

Part Two *The Pursuit of Lord Ruthwen*

I

Lord Ruthwen, the mysterious man who hid his dreadful secret beneath the perfidious appearances of an amiability full of charm, had profited from an imperious opportunity to extract from the unfortunate Aubrey, his imprudent travelling companion, an oath to be silent for a year and a day regarding the crimes of which he had been the witness.

One recalls with terror that fatal oath, whose extraordinary empire enchained all of Aubrey's faculties, at the very moment when his sister, affianced to Lord Ruthwen in spite of him, became the victim of a silence that a supernatural power and the violence of his illness caused him to keep until the end.

Finally, destiny, which presides over everything and counts our moments, completed the union of all that the world offers of the most virtuous and most amiable with the sum of the most perverse and the most odious, and the day of the marriage, that primal day, so pure and sweet, the deceptive presage of a happiness that is believed to be eternal and which is of such short duration, that day full of life, was the unfortunate Georgina's tomb.

An extreme dolor had robbed Aubrey of the use of his senses for some time. The fear of those around him spread the news of his death everywhere, and yet, by an effort of nature, after a long lethargy, his pulse revived, his eyes opened, and the beating of his heart announced his return to life.

Vengeance was the first need that he experienced.

Scarcely back on his feet, he leaves London and launches himself on Lord Ruthwen's trail. He knows that the beautiful climate of Italy is the object of the desires and the goal of the travels of men to whom fortune permits these voluntary emigrations. A secret inspiration directs his search toward those smiling lands that he had already travelled in happier times.

He disembarks in Venice, and asks everywhere if anyone has seen him, if anyone knows Lord Ruthwen. Vain efforts! He can discover nothing. Then melancholy draws him to the shore of the Adriatic, and there, filled with a dolorous memory, inspired by the enchanting places that he admires, he inscribes on a piece of paper bathed with his tears the names of the places where he would like to be able to spend the rest of his life, with the beloved sister he will mourn forever.

It is in that situation that Léonti finds the inconsolable Aubrey. Their hearts understand one another at the first whimper of a dolor that has the same source. They leave, animated by the same sentiments, swearing never to part again.

Léonti's heart is too dolorously affected, however, and the loss he had just suffered is too recent to find relief in the distractions of the voyage. His sobs, his stifled sighs and his profound reveries all reveal the sickness tormenting him, and when his long-contained grief bursts forth with greater violence for the very effort he makes to hide it, Aubrey takes him in his arms, consoles him and weeps with him, and it is by sharing his troubles that he softens their bitterness.

When they left the Lido, the gondolier charged with carrying them to the next shore gazed at Léonti for a long time without daring to speak to him, but the grief of Bettina's lover made such a deep impression on him that, more than once, his hand released the oar, confiding the care of his vessel to the motionless sea. Finally, weary of maintaining silence, he said: "Léonti, all Venetians have mourned your misfortune. You deserve a better fate. Having served your fatherland, you ought to find recompense on our shores for the perils of war. Like you, I have served the standard of Venice, I have braved enemy fire, I have fought on the plain of Olmutz."¹

¹ As the text will eventually specify, Olmutz (the German spelling of Olomouc) was the capital of Moravia, nowadays one of the Czech Republics. It is not obvious why Venetian troops would have been fighting there at the time when the story is set—which will also be specified eventually, although Bérard might not have had that date in mind at this stage of his story, given that it seems inconsistent with the temporal setting of the Polidori story to which this one is a sequel.

“On the plain of Olmutz?” said Léonti.

“Yes,” Nadoli continued, “and it was there, surrounded by enemies, that I was about to perish. Suddenly, a soldier arrived, saw my danger, and raced to my rescue.”

“What are you saying? Speak—who was that soldier?”

“He wore the costume of our region, and when he appeared, he was alone.”

“Alone?”

“By night.”

“By night?”

“And, as quick as lightning, his first action was to stop the blade that was about to strike me and kill the enemy who was menacing me.”

“What’s that?”

“Do you know that generous mortal? Is he dead, a victim of his own courage?”

“He lives—he is still breathing.”

“Who is he?”

“It was me.”

“O Heaven! What—that young soldier who, without knowing me, risked his life to save mine...”

“Was me.”

“Who was immediately pursued, overwhelmed...”

“It was me!” Léonti repeated.

“Whom I attempted, unsuccessfully, to rescue...”

“It was me, I tell you!”

“And who, in his turn, struck by a mortal blow, fell dying at my feet?”

“It was me, in person.”

“What about the wound he received?”

“Here it is!” said Léonti, explosively, uncovering his breast.

“Great God!” cried Nadoli, “It was you, Léonti?” And he fell at the feet of his rescuer.

Léonti lifted him up and hugged him in his arms. “Nadoli,” he said, “since the death of Torelli’s daughter, this is the first instant of consolation that I have found, perhaps the only one for which it was permissible for me to hope. Be happy in the places, ever loved and ever regretted, that I am leaving forever. I shall perish under a foreign sky. That is what destiny requires, which destroys the vain projects of human beings at its whim. Goodbye, then! Goodbye forever!”

At that moment, the vessel reached the shore. It was necessary to part.

Nadoli wanted to go with his savior. “Dispose of my life,” he said, dissolving in tears. “Take it—it’s yours.”

Léonti did not have the strength to reply. He received the other’s embraces, forbade him to follow him, and drew away—but in a voice interrupted by heart-rending sobs, in that tone which is so true and expressive that it produces a rapid and irresistible effect, with that cry from the heart whose vibration makes an immediate penetrating impact, resounds with so much force in the hearts of others, Nadoli still persisted.

“Friend! My benefactor! You to whom I owe my life, may Heaven preserve yours! Léonti! Farewell! Farewell!”

And the sea breeze continued to carry that farewell to Léonti, who was already far away.

II

Aubrey shakes his friend's hand sympathetically; the latter, able to understand that mute statement, replies with a tear. Nothing is purer, more consoling, than the memory of a generous action. For the benefactor, there is perhaps a reward greater than the benefit itself, which is the delightful emotion that it leaves behind.

They are soon far from the estates of Venice, however. Pursuing an enemy who always escapes them, they pass through many countries without pause.

In a happy situation, everything takes on a pleasing color for our observing eyes. We contemplate the inexhaustible beauties of nature ecstatically. A picturesque location, the slope of a hill, the summit of a mountain, the pure air one breathes there, an avalanche suspended over a precipice, an open space prolonged in a fleecy wood, a distant perspective fading away, the sun that, by virtue of a magical opposition, covers all the objects that interrupt its rays with a thousand shades of gold and azure, and darkens the shadows adjacent to its floods of light—all these scenes, which an immortal hand has placed in profusion in favorite climates, possess an admirable harmony that reanimates the delirium of poets, the inspiration of painters and the idle curiosity of travelers. But a man pursued by misfortune seems an exile on earth; the faculties of his imagination weaken. When his soul suffers, everything around him is sad. Respiring nothing but dolor, he obtains nothing from life save sensations whose diminished compass renders him insensible to everything that reproduces the distractions he rejects.

Such were the sentiments of Léonti and his friend. The marvels of nature had no attraction for them. If hazard led their path to a naïve scene of village love—a noisy troop of joyful harvesters, young men celebrating their return from labor and young women dancing in the green meadow to the music of guitars and amorous voices—far from pleasing Léonti, the variety of those happy groups, inspiring in their turn the gaiety that they inspired, further increased his sadness.

Aubrey, however, was impatient to go to Florence, where he was expected by a Neapolitan banker he had met during his earlier travels. Only a few leagues distant from that city, they were both hastening their pace in order to arrive there when a singular adventure forced them to stop at the first village through which they passed.

As they were approaching Roveredo their eyes were struck by bright light. The night was well advanced; the village, illuminated at all points by torches placed at close intervals, was dressed for a fête, and yet everything was dismal and silent; no singing could be heard.

That absence of melody, in a country where it seemed to be renewed at every step, was not a fortunate omen. Aubrey and Léonti went forward without daring to confide to one another the reason for their astonishment. As they entered the village, which seemed deserted at first, a cry of alarm emerged from a high window.

“There are two of them!” cried a voice—and these words, repeated, spread fear everywhere.

Long moans reply to them.

Aubrey stops, and tries to understand what might have caused the terror that their presence inspires. Léonti knocks at the door of a house that is more prominent than the rest. It does not open.

After further attempts to get in, he reverts to pleading. “We are two distraught travelers, whom misfortune has condemned to a voluntary exile. Grant us shelter for the night beneath your hospitable roof. Venice is my fatherland, and if storm winds cast your ship upon our shore, our urgent help would save you from the wreck. Why are you manifesting less generosity than us? Inhabitant of Roveredo, open your door to us.”

After a long silence, someone appears at the window, and replies, in an uncertain voice: “Alas, take pity on us. One sole vampire suffices to put the whole village in turmoil, and there are two of you. Go away, or our wives and daughters will die of fright on seeing you.”

“Vampires, us!” cries Aubrey, in astonishment. “You’re mistaken. Far from resembling such monsters, we are in horror of them, as you are, and it’s to liberate the earth from one of them that we have directed our path this way.”

On this assurance, Rodogni hastens to come down and let them into his dwelling. In a vast, elegantly-decorated apartment, women gathered there tremble at the arrival of the two travelers, but soon, reassured by what the newcomers say, they recover from their fright, and Rodogni, yielding to Aubrey’s entreaties, recounts the reason for their alarm.

“Two days ago,” he says, “a vampire appeared in the village.”

“Was he a foreigner?” asks Léonti.

“No,” their host replies, “he was a native of this country. We knew him, and this is his story:

“Roberti, a poor farmer of the village, was the tenant of a domain that belonged to a rich Florentine. A poor harvest ruined him. He left for Florence and asked for help, which was refused. Forced to pay what he owed without delay, misery caused his health to deteriorate. When adversity weighs upon us, it seems that it overwhelms us with various disgraces at the same time, taking pleasure in draining the cup of bitterness to the dregs.

“In Roberti’s absence, the modest field that his forefathers had worked was sold; his beloved wife died of grief, and a daughter, his sole consolation, was carried off by a foreign soldier. Driven to despair by so much misfortune, he came to request from his native soil a second helping of the wealth that was irredeemably lost, but found nothing but futile regrets. Fever took hold of him; his illness grew worse, and it did not take long to lead him to the grave.

“At this point, a prodigy commenced that still confounds me. Three days ago, Roberti was carried to the last resting-place of mortals, and the earth was already open to receive him, when he leapt from his coffin, alive, and disappeared over our fields. At that unexpected apparition, the frightened priests covered their faces, the holy crucifix slipped from their hands, the religious torches went out, and the terrified women ran to spread the incredible news.

“That miraculous event gave rise to a thousand conjectures. Everyone knows that an incident much slighter than that one, unnoticed in a great city, rapidly acquires great importance in a village. In this remarkable circumstance, in my capacity as the local *podesta*,² I assembled the resident elite and, after having consulted the savants of all centuries and all places by way of my books, it was decided, with unanimous agreement, that Roberti, suddenly returned to life, was a vampire, whose return it was necessary to anticipate.

“The danger was imminent. He had been seen roaming around the neighborhood. I gave orders. The men were armed, the women ran to the church, where public prayers were said, but the precautions were in vain, alas. Yesterday, at ten o’clock in the evening, the vampire ran through the village. His passage has chilled everyone’s courage, and at this moment, we’re waiting tremulously for the fatal hour to chime.”

Indeed, scarcely has Rodogni pronounced these words than a great tumult becomes audible outside, cries coming from all directions. Léonti and Aubrey, hidden on the threshold of the *podesta*’s house, precipitate themselves after a phantom that flees before them. Then, however, the mysterious man stops, throwing off the black cloak that had covered him, and renders them motionless with surprise by responding to their threats with repeated bursts of immoderate laughter.

They hasten to take the pretended vampire to Rodogni’s house, where, as soon as he comes in, everyone cries: “It’s Antonio! That madman Antonio!”

From that moment on, fear gave way to the most lively gaiety.

The two travelers were unable to understand anything of what was happening around them. They demanded an explanation from Antonio himself, who promised to tell the story of his vampirism, and began thus:

“Everyone acquires in being born a character that ordinarily accords with his physiognomy. Mine is not sad, and I am even cheerful to the point of madness. It was assuredly to punish me that I was imprisoned in an accursed place where I only found people who became furious when I spoke and who wept when I laughed. They’re insane, I know, and I pity them—but at the end of the day, their society was not to my taste.

“My prison displeased me to such an extent that, surprisingly enough, I began to become serious. I felt that if I became bored, I was doomed, and I looked out for a favorable opportunity to save myself. It presented itself. They had forgotten to close a secret exit. I noticed it, and left—and here I am, free. But that wasn’t the end of the matter. Once my escape was discovered, people would set out in my pursuit.

² A *podesta* is a local official roughly equivalent to a French *maire*; like the latter term, its precise significance evolved along with changing patterns of administrative organization. There is no precise English equivalent, although the local squire would probably have held a vaguely similar position in the era in which the story appears to be set.

“What shall I do? I abandon myself to my star, which always guides me marvelously. I run toward this village. I encounter a chapel on my route. It is open. I go in. I was alone. I approach the altar, and in a coffin, which I am curious enough to open, I recognize...guess who? My friend Roberti. He was a good man, and I’m pleased to see him again—but while I’m looking at him, I hear noises at the chapel door, and make out torches. They’re coming to fetch Roberti.

“My embarrassment is extreme. How can I get out without being seen? Fortunately, a mind like mine is fertile in expedients. An idea occurs to me, unique, singular and charming. I slide on top of the poor dead man and, thus hidden, allow myself to be carried away with him. You’ll understand, however, that I have no desire to have myself buried alive.

“So, having arrived at the burial-ground, the funeral procession stops and deposits me on the ground; immediately, I say farewell to my friend, reach out my arms, take possession of his covering, stand up, and, as quick as lightning, escape through the crowd.

“Apparently, the people around me thought that the dead man had returned from the other world, for it was necessary to see them grow pale, turn their eyes away, utter screams and run away at top speed—truly, nothing could be funnier.

“The adventure was too amusing for me not to take pleasure in seeing it through to the end, and my plan was to come back every evening at the same time, to frighten the good souls of the village, who have courage, as you know, and have taken me for I don’t know what. I was making my second nocturnal run when you stopped me. After that, let them say that I’m mad. You’ve heard me, and seen me—judge for yourselves.”

Thus spoke Antonio. His return and his madness were soon known to all the inhabitants of Roveredo, and that ludicrous object of general terror then became an inexhaustible subject of merriment. He was taken back, by winding paths, to the accompaniment of musical instruments, to the place from which he had fled. Eulogies were delivered to the courage of the travelers who, more fatigued than satisfied by the adventure, got up at daybreak the following day and took the road to Florence again.