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EPISODE

Clarimonde - Part 2

BY **CURT ROSEWOOD** — 2024-10-02



Adapted from an original story[1] *by* Théophile Gautier[2]

Clarimonde - Part 2: Duty

The memory of Clarimonde kept haunting father Romuald. The promise of her siren song stung sharply into his mind and into his loins. Lonely nights tossing and turning trying to keep temptation at bay. Early mornings of shame as the cold light of day chased away the intoxication of his infatuation.

The situation remained unchanged until he arrived at the small parish he'd been assigned. Abries was beautiful, remote and nestled into the mountains. The town was small and the faithful few. The church had been there for hundreds of years. A draughty stone building: twenty wooden pews, a raised altar with a linen cloth over it and a large wooden cross behind. There was a small room for the new priest, just as bare as the interior of the church. A bed, a table with a wash basin, a chair and a small closet as well as an old, worn wooden kneeling bench with its own crucifix above as well as a small wood-burning heater used in the evenings.

[1] https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/22661/pg22661-images.html

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Théophile_Gautier

At this time of year the snow was high, the trees bare and people were only seen when they had to be out. Every Sunday the faithful entered in through the heavy wooden doorway to attend church, to listen to the wise words the priest had for them. For his flock. They suffered through these winters just like they had for decades, centuries, as their parents and grandparents had before them. There wasn't much to tithe: offerings of crusty loaves of bread and some eggs were left instead of shiny gold or silver francs.

The daily grind of preparing and serving mass finally seemed to calm father Romuald's soul. The sting dulled. Clarimonde, ever present, receded into the murky depts of his subconscious. Every evening he kneeled down on the bench in front of the small crucifix in his room, folded his hands together and started praying with his head humbly lowered. Praying always helped. It cleared his mind and returned his focus to the almighty. His only true confidant.

That evening was no different. As he continued praying the last embers of daylight slowly faded. By the time he allowed himself to lay down on his bed the moon had climbed the sky and cast her pale silvery light over the winter landscape. An incessant banging on the front door woke father Romuald from a slumber. A figure stood hunched beneath a heavy coat, flecks of snow clinging to it, hat held in hands that worried the edges of the heavy felt material. The man implored him:

My mistress is on her death bed, she is begging for a priest!

Bound by duty, father Romuald followed the servant out into the night. Soon a horse drawn coach sped them along twisty and dangerous roads that led deep into the hills beyond the village. The moon had passed behind clouds when they arrived at a steep hill crowned by a large estate the servant called: *The Palace Concini*. There was light from flickering gas lamps at the entrance to the large house and several of the rooms were lit as well.

Along a snow covered path, father Romuald followed the impatient man inside. The house was ornate: gilt fixtures, chandeliers, heavy curtains covering the large windows, antique vases and paintings in beautiful handcrafted frames. Everywhere he looked reminded of a past he left behind, of the opulence of a rich household, the easy living. No freezing here, no bare rooms and thin clothing, no going hungry during the day and trudging out to gather firewood that was only able to be used in the evenings.

They left a messy trail of footsteps and puddles of water as they ascended the marble stairs. The servant stopped short of the ornate door at the end of a long hallway. Was he afraid to enter his mistress's bedchambers?

Alone Romuald entered the room. The bed was large, draped in sheer fabric. The frame and posts made of dark wood. It took up a good amount of room, but the room itself was large. A fireplace in the corner, putting off a heavy heat. The sound of the wood crackling was all that could be heard. A parting of that thin fabric would have him find the woman.

Her shape barely hidden by a black robe of delicate silks that clung to her every curve in a revealing way. Her bosom was deathly still. Her skin was pale, without colour. Her eyes hidden. Auburn hair sprawled in curls around her. He recognised this beautiful face instantly. Her name rolled off of his surprised lips:

Clarimonde!

He was too late, she had passed away!

To be continued...[3]

[3] https://thehiddencircle.com/clarimonde-part-3/

