Baroness Orczy

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Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338088963

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Chapter 1
Faded Splendour

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Midway between Apt and the shores of the Durance, on the southern slope of Luberon there stands an old château. It had once been the fortified stronghold of the proud seigneurs de Ventadour, who were direct descendants of the great troubadour, and claimed kinship with the Comtes de Provence, but already in the days when Bertrand de Ventadour was a boy, it had fallen into partial decay. The battlemented towers were in ruin, the roof in many places had fallen in; only the square block, containing the old living-rooms, had been kept in a moderate state of repair. As for the rest, it was a dwelling-place for owls and rooks, the walls were pitted with crevices caused by crumbling masonry, the corbellings and battlements had long since broken away, whilst many of the windows, innocent of glass, stared, like tear-dimmed eyes, way away down the mountain slope, past the terraced gradients of dwarf olives and carob trees, to the fertile, green valley below.

It is, in truth, fair, this land of Provence; but fair with the sad, subtle beauty of a dream—dream of splendour, of chivalry and daring deeds, of troubadours and noble ladies; fair with the romance of undying traditions, of Courts of Love and gallant minstrels, of King René and lovely Marguerite. Fair because it is sad and silent, like a gentle and beautiful mother whose children have gone out into the great world to seek fortunes in richer climes, whilst she has remained alone in the old nest, waiting with sorrow in her

heart and arms ever outstretched in loving welcome in case they should return; tending and cherishing the faded splendours of yesterday; and burying with reverence and tears, one by one, the treasures that once had been her pride, but which the cruel hand of time had slowly turned to dust.

And thus it was with the once splendid domaine of the Comtes de Ventadour. The ancient family, once feudal seigneurs who owed alliance to none save to the Kings of Anjou, had long since fallen on evil days. The wild extravagance of five generations of gallant gentlemen had hopelessly impoverished the last of their line. One acre after another of the vineyards and lemon groves of old Provence were sold in order to pay the gambling debts of M. le Comte, or to purchase a new diamond necklace for Madame, his wife. At the time of which this chronicle is a faithful record, nothing remained of the extensive family possessions, but the château perched high up on the side of the mountain and a few acres of woodland which spread in terraced gradients down as far as the valley. Oh! those woods, with their overhanging olive trees, and feathery pines, and clumps of dull-coloured carob and silvery, sweet-scented rosemary: with their serpentine paths on the edge of which buttercups and daisies and wild violets grew in such profusion in the spring, and which in the summer the wild valerian adorned with patches of purple and crimson: with their scrub and granite boulders, their mysterious by-ways, their nooks and leafy arbours, wherein it was good to hide or lie in wait for imaginary foes. Woods that were a heaven for small tripping feet, a garden of Eden for playing hide-

and-seek, a land of pirates, of captive maidens and robbers, of dark chasms and crevasses, and of unequal fights between dauntless knights and fierce dragons. Woods, too, where in the autumn the leaves of the beech and chestnut turned a daffodil yellow, and those of oak and hazel-nut a vivid red, and where bunches of crimson berries fell from the mountain ash and crowds of chattering starlings came to feed on the fruit of the dwarf olive trees. Woods where tiny lizards could be found lying so still, so still as the stone of which they seemed to form a part, until you moved just a trifle nearer, and, with a delicious tremor of fear, put out your little finger, hoping yet dreading to touch the tiny, lithe body with its tip, when lo! it would dart away; out of sight even before you could call Tan-tan to come and have a look.

Tan-tan had decided that lizards were the baby children of the dragon which he had slain on the day when Nicolette was a captive maiden, tied to the big carob tree by means of her stockings securely knotted around her wee body, and that the patch of crimson hazel-bush close by was a pool of that same dragon’s blood. Nicolette had spent a very uncomfortable half-hour that day, because Tan-tan took a very long time slaying that dragon, a huge tree stump, decayed and covered with fungi which were the scales upon the brute’s body; he had to slash at the dragon with his sword, and the dragon had great twisted branches upon him which were his arms and legs, and these had to be hacked off one by one. And all the while Nicolette had to weep and to pray for the success of her gallant deliverer in this unequal fight. And she got very tired and very hot, and the wind blew her brown curls all over her face, and they stuck

into her mouth and her eyes and round her nose; and Tan-tan got fiercer and fiercer, and very red and very hot, until Nicolette got really sorry for the poor dragon, and wept real tears because his body and legs and arms had been a favourite resting-place of Micheline's when Micheline was too tired for play. And now the dragon had no more arms and legs, and Nicolette wept, and her loose hair stuck to her eyes, and her stockings were tied so tightly around her that they began to hurt, whilst a wasp began buzzing round her fat little bare knees.

"Courage, fair maiden!" Tan-tan exclaimed from time to time, "the hour of thy deliverance is nigh!"

But not for all the world would Nicolette have allowed Tan-tan to know that she had really been crying. And presently when the dragon was duly slain and the crimson hazel-bush duly testified that he lay in a pool of blood, the victorious knight cut the bonds which held Nicolette to the carob tree, and lifting her in his arms, he carried her to his gallant steed, which was a young pine tree that the mistral had uprooted some few years ago, and which lay prone upon the ground—the most perfect charger any knight could possibly wish for.

What mattered after that, that old Margaï was cross because Nicolette's stockings were all in holes? Tan-tan had deigned to say that Nicolette had a very good idea of play, which enigmatic utterance threw Nicolette into a veritable heaven of bliss. She did not know what it meant, but the tiny, podgy hand went seeking Tan-tan's big, hot one and nestled there like a bird in its nest, and her large liquid eyes, still wet with tears, were turned on him with the look of

perfect adoration, which was wont to bring a flush of impatience into his cheek.

“Thou art stupid, Nicolette,” he would say almost shamefacedly, when that look came into her eyes, and with a war-whoop, he would dart up the winding path, bounding over rocks and broken boughs like a young stag, or swarming up the mountain ash like a squirrel, shutting his manly ears to the sweet, insidious call of baby lips that called pathetically to him from below:

“Tan-tan!”

* * * * * * * * *

Then, when outside it rained, or the mistral blew across the valley, it meant delicious wanderings through the interminable halls and corridors of the old château—more distressed maidens held in durance in castellated towers, Nicolette and Micheline held captive by cruel, unseen foes: there were walls to be scaled, prisons to be stormed, hasty flights along stone passages, discovery of fresh hiding-places, and always the same intrepid knight, energetic, hot and eager to rescue the damsels in distress.

And when the distressed damsels were really too tired to go on being rescued, there would be those long and lovely halts in the great hall where past Comtes and Comtesses de Ventadour, vicomtes and demoiselles looked down with silent scorn from out the mildewed canvases and tarnished gold frames upon the decayed splendour of their ancient home. Here, Tan-tan would for the time being renounce his rôle of chivalrous knight-errant, and would stand thoughtful and absorbed before the portraits of his dead forbears. These pictures had a strange fascination for the boy. He

never tired of gazing on them and repeating to his two devoted little listeners the tales which for the most part his grandmother had told him about these dead and gone ancestors.

There was Rambaud de Ventadour, the handsome Comte of the days of the Grand Monarque, who had hied him from his old château in Provence to the Court of Versailles, where he cut a gallant figure with the best of that brilliant crowd of courtiers, stars of greater and lesser magnitude that revolved around the dazzling central sun. There was Madame la Comtesse Beatrix, the proud beauty whom he took for wife. They were rich in those days, the seigneurs of Ventadour, and Jaume Deydier, who was Nicolette's ancestor, was nothing but a lacquey in their service; he used to take care of the old château while M. le Comte and Mme. la Comtesse went out into the gay and giddy world, to Paris, Versailles or Rambouillet.

'Twas not often the old lands of Provence saw their seigneurs in those days, not until misfortune overtook them and Geoffroy, Comte de Ventadour, Tan-tan's great-grandfather, he whose portrait hung just above the monumental hearth, returned, a somewhat sobered man, to the home of his forbears. Here he settled down with his two sons, and here Tan-tan's father was born, and Tan-tan himself, and Micheline. But Nicolette's father, Jaume Deydier, the descendant of the lacquey, now owned all the lands that once had belonged to the Comtes de Ventadour, and he was reputed to be the richest man in Provence, but he never set foot inside the old château.

Nicolette did not really mind that her ancestor had been a lacquey. At six years of age that sort of information leaves one cold; nor did she quite know what a lacquey was, as there were none in the old homestead, over on the other side of the valley, where Margaï did the scrubbing, and the washing and the baking, put Nicolette to bed, and knitted innumerable pairs of woollen stockings. But she liked to hear about her ancestor because Tan-tan liked to talk about him, and about those wonderful times when the Comtes de Ventadour had gilded coaches and rode out on gaily caparisoned horses, going hawking, or chasing, or fishing in the Durance, the while old Jaume Deydier, the lacquey, had to stay at home and clean boots.

“Whose boots, Tan-tan?” Nicolette would venture to ask, and a look of deep puzzlement would for a moment put to flight the laughter that dwelt in her hazel eyes.

“Thou art stupid, Nicolette,” Tan-tan would reply with a shrug of his shoulders. “Those of the Comte and Comtesse de Ventadour, of course.”

“All the day ... would he clean boots?” she insisted, in her halting little lisp. Then, as Tan-tan simply vouchsafed no reply to this foolish query, she added with a sigh of mixed emotions: “They must have worn boots and boots and boots!”

After which she dismissed the subject of her ancestor from her mind because Tan-tan had gone on talking about his: about the Comte Joseph-Alexis, and the Vicomtesse Yolande, the Marquis de Croze (a collateral), and Damoysella Ysabeau d’Agoult, she who married the Comte Jeanroy de Ventadour, and was Lady-in-waiting to Mme. de Maintenon,

the uncrowned Queen of France, and about a score or more of others, all great and gallant gentlemen or beautiful, proud ladies. But above all he would never weary of talking about the lovely Rixende, who was known throughout the land as the Lady of the Laurels. They also called her Riande, for short, because she was always laughing, and was so gay, so gay, until the day when M. le Comte her husband brought her here to his old home in Provence, after which she never even smiled again. She hated the old château, and vowed that such an owl's nest gave her the megrims: in truth she was pining for the gaieties of Paris and Versailles, and even the people here, round about, marvelled why M. le Comte chose to imprison so gay a bird in this grim and lonely cage, and though he himself oft visited the Court of Versailles after that, went to Paris and to Rambouillet, he never again took his fair young wife with him, and she soon fell into melancholia and died, just like a song-bird in captivity.

Tan-tan related all this with bated breath, and his great dark eyes were fixed with a kind of awed admiration on the picture which, in truth, portrayed a woman of surpassing beauty. Her hair was of vivid gold, and nestled in ringlets all around her sweet face, her eyes were as blue as the gentian that grew on the mountain-side; they looked out of the canvas with an expression of unbounded gaiety and joy of life, whilst her lips, which were full and red, were parted in a smile.

"When I marry," Tan-tan would declare, and set his arms akimbo in an attitude of unswerving determination, "I shall choose a wife who will be the exact image of Rixende, she will be beautiful and merry, and she will have eyes that are

as blue as the sky. Then I shall take her with me to Paris, where she will put all the ladies of the Court to the blush. But when she comes back with me to Ventadour, I shall love her so, and love her so that she will go on smiling and laughing, and never pine for the courtiers and the balls and the routs, no, not for the Emperor himself."

Nicolette, sitting on the floor, and with her podgy arms encircling her knees, gazed wide-eyed on the beautiful Rixende who was to be the very image of Tan-tan's future wife. She was not thinking about anything in particular, she just looked and looked, and wondered as one does when one is six and does not quite understand. Her great wondering eyes were just beginning to fill with tears, when a harsh voice broke in on Tan-tan's eloquence.

"A perfect programme, by my faith! Bertrand, my child, you may come and kiss my hand, and then run to your mother and tell her that I will join her at coffee this afternoon."

Bertrand did as he was commanded. The austere grandmother, tall and proud, and forbidding in a hooped gown, cut after the fashion of three decades ago, which she had never laid aside for the new-fangled modes of the mushroom Empire, held out her thin white hand, and the boy approached and kissed it, and she patted his cheek, and called him a true Ventadour.

"While we sit over coffee," she said, vainly trying to subdue her harsh voice to tones of gentleness, "I will tell you about your little cousin. She is called Rixende, after your beautiful ancestress, and when she grows up, she will be just as lovely as this picture...."

She paused and raised a lorgnette to her eyes, gazed for a moment on the picture of the departed Riande, and then allowed her cold, wearied glance to wander round and down and about until they rested on the hunched-up little figure of Nicolette.

“What is that child doing here?” she asked, speaking to Micheline who stood by, mute and shy, as she always was when her grandmama was nigh.

It was Bertrand who replied:

“Nicolette came to ask us to go over to the mas and have coffee there,” he said, hesitating, blushing, looking foolish, and avoiding Nicolette’s innocent glance. “Margaï has baked a big, big brioche,” Nicolette chimed in, in her piping little voice, “and churned some butter—and—and—there’s cream—heaps and heaps of cream—and—”

“Go, Bertrand,” the old Comtesse broke in coldly, “and you too, Micheline, to your mother. I will join you all at coffee directly.”

Even Bertrand, the favourite, the *enfant gâté*, dared not disobey when grandmama spoke in that tone of voice. He said: “Yes, grandmama,” quite meekly, and went out without daring to look again at Nicolette, for of a surety he knew that her eyes must be full of tears, and he himself was sorely tempted to cry, because he was so fond, so very fond of Margaï’s brioches, and of her yellow butter, and lovely jars of cream, whilst in mother’s room there would only be black bread with the coffee. So he threw back his head and ran, just ran out of the room; and as Nicolette had an uncomfortable lump in her wee throat she did not call to Tan-tan to come back, but sat there on the floor like a little

round ball, her head buried between her knees, her brown curls all tangled and tossed around her head. Micheline on the other hand made no attempt to disguise her tears. Grandmama could not very well be more contemptuous and distant towards her than she always was, for Micheline was plain, and slightly misshapen, she limped, and her little face always looked pinched and sickly. Grandmama despised ugliness, she herself was so very tall and stately, and had been a noted beauty in the days before the Revolution. But being ugly and of no account had its advantages, because one could cry when one's heart was full and pride did not stand in the way of tears. So when grandmama presently sailed out of the hall, taking no more notice of Nicolette than if the child had been a bundle of rags, Micheline knelt down beside her little friend, and hugged and kissed her.

"Never mind about to-day, Nicolette," she said, "run back and tell Margaï that we will come to-morrow. Grandmama never wants us two days running, and the brioche won't be stale."

But at six years of age, when a whole life-time is stretched out before one, every day of waiting seems an eternity, and Nicolette cried and cried long after Micheline had gone.

But presently a slight void inside her reminded her of Margaï's brioche, and of the jar of cream, and the tears dried off, of themselves; she picked herself up, and ran out of the hall, along the familiar corridors where she had so often been a damsel in distress, and out of the postern gate. She ran down the mountain-side as fast as her short legs would carry her, down and down into the valley, then up

again, bounding like a young kid, up the winding track to the old house which her much-despised ancestor had built on the slope above the Lèze when first he laid the foundations of the fortune which his descendants had consolidated after him. Up she ran, safe as a bird in its familiar haunts, up the gradients between the lines of olive trees now laden with fruit, the source of her father's wealth. For while the noble Comtes de Ventadour had wasted their patrimony in luxury and in gambling, the Deydiers, father and son, had established a trade in oil, and in orange-flower water, both of which they extracted from the trees on the very land that they had bought bit by bit from their former seigneurs; and their oil was famed throughout the country, because one of the Deydiers had invented a process whereby his oil was sweeter than any other in the whole of Provence, and was sought after far and wide, and even in distant lands. But of this Nicolette knew nothing as yet: she did not even know that she loved the grey-green olive trees, and the terraced gradients down which she was just able to jump without tumbling, now that she was six and her legs had grown; she did not know that she loved the old house with its whitewashed walls, its sky-blue shutters, and multi-coloured tiled roof, and the crimson rose that climbed up the wall to the very window sill of her room, and the clumps of orange and lemon trees that smelt so sweet in the spring when they were laden with blossom, and the dark ficus trees, and feathery mimosa, and vine-covered arbours. She did not know that she loved them because her baby-heart had not yet begun to speak. All that she knew was that Tan-tan was beautiful, and the most wonderful boy that ever, ever was.

There was nothing that Tan-tan could not do. He could jump on one leg far longer than any other boy in the country-side. He could throw the bar and the disc much farther even than Ameyric who was reckoned the finest thrower at the fêtes of Apt. He could play bows, and shoot with arrows, and to see him wrestle with some of the boys of the neighbourhood was enough to make one scream with excitement.

Nicolette also knew that Tan-tan could make her cry whenever he was cross or impatient with her, but that it was nice, oh! ever so nice!—when he condescended to play with her, and carried her about in his arms, and when, at times, when she had been crying just in play, he comforted her with a kiss.

* * * * * * * * * *

But that was all long, long, so very long ago. Tan-tan now was a big boy, and he never slew dragons any more; and when Nicolette through force of habit called him Tan-tan, there was always somebody to reprove her; either the old Comtesse of whom she stood in mortal awe, or Pérone who was grandmama’s maid, and seemed to hold Nicolette in especial aversion, or the reverend Father Siméon-Luce who came daily from Manosque to the château in order to give lessons to Bertrand in all sorts of wonderful subjects. And so Nicolette had to say Bertrand like everybody else, only when she was quite alone with him, would she still say Tan-tan, and slide her small hand into his, and look up at him with wonder and admiration expressed in her luminous eyes. She took to coming less and less to the château; somehow she preferred to think of Tan-tan quietly, alone in her cheerful little room, from the windows of which she could see the top

of the big carob tree to which he used to tie her, when she was a captive maiden and he would be slaying dragons for her sake. Bertrand was not really Tan-tan when he was at the château, and Father Siméon-Luce or grandmama were nigh and talked of subjects which Nicolette did not understand. The happy moments were when he and Micheline would come over to the mas, and Margaï would bake a lovely brioche, and they would all sit round the polished table and drink cups of delicious coffee with whipped cream on the top, and Bertrand's eyes would glow, and he would exclaim: "Ah! it is good to be here! I wish I could stay here always." An exclamation which threw Nicolette into a veritable ecstasy of happiness, until Jaume Deydier, her father, who was usually so kind and gentle with them all, would retort in a voice that was harsh and almost cruel:

"You had better express that wish before my lady, your grandmother, my lad, and see how she will receive it."

But there were other happy moments, too. Though Bertrand no longer slew dragons, he went fishing in the Lèze on his half-holidays, and Nicolette was allowed to accompany him, and to carry his basket, or hold his rod, or pick up the fish when they wriggled and flopped about upon the stones. Micheline seldom came upon these occasions because the way was rough, and it made her tired to walk quite so far, and at the château no one knew that Nicolette was with Bertrand when he fished. Father Siméon-Luce was away on parish work over at Manosque, and grandmama never walked where it was rough, so Bertrand would call at the mas for Nicolette, and together the two children would

wander up the bank of the turbulent little mountain stream, till they came to a pool way beyond Jourdans where fish was abundant, and where a group of boulders, grass-covered and shaded by feathery pines and grim carobs, made a palace fit for a fairy-king to dwell in. Here they would pretend that they were Paul and Virginie cast out on a desert island, dependent on their own exertions for their very existence. Bertrand had to fish, else they would have nothing to eat on the morrow.

All the good things which Margaï's loving hands had packed for them in the morning, were really either the result of mysterious foraging expeditions which Bertrand had undertaken at peril of his life, or of marvellous ingenuity on the part of Nicolette. Thus the luscious brioches were in reality crusts of bread which she had succeeded in baking in the sun, the milk she had really taken from a wild goat captured and held in duress amongst the mountain fastnesses of the island, the eggs Bertrand had collected in invisible crags where sea-fowls had their nests. Oh! it was a lovely game of "Let's pretend!" which lasted until the shadows of evening crept over the crest of Luberon, and Bertrand would cast aside his rod, remembering that the hour was getting late, and grandmama would be waiting for him. Then they would return hand in hand, their shoes slung over their shoulders, their feet paddling in the cold, rippling stream. Way away to the west the setting sun would light a gorgeous fire in the sky behind Luberon, a golden fire that presently turned red, and against which the crests and crags stood out clear-cut and sharp, just as if the world ended there, and there was nothing behind the mountain-tops.

In very truth for Nicolette the world did end here; her world! the world which held the mas that was her home, and to which she would have liked to have taken Tan-tan, and never let him go again.

Chapter 2
Le Livre De Raison

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Grandmama sat very stiff and erect at the head of the table; and Bertrand sat next to her with the big, metal-clasped book still open before him, and a huge key placed upon the book. Micheline was making vain endeavours to swallow her tears, and mother sat as usual in her high-backed chair, her head resting against the cushions; she looked even paler, more tired than was her wont, her eyes were more swollen and red, as if she, too, had been crying.

As Bertrand was going away on the morrow, going to St. Cyr, where he would learn to become an officer of the King, grandmama had opened the great brass-bound chest that stood in a corner of the living-room, and taken out the “Book of Reason,” a book which contained the family chronicles of the de Ventadours from time immemorial, copies of their baptism and marriage certificates, their wills, and many other deeds and archives which had a bearing upon the family history. Such a book—called “*Livre de Raison*”—exists in every ancient family of Provence; it is kept in a chest of which the head of the house has the key, and whenever occasion demands the book is taken out of its resting-place, and the eldest son reads out loud, to the assembled members of the family, extracts from it, as his father commands him to do.

Just for a time, when Bertrand’s father brought a young wife home to the old château, his old mother—over-reluctantly no doubt—resigned her position as head of the

house, but since his death, which occurred when Bertrand was a mere baby, and Micheline not yet born, grandmama had resumed the reins of authority which she had wielded to her own complete satisfaction ever since she had been widowed. Of a truth, her weak, backboneless daughter-in-law, with her persistent ill-health and constant repinings and tears, was not fit to conduct family affairs that were in such a hopeless tangle as those of the de Ventadours. The young Comtesse had yielded without a struggle to her mother-in-law's masterful assumption of authority; and since that hour it was grandmama who had ruled the household, superintended the education of her grandchildren, regulated their future, ordered the few servants about, and kept the keys of the dower-chests. It was she also who put the traditional "Book of Reason" to what uses she thought best. Mother acquiesced in everything, never attempted to argue; it would have been useless, for grandmama would brook neither argument nor contradiction, and mother was too ill, too apathetic to attempt a conflict in which of a surety she would have been defeated.

And so when grandmama decided that as soon as Bertrand had attained his seventeenth year he should go to St. Cyr, mother had acquiesced without a murmur, even though she felt that the boy was too young, too inexperienced to be thus launched into the world where his isolated upbringing in far-off old Provence would handicap him in face of his more sophisticated companions. Only once did she suggest meekly, in her weak and tired voice, that the life at St. Cyr offered many temptations to a boy

hitherto unaccustomed to freedom, and to the society of strangers.

“The cadets have so many days’ leave,” she said, “Bertrand will be in Paris a great deal.”

“Bah!” grandmama had retorted with a shrug of her shoulders, “Sybille de Mont-Pahon is no fool, else she were not my sister. She will look after Bertrand well enough if only for the sake of Rixende.”

After which feeble effort mother said nothing more, and in her gentle, unobtrusive way set to, to get Bertrand’s things in order. Of course she was bound to admit that it was a mightily good thing for the boy to go to St. Cyr, where he would receive an education suited to his rank, as well as learn those airs and graces which since the restoration of King Louis had once more become the hall-mark that proclaimed a gentleman. It would also be a mightily good thing for him to spend a year or two in the house of his great-aunt, Mme. de Mont-Pahon, a lady of immense wealth, whose niece Rixende would in truth be a suitable wife for Bertrand in the years to come. But he was still so young, so very young even for his age, and to put thoughts of a mercenary marriage, or even of a love-match into the boy’s head seemed to the mother almost a sin.

But grandmama thought otherwise.

“It is never too soon,” she declared, “to make a boy understand something of his future destiny, and of the responsibilities which he will have to shoulder. Sybille de Mont-Pahon desires the marriage as much as I do: she speaks of it again in her last letter to me: Rixende’s father, our younger sister’s child, was one of those abominable