

Giulietta
By
Letitia Elizabeth Landon
(L. E. L.)

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by
Peter J. Bolton

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GIULIETTA—A TALE OF THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY.

BY L. E. L.

The crimson shadows of the evening, mantling over the sky, and mirrored on the ocean, steeping the marble villas on the coast with their rich hues, and giving the pale orange-flowers a blush not their own—how welcome were they after a day so sultry as that which had just set over Genoa! The sea-breeze came fresh, as if its wings were cool with sweeping over snowy mountains, or those islands of ice of which northern voyagers tell, but softened ere it reached the land by thousand odours which floated from the shore.

But there was one eye to which the glad sunset brought no light, one lip to which the evening wind brought no freshness, though the heavy arm-chair had been drawn to the window, and the lattice flung back to its utmost extent. The Lady Giulietta Aldobrandini was far beyond their gentle influences; yet a few more nights, and hers would be the deep, unbroken sleep of death. It was hard to die, with such ties as bound her to life. She gazed on the three lovely girls, who watched her lightest look, and felt how

bitter it was to know that in a few more days they would be motherless: she had supplied their father's loss, but who could supply hers? She had been commending them to the care of their uncle, the Cardinal Aldobrandini, who had undertaken the charge of those who would so soon be orphans; but her heart yearned to say yet more, and she signed to them to leave the room. The cardinal watched with moistened eyes their graceful figures disappear amid the shower of scented leaves, which, as they passed, they shook from the flowering shrubs, and his lip quivered as he said, "And how may I supply a mother's place to those most ill-fated children? Is there no hope, Giulietta?" and, even as he spoke, his own conviction answered, "There is none."

The countess replied not to his question touching herself. She knew that it was asked in vain, and she had yet much to say. "Two of them will cumber you but little; Constanza and Bianca are of calm and gentle natures; from infancy they have felt sorrow lightly, and their affection is half habit. I feel within my dying soul a stedfast conviction that life to them will be as an unbroken stream, whose tranquil course no fierce wind has ever ruffled. But, my name-child, my Giulietta, she, whose eyes fill with tears, and whose cheek reddens at the slightest emotion, whose strong feelings and whose timid temper require at once so much caution and yet so much encouragement—for Giulietta's future I tremble. God forgive me, if my youngest has been my dearest! but they have not known it; I knew it not myself till now."

She sank back exhausted; and for a moment Aldobrandini was too much moved to reply. He was a man in whom all earthly affections were reputed to be dead. Cold and stern in manner, rigid in conduct, severe in judgment, he knew no interests but those of the church which he served. His talents were great, and his influence in Genoa almost unbounded; for his bitterest foe—and the successful have always enemies—had no hold on a man who had no weaknesses. But, where the desert seems most bare, be sure the sun has burned most fiercely; and the young and enthusiastic Giulio Aldobrandini had given little indication of the future cold and impassive prelate. He was the younger son, and the beautiful Giulietta was the betrothed of his brother. It was said that the bride looked somewhat pale, and it was deemed a harsh decree which had sent the younger Aldobrandini to a distant convent. Time passed as rapidly as time ever passes, be the change what it will upon its path; and when Aldobrandini returned to his native city, he looked wan and worn, but it was with toil and vigil that had brought their own reward: for, in those days, ability

and energy found a ready career to power and honour in the church. It may be believed that Aldobrandini would not have exchanged the waking certainties of his ambition for the realization of all his once-romantic fantasies; but, for a moment, the flood of years rolled back, the woman he had once so loved was dying at his side, and feeling became but the more bitter from the consciousness of the vanity of indulgence.

"Giulietta," at length, he said, in a low and broken tone, "years have passed since you and I spoke of the future as of a thing in which we took interest together. Then we spoke in vain: not so now; for, let the remembrance of our own youth be the pledge how precious another—your—Giulietta shall be in my sight."

The countess extended her emaciated hand towards him. Aldobrandini remembered it when its perfect beauty had been a model for the sculptor; he took it tenderly. Could it be the rigid and ascetic priest whose tears fell heavily on the dying Giulietta's hand? The lady was the first to recover herself. "Aldobrandini," she whispered, "I trust her happiness wholly to you." The girls now re-appeared in the garden, the cardinal himself beckoned them in, and, with a few brief but kind words, took his departure to the city.

Deeper and deeper fell the shades of melancholy over that sea-side villa. Day by day, those youthful sisters became more conscious of the approach of death. Their voices took a lower tone; their steps were more subdued; and their laughter, once so frequent, was unheard. At length, the worn eyes of the countess closed for ever: but their latest look was on her children.

Drearly did the rest of the summer pass away; and, when the leaves fell from the garden, and the bleak sea-breeze swept through the desolate lattices, it was with a feeling of rejoicing that the two elder sisters heard that they were to leave the villa, and pass the next year in the convent of Santa Caterina: after which their home would be the palace of the cardinal. But Giulietta left her mother's late dwelling with reluctance: it seemed almost like another separation. She visited and re-visited every spot which she could remember that the countess had once loved, and parted from it with many and bitter tears, as if it had been an animate object conscious of her regret. But youth is as a flowing stream, on whose current the shadow may rest but not remain; sunshine is natural to its glad waters, and the flowers will spring up on its banks: thus, though still preserving the most tender recollection of the parent whom she had lost, Giulietta's spirits gradually recovered their tone, and some very happy hours were spent in the convent.

A year in youth is like a month in spring; it is wonderful what an alteration it makes; the germ expands into a leaf, and the bud into a flower, almost before we have marked the change. On the cardinal's return from Rome, where he had made a long sojourn, he was surprised to perceive how the three Aldobrandini had sprung up into graceful womanhood. Constanza, the eldest, was nineteen, and Giulietta seventeen; but the sisters had never been parted, and he resolved that they should together take up their residence in his palace.

It was early in a spring evening when the Aldobrandini arrived at their uncle's dwelling. It was an old and heavy-looking building. Constanza and Bianca, as the massy gate swung behind them, on their arrival in the dark, arched court, simply remarked that they were afraid it would be very dull: but Giulietta's imagination was powerfully impressed; a vague terror filled her mind, which the gloom of the huge and still chambers through which they were ushered did not tend to decrease. At length, they paused in a large vaulted room, while the aged domestic went on, to announce them to the cardinal. Giulietta glanced around; the purple hangings were nearly black with age, so was the furniture, while the narrow windows admitted shadows rather than light. Some portraits hung on the walls, all dignitaries of the church; but the colour of their scarlet robes had faded with time, and each wan and harsh face seemed to turn frowning on the youthful strangers. A door opened, and they were ushered into the presence of their uncle. He was standing by a table, on which was a crucifix and an open breviary, while a volume of the life of St. Chrysostom lay open on the floor. A window of stained glass was half screened by a heavy curtain, and the dark pannels of carved oak added to the gloom of the oratory. The sisters knelt before him, while gravely and calmly he pronounced over them a welcome and a blessing. Constanza and Bianca received them gracefully and meekly, but Giulietta's heart was too full; she thought how different would have been the meeting had they been but kneeling before parents instead of the stern prelate. She bowed her head upon the breviary; and her dark hair fell over her face while she gave way to a passionate burst of tears. Next to indulging in the outward expression of feeling himself, the cardinal held it wrong to encourage it in another. Gently, but coldly, he raised the weeping Giulietta; and, with kind but measured assurances of his regard and protection, he dismissed the sisters to their apartments. Could Giulietta have known the many anxious thoughts that followed her, how little would she have doubted her uncle's affection!

The light of a few dim stars shed a variable gleam amid the thick boughs of a laurel grove, too faint to mark the objects distinctly, but enough to guide the steps of one who knew the place. The air was soft and warm, while its sweetness told of the near growth of roses; but a sweeter breath than even the rose was upon the air, the low and musical whisper of youth and of love. Gradually, two graceful forms became outlined on the dark air—the one a noble-looking cavalier, the other Giulietta. Yet the brow of the cavalier was a gloomy one to turn on so fair a listener in so sweet a night; and his tone was even more sad than tender.

"I see no hope but in yourself. Do you think my father will give up his life's hatred to the name of Aldobrandini, because his son loves one of its daughters, and wears a sad brow for a forbidden bride? or, think you, that yonder stern cardinal will give up the plans and power of many years, and yield to a haughty and hereditary foe, for the sake of tears even in thy eyes, Giulietta?"

"I know not what I hope," replied the maiden, in a mournful, but firm voice; "but this I know, I will not fly in disobedience and in secrecy from a home which has been even as my own."

"And what," exclaimed the cavalier, "can you find to love in your severe and repelling uncle?"

"Not severe, not repelling, to me. I once thought him so; but it was only to feel the more the kindness which changed his very nature towards us. My uncle resembles the impression produced on me by his palace: when I first entered, the stillness, the time-worn hangings, the huge, dark rooms, chilled my very heart. We went from these old gloomy apartments to those destined for us, so light, so cheerful, where every care had been bestowed, every luxury lavished; and I said within myself, 'My uncle must love us, or he would never be thus anxious for our pleasure.'"

A few moments more, and their brief conference was over. But they parted to meet again; and at length Giulietta fled to be the bride of Lorenzo da Carrara. But she fled with a sad heart and tearful eyes; and when, after her marriage, every prayer for pardon was rejected by the cardinal, Giulietta wept as if such sorrow had not been foreseen. Her uncle felt her flight most bitterly. He had watched his favourite niece, if not with tenderness of look and tone, yet with deep tenderness of heart. When her elder sisters married and left his roof, he missed them not: but now it was a sweet music that had suddenly ceased, a soft light that had vanished. The only flower that, during his severe existence, he had permitted himself to cherish, had passed away even from the hand that sheltered it. It was an illusion fresh from

his youth: his love for the mother had revived in a gentler and holier form for her child, and now that, too, must perish. He felt as if punished for a weakness; and all Giulietta's supplications were rejected: for pride made his anger seem principle. "I have been once deceived," said he; "it will be my own fault if I am deceived again."

Yet how tenderly was his kindness remembered, how bitterly was his indignation deplored, by the youthful Countess da Carrara!—for such she now was—Lorenzo's father having died suddenly, soon after their union. The period of mourning was a relief; for bridal pomp and gaiety would have seemed too like a mockery, while thus unforgiven and unblessed by one who had been as a father in his care. At her earnest wish they fixed their first residence in the marine villa where her mother died.

"And shall you not be sad, my Giulietta?" asked her husband. "Methinks the memory of the dead is but a mournful welcome to our home."

"Tender, not mournful," said she. "I do believe that even now my mother watches over her child, and every prayer she once breathed, every precept she once taught, will come more freshly home to my heart, when each place recalls some word or some look there heard and there watched. It is for your sake, Lorenzo, I would be like my mother."

They went to that fair villa by the sea; and pleasantly did many a morn pass in the large hall, on whose frescoed walls was painted the story of *Ænone*, she whom the Trojan prince left, only to return and die at her feet. On the balustrade were placed sweet-scented shrubs, and marble vases filled with gathered flowers; and, in the midst, a fountain, whose spars and coral seemed the spoil of some sea-nymph's grotto, fell down in a sparkling shower, and echoed the music of Giulietta's lute. Pleasant, too, was it in an evening to walk the broad terrace which overlooked the ocean, and watch the silver moonlight reflected on the sea, till air and water were but as one bright element.

And soon had Carrara reason to rejoice that he had yielded to his wife's wish; for, ere they had been married three months, the plague broke out in Genoa, with such virulence as if, indeed, a demon had been unchained upon earth. "The spirit of your mother, my sweet wife, has indeed been our guardian angel," said the count, as he watched a fresh sea-breeze lift up the long dark curls, and call the crimson into Giulietta's cheek. Still, though safe themselves—for, though the distance from Genoa was but short, their secluded situation and the sea-air precluded all fear of infection—still an atmosphere of terror and woe was around them, and their thoughts were carried out of their

own sweet home by dim and half-told tales of the dangers around them. And, among other things, Giulietta heard of her uncle's heroic conduct; others fled from the devoted city—but he fled not; others shut themselves up in their lonely palaces—he went forth amid the dead and dying; his voice gave consolation to the sick man, and his prayer called on Heaven for mercy to the departed soul. Giulietta heard, and in the silence of her chamber wept; and, when her tears were done, knelt, and gave thanks to God for her uncle.

For the first time hope arose within her, and she said to herself—"He who walks now even as an angel among his fellow-men cannot but forgive the errors and the weakness of earth." She went to meet her husband with a lightened heart; but, as she met him on the terrace, she saw that his brow was clouded, and his first words told her that important business would oblige him to go for a week to an ancient castle on the verge of the state, as his neighbours were disposed to question his boundary rights. It was but a day's, a summer day's, journey, through a healthy district; and yet how sorrowful was the parting! Alas! how soon the presence of beloved ones becomes a habit and a necessity! but a few weeks with them at our side, and we marvel how ever life was endured without them. The young countess touched her lute—it had no music; she gathered flowers—they had no sweetness; she turned to the fairy page of Ariosto—but she took no interest in his knights or dames; and at length the day was spent ere she had finished pacing the hall, and imagining all the possible and impossible dangers that could befall Carrara.

She was walking languidly on the terrace early the following morning, when a hum of voices caught her ear; one name riveted her attention: a horrible conviction rushed upon her mind. She called a page, who at first equivocated; but the truth was at last owned. The cardinal was stricken with the plague. She signed the page to leave her, and sank for a moment against one of the columns. It was but for a moment. She withdrew her hands from her face: it was pale, but tearless; and she left the terrace for her chamber with a slow but firm step. Two hours afterwards, the countess was sought by her attendants, but in vain; a letter was found addressed to their master, and fastened by one long, shining curl of raven darkness, which all knew to be hers.

Leaving the household to the dismay and confusion which such a departure occasioned, we will follow the steps of the countess, who was now on the road to Genoa. She had waited but to resume the black serge dress, which, as a novice of St. Caterina's, she had worn, and in which she knew she might pass

for one of the sisters who had vowed attendance on the sick; and, during the hour of the *siesta*, made her escape unobserved. Giulietta had been from infancy accustomed to long rambles by the sea-shore, or through the deep pine-forests; but now, though her purpose gave her strength, she felt sadly weary; when, on the almost deserted road, she overtook a man who was driving a small cart laden with fruit and vegetables. She accosted him; and the offer of a few piastres at once procured a conveyance to Genoa, for thither was her companion bound.

"The plague," said he, "makes every thing so scarce, that my garden has brought me a little fortune; it is an ill wind that blows nobody good."

"And are you not afraid of the infection?" asked the seeming Sister of Charity.

"Nothing hazard nothing win. A good lining of ducats is the best remedy for the plague," returned the gardener.

"Holy Madonna," thought Giulietta, "shall I not encounter for gratitude and dear love the peril which this man risks for a few ducats?"

The quarter where stood her uncle's palace was at the entrance of the city, and to reach it they had to traverse the principal street. How changed since last the countess passed that way! Then it was crowded with gay equipages and gayer company. She remembered the six white mules with their golden trappings, which drew the emblazoned coach of her uncle along; and how she leant back upon its purple velvet cushions, scarcely daring to glance amid the crowd of white-plumed cavaliers who reined in the curvettings of their brave steeds, lest she should meet Lorenzo da Carrara's eye, and betray their whole secret in a blush. Now not one living creature walked the street, and the sound of their light cart was like thunder. She was roused from her reverie by observing that her companion was taking an opposite direction to that of the palace; and requested to alight, mentioning her destination.

"To the archbishop's! Why, you will not find one living creature there. The good cardinal would have all the sick he could find brought to his palace, but they fell off like dried leaves; and when he was struck with the plague himself none ventured to approach it; for we all agree that the air there must be more deadly than elsewhere, since it has not even spared his eminence. So, if it is there you are bound, Madonna, we part company; but it is just tempting Providence."

Giulietta's only answer was to offer the gardener a small sum for her conveyance; but to her surprise he refused it. "No, no, you are going on a holier errand than I; keep your money; you will want it all if you stay in this city, every thing is so dear."

A sudden thought struck Giulietta. "I do not ask you," said she, "to venture to a spot which seems marked for destruction; but if I meet you here to-morrow will you bring with you a small supply of provisions and fruit? I can afford to pay for them."

"I will come, be sure," replied the man; "and the saints keep you, maiden, for your errand is a perilous one. He watched her progress till she disappeared round a corner in the street. "I wish," muttered he, "I had gone with her to the palace; at all events, I will be here to-morrow; she is, for all her black veil and pale face, so like my little Minetta. Ay, ay, if this plague lasts, I shall be able to tell down her dowry in gold;" and the gardener pursued his way.

When Giulietta arrived at her uncle's palace, she paused for a moment, not in fear but in awe, the stillness was so profound; not one familiar sound broke upon her ear. The doors were all open, and she entered the hall; pallets were ranged on each side, and on one or two of the small tables stood cups and phials; but not a trace appeared of an inhabitant. On she passed through the gloomy rooms; every thing was in disorder and out of place: it was indeed as if a multitude had there suddenly taken up their abode and as suddenly departed. But Giulietta hurried on to her uncle's sleeping apartment; it was vacant. Her heart for the first time sank within her, and she leant against the wainscot, sick and faint. "I have yet a hope," exclaimed she, and even as she spoke she turned to seek the oratory. She was right. The crucifix stood, and the breviary was open on the small table, even as they were the first time she entered that room: and on a rude mattress beside it lay her uncle. She sank on her knees, for he lay motionless; but, thanks to the holy Virgin, not breathless; no, as she bent over him, and her lips touched his, she could perceive the breath, the precious breath, of life: his hand too! it burnt in hers, but she could feel the pulse distinctly.

Giulietta rose, and threw herself before the crucifix. A violent burst of tears, the first she had shed, relieved her; and then calmly she prayed aloud for strength to go through the task which she had undertaken. The room was hot and oppressive; but she opened the window, and the sweet air came in, fresh and reviving from the garden below. She bathed her uncle's temples with aromatic waters, and poured into his mouth a few drops of medicine. He opened his eyes, and turned faintly on his pallet, but sank back, as though exhausted. Again he stretched out his hand, as if in search for something, which failing to find he moaned heavily. Giulietta perceived at once that parching thirst was consuming him. From the balcony a flight of steps led to the gar-

den; she flew down them to the fountain, whose pure, cold water made the shadow of the surrounding acacias musical as ever. She returned with a full pitcher; and the eagerness with which the patient drank told how much that draught had been desired. The cardinal raised his head, but was quite unconscious; and all that long and fearful night had Giulietta to listen to the melancholy complainings of delirium.

The next day, she went to meet the gardener, who had waited, though, as he owned, in hopelessness of her coming. How forcibly the sense of the city's desolation rose before Giulietta, when she remembered that her ignorance of the hour proceeded from there being no one now to wind up the church-clocks! Again she returned to the unconscious sufferer; but little needs it to dwell on the anxiety or the exertion in which the next three days were passed. On the early morning of the last, as she watched over her uncle's pillow, she perceived that there was a slight moisture on his skin, and that his sleep was sound and untroubled. His slumbers were long and refreshing; and when he awoke it was with perfect consciousness. Dreading the effect of agitation, Giulietta drew her veil over her face, and to his enquiry of 'was any one there?' she answered in a low and feigned voice.

"I am faint and want food; but who, daughter, are you, who thus venture into the chamber of sickness and death?"

"A stranger; but one whose vow is atonement."

"Giulietta!" exclaimed the cardinal, and the next moment she was at his side; and both wept the sweetest tears ever shed by affection and forgiveness. Eagerly she prepared for him a small portion of food, and then, exerting the authority of a nurse, forbade all further discourse, and, soon exhausted, he slept again.

The cool shadows of the coming evening fell on the casement, when Giulietta first ventured to propose that she should send a letter by the gardener to Lorenzo, and desire that a litter might be sent to convey her uncle to their villa.

"My sweet child, do with me as you will," said the cardinal; "take me even to the house of a Carrara."

"And nowhere could you be so welcome," said a stranger entering, and Giulietta, springing from her knees, found herself in the arms of her husband. "I knew, Giulietta, I should find you here, though your letter told me but of prayer and pilgrimage."

And what now remains to be told? The cardinal accompanied them to the villa, where his recovery was rapid and complete: and the deep love which he witnessed in that youthful pair made him truly feel how great had been Giulietta's devotion to himself. The

plague had done its worst in Genoa; and men were enabled to return to their habits, their occupations, and their duties, things ever inseparably connected. The cardinal from that hour treated Lorenzo da Carrara as a son; and their family union was happy as self-sacrifice and enduring affection could make it. In the picture-gallery, there is still preserved a portrait of the countess in her novice's garb; her cheek pale, her graceful form hidden by the black serge robe, and her beautiful hair put out of sight; and the count, her husband, used to say that "she never looked more lovely."
