Baroness Orczy

The Turbulent Duchess

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Published by Good Press, 2022

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EAN 4066338051523

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Foreword

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When our mothers were still in their teens, when women wore crinolines, and chignons and prunella boots, when Queen Victoria sat, a sorrowing widow, on the throne of England, and her son could look forward with assurance to succeeding her one day, when one drove four days in a *calèche* from York to London, and it took six months to get to Australia, when there was no talk of S.A. and waists were eighteen inches round, there still lingered in the grim old fortress of Brünnsee in Bohemia a decrepit, obese, old lady who had once been Regent of France and had half Europe at her feet. She was Madame Marie Caroline Ferdinande Louise, Princess of Naples, daughter of Kings, niece of one Queen, great-niece of another, great-granddaughter of an Empress; she was the widow of the Due de Berri, who would have been King of France but for the dagger of the assassin Louvel.

Crippled with rheumatism, so blind that she could no longer read, even with the aid of spectacles, she sat most of the day by the window in a high-backed chair, in a large ill-furnished room, a room full of memories, all of them sad, not one of them glorious; an empty bird-cage, a dog-basket, a spinet with broken cords, a mechanical toy which had once belonged to her son the Due de Bordeaux, its mechanism now broken, the toy as useless as Madame's longings and dreams; a model of the ship *Carlo Alberto*, on which she had set sail one day, in order to reconquer the heart of France. All day she would sit and gaze out of the

window with her dimmed eyes fixed on the dreary pine-clad mountains of Bohemia, as Napoleon did once, from the fastnesses of Saint Helena, on the turbulent Atlantic that framed in his place of exile. And as Napoleon used to murmur with sighs of longing: “France! France!” so did Madame murmur: “Sicily! my Sicily!” the land of palms and orange groves, of blue skies and sun-baked earth. Sicily, her home! If only she could have gone back to Sicily.

From the upstairs room over her head there would come at times the merry sound of the pattering of small feet; her grandchildren were up there. Their parents would bring them over from Italy sometimes to cheer granny’s solitude. The children of her children, of Clementine and Isabella and Francesca, and of Adinolphe her Benjamin. They would come now and again, the whole brood of them, raising the echo of the grim chateau with their laughter, their chatter and their infantile screams: smashing a few more things, leaving after their departure the place just a little more dilapidated, a little more ramshackle than it was before, and their granny a little more sad, a little more solitary, by contrast with their gaiety. They were her Italian family, the children and grandchildren of the only man who had ever loved her truly and faithfully. She hardly ever saw her French children, her son the Comte de Chambord, Duc de Bordeaux, was at Frohsdorf or at Goritz studying the difficult craft of kingship—a craft which he was never destined to exercise. Her daughter was in exile with her family.

And sitting alone in her high-backed chair, watching the twilight slowly creeping over mountain and lake, and the various landmarks fading into the gloom, Madame Caroline

would close her weary eyes and, neither sleeping nor waking, see pictures of her past life rise out of the shadows. Memories, some of them glorious, some of them sad, most of them bitter, would crowd ghostlike around her; and she would see her sorrows, her few joys, her many disappointments and final humiliation pass like an ever-changing picture before her mental vision, caus¬ing a smile to break at times around her flaccid lips, but more often a tear to roll down her wrinkled cheek.

Book I
The Fairy Tale

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Chapter I
Storms In Naples

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On the 5th of November 1798 there raged in the Bay of Naples and all along its coast a devastating cyclone, as well as the most terrifying thunderstorm within the memory of a living generation. And when the cyclone and the thunderstorm were at their height and the old castle walls trembled to their foundations under the lashings of the gale, there was born in the Château of Caserta a baby girl. She was born to the accompaniment of a deafening thunder-clap and a blinding flash of lightning, and as soon as she opened her eyes to the world she set up an unholy yelling, and continued to yell and to scream, so that the official personages commanded by law to be present at every royal birth (so that no kind of substitution or other trickery could occur) very nearly lost their countenance and sense of decorum by whispering as audibly as they dared that the royal infant ought to be well slapped.

The baby girl, however, was not slapped on this occasion. Etiquette forbade such a drastic proceeding, but destiny did the slapping later, much later, and did it very cruelly. As it was, her attitude when she had been less than ten minutes in this turbulent world was both pertinent and prophetic. The whole world in that year 1798 was in as great an upheaval as the Bay of Naples, political cyclones continued to rage all over Europe for many years afterwards whilst Caroline Ferdinande Louise raised her determined if feeble

voice to assert her rights and to drown the thunder-claps of revolution and of war.

For the moment she was only a small bundle of humanity whom Monseigneur the Bishop held up in his hands and presented to the official personages, declaring solemnly that this puny little body was a child of the female sex, truly born on this 5th day of November to His Gracious Highness Janvier Joseph François, Prince of Naples and the Two Sicilies, and to his gracious Consort. After which solemn declaration the official personages, the Ministers of State, Municipal Councillors and other big-wigs were relieved of their unpleasant task, and made haste to return to their homes. They had been hauled out of their beds at five o'clock in the morning and had tumbled into their breeches with all possible haste. Some had come from Caserta Vecchia, a matter of three or four kilometres, and had scrambled into their chaises in the midst of drenching rain, clinging to their hats and squelching in the mud. The wildest of nights, and a wild, yelling infant: they all shook their heads, and vowed that it was all of the worst possible augury.

No one had thought of letting His Most Gracious Majesty the King know that a granddaughter had been born to him. He wouldn't have cared one way or another about that, but he would have greatly cared if anyone had come to disturb him when he had just succeeded in shutting out the noise of the thunder from his ears, by stuffing cotton-wool into them, and burying his head under the blankets so that he should see nothing of those terrifying flashes of lightning. Anyway, the birth of a royal princess was Madame the Queen's affair.

She was the virtual ruler of this turbulent kingdom of Naples, she wore the breeches: he was nothing but a nonentity, and as she bore the brunt of rebellions which were constantly breaking out among the crowd of rogues and of thieves over whom an unkind destiny had set him to rule, so let her bear the brunt of providing for the future of her granddaughter —if she could. As for their gracious Highnesses the father and mother of this very unwelcome princess, they didn't count at all, anyway. Nor did parents and grandparents worry further over the subsequent fate of the baby girl, born at Caserta on that tempestuous night. She was tossed hither and thither like a useless bale of goods, while they all looked after their personal safety. A few months after her birth the population of the Kingdom of Naples, long since tired of their supine, shiftless King and his domineering wife, broke into open rebellion. It was not the first time by any means, but on this occasion rebellion turned into red revolution and the people succeeded in sending their inglorious monarchs about their business; and there they remained until such time as it suited European politicians to reestablish them on their throne. But the transition period was as unsafe for their family as it was for them. His Gracious Highness Janvier Joseph François sought refuge on board a British warship, whilst his gracious consort, after presenting her lord with another daughter and a son, sought permanent refuge in death.

But in the meanwhile Caroline Ferdinande when only three months old was sent comfortably out of the way to Bocca di Falco in Sicily, where she acquired a love for its palms and orange trees, for its blue skies and sunbaked

earth, a love which she never dissembled and which endured throughout her life. Sicily! Her Sicily!

Almost as soon as she could toddle she was the terror and despair of the unfortunate governesses who were set to look after her physical and mental development. She had made her presence in the world felt when she was less than an hour old, by yelling and screaming and upsetting the equanimity of grave and reverend seigniors, and she continued to make her presence felt just as insistently in the orange groves of Bocca di Falco if her dominant will was in any way thwarted. She had inherited her father's fair skin, his blue eyes and curly hair; she had her mother's delicate hands and feet and diminutive stature, but neither her meekness nor her indolence. Her courage and domineering disposition came from her grandmother together with the obstinate Hapsburg lip. The ladies of the Court whom she had maltreated, and the Ministers of State whom she had ridiculed, declared that Caroline Ferdinande was an ugly little thing with a decided squint; but the young Count de Lucchesi-Palli at eight years old fought a duel with a boy four years older than himself in order to establish the fact that all she had was a fascinating cast. He received a rather serious flesh wound on that occasion, but soon forgot all pain because from that hour Caroline Ferdinande, who admired physical courage more than any other quality in the world, enrolled him as her playmate, the only companion she ever permitted to join in those wild escapades of hers, when the Comtesse de La Tour trembled for the life and limbs of her royal charge. He was as reckless, as fearless as she was, punishments held no terror for him, he gloried in

them if they came as a result of his participation in one of Caroline Ferdinande's mad pranks. And she gloried in his allegiance. Being already inordinately vain, she loved to see him fight any and every boy who had in any way offended her self-love. With screams of delight and clapping of her tiny hands she would egg him on to prowess, while he pummelled an offender who might be twice his size. But when with bleeding nose and a bunged eye he came to her to claim his reward in the shape of a kiss, she would either grant it with a glance that turned his young head, or, more often than not, she would slap his face and run away laughing at his discomfiture. It all depended on her mood.

Once only did the worm turn, but it was with disastrous consequences.

The two children were playing in the garden close to the pond which was known to be quite deep in places. Ducks and swans swam on it and there were a lot of big fish in the water. The children had been forbidden to climb on the low balustrade that framed the pond. Forbidden? No one had the power of forbidding Caroline Ferdinande to do anything on which she had set her mind. And at the moment she was perched rather precariously on the forbidden territory of the balustrade, and from this point of vantage she was taunting young Hector de Lucchesi-Palli and making snooks at him.

"I dare you to jump in," she cried in her piping voice; "I dare you! I dare you!" And then went on: "You dare not! you dare not! Coward! You are afraid! You know they will whip you if you do!"

Now young Hector was an expert swimmer, nor was he the least bit afraid of a whipping, but he was accustomed to

obedience, and so put up with the wilful little lady’s taunts, and kept his temper under control, until the moment when, in her excitement, she seemed in danger herself of falling in the pond. The poor boy never knew afterwards how it all happened: he supposed that he got exasperated in the end, and didn’t quite realize what he was doing. What he did do was to try and seize those tiny hands that were making rude gestures at him: he only wanted to steady her on her feet, instead of which he caused Her Royal Highness to lose her balance and to topple backwards into the water. Poor Madame de La Tour, who had snatched a few moments of quietude with her embroidery in an arbour close by, heard a scream and a splash. Before she could arrive on the scene of the disaster, however, there was a second splash. Young Hector had taken a header, and, very skilfully, was already bringing the gasping little lady back to dry land. Madame de La Tour called loudly for help. Lacqueys and ladies-in-waiting came running along. The two children, dripping and disconcerted, stood for the space of half a minute, side by side, wide-eyed and motionless, and then, suddenly and without any warning, Caroline Ferdinande, Princess of Naples, administered to her rescuer such a vigorous kick in that region of his body which is designed by nature for the purpose, that he lost his balance and the young Comte de Lucchesi-Palli, son and heir of the Duke della Grazzia, measured his length upon the ground. After which act of unparalleled injustice Caroline Ferdinande allowed herself to be led away.

For days and weeks after that, she would not speak to Hector; she would not tolerate him inside the palace or the

gardens: she set up a scream if his name was mentioned. The servants had strict orders that M. le Comte de Lucchesi-Palli was never to be admitted if he called.

“If he comes near me,” she declared, “I will set Léon on him ”—Léon being a mongrel with decidedly savage instincts. She was quite convinced that the boy had deliberately pushed her into the pond, his jumping in after her being merely caused by the fear of punishment.

She tried other playmates, the young Marquis Malavieri, Duke de Giulio di San Martino, even her sister and little brother whom she hated; but not one of them would stand Caroline’s tantrums for long, and after feeling the weight of her small hand on their faces, and the lash of her sharp tongue, refused to play with her any more. Feeling a little depressed in this new isolation, the little Princess took up music with her usual erratic ardour. Music masters were provided for her. Scales, arpeggios, piano, violin, guitar, she practised them all feverishly for a time, then abandoned them with equal unreasoning caprice. She then demanded a drawing master. Palette, brushes, canvases were purchased and used with frantic energy, only to be soon cast aside. Learn anything useful she would not. To her dying day she never knew how to spell, and her speech was just a mixture of bad French and Neapolitan patois. She was the despair of the learned tutors who were set to teach her calligraphy and the elements of arithmetic. In the matter of religion she was little better than a pagan. Indeed, since her quarrel with Hector de Lucchesi-Palli she had been more difficult than ever before. The worthy Abbé Olivieri, her religious instructor, did his best to effect a reconciliation between the

young people: “Her Royal Highness has long since repented of her injustice,” he would say to young Hector; “she bears you no ill will. Go and ask her forgiveness for the offence you may unwittingly have given her.”

But Hector too knew how to be proud when occasion arose.

“I have given no offence,” he said firmly, “I cannot ask pardon for what I did not do. She may hate me now, but if I humbled myself having done no wrong, she would despise me, and that would be worse.”

With a sigh of perplexity the good Abbé tried other tactics:

“Don Hector never did cause your Highness to fall into the water,” he explained to Caroline.

“How do you know?” she retorted; “you weren’t there. You were busy chasing the kitchen wench down the corridor.”

In the end it was chance that brought the playmates together again. It was during the unfortunate period when Joseph Bonaparte, and after him Murat, reigned in Naples, and King Ferdinand with his domineering Queen had been relegated to their kingdom of Sicily. The Court was at Palermo, and there too just as in Naples mild insurrections broke out from time to time among the populace. When the turmoil grew high, Their Majesties remained closely guarded inside their palace; but somehow or other on one occasion Caroline Ferdinande managed to give the guard the slip. Unnoticed she made her way out into the street. She was used to insurrections from early childhood, but she had never seen one at close quarters. While her governesses

and ladies-in-waiting were huddled up together like so many frightened hens in that part of the palace which seemed most safe, the child—she was only twelve— slipped out of her room, down the grand staircase and out in the open before those responsible for her safety were aware of her escapade.

The great Piazza in front of the Palazzo Reale was full of animation: people running for the shelter of their homes, cavalry thundering past in the direction whence came the sound of the clash of arms, one or two pistol-shots and any amount of shouting. Caroline Ferdinande, in her little dark frock, a small atom in the midst of all this turmoil, was not recognized. She turned away very quickly from the approach of the palace and found shelter in an open doorway lower down the Piazza. Immediately opposite was the house which served as the quarters of the officers of the guard, and Caroline, gazing curiously about her, and delighted at having given all those tiresome attendants of hers the slip, saw two things that immediately engrossed her attention. She saw the captain of the guard leaning out of a window of the house opposite, shouting orders to a sergeant and men down below. He was in a flowered dressing-gown and his hair was unkempt: apparently he had no intention of risking his valuable life or wasting precious time in heading the charge against a riotous mob. Caroline immediately put him down as a coward, and, regardless of her own precarious position, started at once to run across the Piazza with the express purpose of telling that faint-hearted captain of the guard just what she thought of him.

And in her haste she collided with someone who was running in the opposite direction.

It was young Hector de Lucchesi-Palli. How he came to be there she never thought to ask. As a matter of fact, he had been out walking with his tutor when first the shouting and firing in the street had begun, and together they were hurrying home to the Della Grazzia Palace situated at the other end of the town. But Caroline asked no questions. Here was just the one person in the world who would know how to back her up in any prank she might devise for the punishment of that cowardly captain. Forgotten was her quarrel with Hector, his supposed offence and her unjust retaliation. She seized him by the hand, and dragging him after her, she shouted excitedly:

“Come and help me throw that poltroon over there out of the window! He makes me sick.”

Fortunately for everyone concerned, for Caroline, for Hector and for the captain of the guard, lacqueys, maids and ladies-in-waiting came running out of the palace headed by the Court Chamberlain and the Master of her household: they arrived on the scene just in time to prevent one of the worst scandals that had ever set Palermo talking. Incidentally that particular scandal would have turned the people’s contempt for the King into admiration for his plucky granddaughter: the army was anything but popular, and the discomfiture of one of the officers at the hands of a child would have turned rebellion against the monarchy into loyalty for its youngest scion.

As it was, that royal scion was carried, screaming, protesting and kicking, back to her palace, whilst the young

Count de Lucchesi-Palli followed in her train with glowing eyes and head erect, confident that the quarrel which had nearly broken his heart was now happily at an end.