward, trying to see if anyone were therein in front of the door; but it was too dark for him to see the door itself. He walked slower and slower, stopping every few steps. "If I knew that that shadow concealed an assassin waiting for me with upraised knife and ready to strike," he thought, "I should walk more quickly and firmly"—and he then took ten or twelve steps forward. "Ah, there she is!" He had seen her; she was seated on the doorstep, but in the darkness he could only discern the mere outline of her form.

"Why are you here, Carmela?" he asked, approaching her. She did not answer at once, but arose and coming to him placed her hands on his shoulder, and softly said:

"I was waiting for you."

"And why are you waiting for me?" he asked, pushing her hands away, which he felt only to grasp his arms. "Because I am unhappy without you," she answered. He could hardly bring himself to believe that she was unconscious of what she had said. He struck a match and held it near her face. The stupor of sleep, which she had not wholly shaken off, had deprived it of a little of its convulsive liveliness, and rendered it more calm and thoughtful, so that her appearance, with the naturalness of what she had said, increased the illusion.

"Oh, my darling, my darling!" she exclaimed, as soon as she saw his face lit up for the moment by the match. She put out her hand and attempted to caress him. In his trying to prevent her doing it she caught his hand, and leaning over quickly, bit it in the fervour of a kiss. He freed himself and rushed into the house, closing the door.

"My treasure!" Carmela called after him. No answer came, and she stood looking up at the lighted windows, until from mere weariness she sat down on the doorstep, crossing her arms over her knees, and her head soon fell forward and rested upon them.

When he reached his room the lieutenant looked at his hand and saw upon it the imprint of eight little teeth. "What sort of love is this?" he asked himself as he lighted a cigar. He commenced to walk about the room, thinking that he would force himself to plan new work for his little division for the morrow. "I will leave that until morning," he said, after a moment's reflection, and heat down by the lamp, opened a book, but not until he reached the end of the second page did he discover that he had been reading a work on military science; then thoroughly disgusted with his inability to concentrate his attention on any object, he decided to retire at once. He was about to blow out the light, when an idea struck him; he stepped quickly to the window, put out a hand to open it, drew it back, shrugged his shoulders, and went slowly to bed.

Early the next morning his man, entering the room softly, was astonished to find him awake, as it was much before the hour when he usually arose. As he was arranging his cravat a little later, he asked the orderly, who had just re-entered the room, if he had seen anything of Carmela.

"Yes," he replied, "she was at the step a few minutes ago."

"See if she is there still."

The soldier went to the window, opened it carefully, looked down and answered:

"Yes."

"Is she looking up?"

"No."

"Is she directly in front of the door or at one side of it?"

"At one side."

"Then I may be able to avoid her."

And he went down. But the sound of his sword again disclosed his presence.

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