



THE DUET AT AJACCIO

CHAPTER I

WAITING

"Yes, I rather imagine this is the exact spot," says Mr. Burton B. Barnes, of New York, to the venerable host of the old and very dilapidated little inn that stands on the shore of the Gulf of Ajaccio, near where the Bastia road turns inland, and following up the Gravaona torrent, down through the orange and citron groves of the fertile Camporolo and then over hills covered with the vine and olive trees of the steep slopes of the great Monte d'Oro.

Count Musso Danella was the guardian of the girl and her brother, their father having died while they were children, and had invited Barnes to visit, with him, his young ward who had just returned from an Italian boarding school, in order to meet her brother, a young naval officer in the service of the French Republic, expected home from a three years' cruise.

"She will return to school no more; they write that they will not have her back," says the Count as they rode up the avenue of olive trees, toward the low, Corsican house. "Indeed! Why?" asks Barnes. "Per Jacco! she is too Corsican for them; she loves liberty too well. She ran away from school to hear Garibaldi sing in Florence one night, and threatened her painting master with an unknown vengeance if he dared to illustrate with daubs from his no-school school of painting, a painting she had just finished. The Italian sent her picture, and I sent her the picture to the Salon, and when it received an honorable mention, I threw the Italian's complaint in the fire!"

"The next evening he is in Ajaccio; and, thoughtful of his message to Antonio, longed to the local Club, which with its traditional hospitality of all Corsica, is open to foreigners, thinking to find him. There are but few visitors at that most quiet of all quiet clubs, The Circle of Ajaccio, and Barnes at first thinks there are none; but soon a voice came to him from the next room, followed by a couple of good round home-made Anglo-Saxon exclaims that no foreigner could imitate. Glancing in, he sees two French officers, and an English one, who evidently belongs to some British man-of-war in the harbor, as he wears the naval uniform of that country.

The matter of their dispute is the Egyptian question, which up to this time makes very bad blood between the two countries; and, in 1882, before the bombardment of Alexandria, was the cause of even more decided and bitter feeling than now. The controversy has been brought before an extremely clever cartoon in the London Punch, that is lying on the table of the club. This picture represents a gigantic palm tree laden with Egyptian coconuts, that France, as an English officer, a French officer, is shaking so that the fruit will fall right into the open and spacious jaws of the British lion, who is reclining lazily beneath its branches. Mr. Barnes looks in the climax is reached by the French officer calling the Englishman a liar, and the next instant getting knocked down for his trouble. The Frenchman gathers himself together, which takes some little time; as the blow was straight from the shoulder, and is about to spring at his opponent, when his comrade stops him, saying "Not now!"

The assaulted man restrains himself, bows and presents his card, in the eagerness of the moment driving from his coat, from the Englishman takes one, leaving the other on the table, and then says, "You must excuse my giving my card in return." "A brave man!" thinks Barnes. "He has courage enough to refuse a duel." "And you are an English officer?" says the Frenchman, with a sneer. "And it is because I am an English officer that I refuse. To send or accept a challenge is against the orders of the British Admiralty." "Not quite so brave as I thought him; he fears the British Admiralty," mutters Barnes. "Ah! you dare not!" says the Frenchman. "You are only fit to fight Egyptians."

"I am very well able to murder you if you wish it," replies the Englishman, "and if you put it on the ground of courage, I'll face both you and a court-martial together." A meeting is arranged for the next morning at eight sharp, at the little inn by the shore, called Il Pescatore, for the Englishman's ship sails at nine. Then the men leave the club, the French officer remarking, "Demand! a le mort!" This affair would not have interested Mr. Barnes greatly; he had once looked on a duel between cow-boys in Texas, and had seen enough blood shed at that meeting between those vagabonds of the wilderness to make him wish never to see another; but, happening a few minutes after to stroll into the room where the dispute had taken place, he picked up the card from the table. After one last glance at it, and then another to be absolutely sure, he went hurriedly out into the street, and ten minutes after, a Corsican boy, instructed to ride for his life, was spurring wildly into the darkness up the Bastia road with a despatch for Musso Danella.

The next morning Mr. Barnes hurried to the inn of Il Pescatore for the sake of the girl he had seen waiting so expectantly the coming of her brother; for the card he had picked up in the Ajaccio Club was, M. ANTONIO PAOLI, Sous Lieutenant Marine Française.

CHAPTER II

COMING

Mr. Barnes divides his time on the little balcony of the inn where we first meet him, between alternately gazing impatiently up the Bastia road for the dust of moving horses, glancing at his watch and looking at the English gun-boat, in hopes she will sail; all the time industriously smoking cigarettes. He is interrupted while rolling the third of these little southern, of sunnate nature, by the return of Matesco with his breakfast. "Signor, this is the shady side of the balcony," says the innkeeper. "But the other has the view! That's the ticket! Now those fellows can't come here and kill each other, by any chance, without my getting my eye on them! That's the ticket! I don't know their master's name, but I thought you had in the island." Saying this, Mr. Barnes proceeds to make his breakfast with a very tolerable appetite. Matesco anxiously waits near him and at last asks eagerly, "Do you think these men who are to kill each other will come soon?" "Yes; but what does that matter to you?" "They might want some breakfast also. They might be hungry before they kill each other." "Ah! that's what interests you," laughs Mr. Barnes. "You only look at the duello

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