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EPISODE

Clarimonde - Part 7

BY **CURT ROSEWOOD** — 2024-10-31



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

Clarimonde - Part 7: Ashes to Ashes

The Palace Concini did not look anything like Romuald remembered. There was no splendid mansion with a grand marble staircase. No welcoming lights. No smoke coming from the chimneys. No, this was not the image from his dreams, it was a mere travesty of the lavish building Clarimonde had received him in. Destruction and decay everywhere. Rotten, broken. Gone. Just derelict ruins, abandoned decades ago.

In a daze he wandered through them. Recognising and yet not recognising. The bedroom was still there. The bed and the lavish furniture gone. Only some scattered pieces of wood left. The air was heavy with the scent of damp earth and decay, and the only sounds were the whispers of the wind through the broken stonework.

Father Serapion impatiently urged him on, leading the way down a narrow flight of steps that descended into a crypt below the ruined main building. The air grew colder and darkness seemed to press in from all sides. The walls, rough-

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

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

hewn and damp, appeared to absorb the faint light that filtered down from above. The single lantern they brought struggled to illuminate their path. As they made their way deeper into the crypt, the silence became more profound, punctuated only by the soft dripping of water somewhere in the distance.

Finally, after navigating a series of narrow, winding tunnels, a grand, ornate tomb came into view. The sarcophagus, crafted from a single block of stone, rested atop a dais, surrounded by intricately carved stone statues of long-forgotten guardians. As Serapion wiped the dust off of it, letters appeared on the heavy stone:

Ici gît Clarimonde Qui fut de son vivant La plus belle du monde

Romuald read them in disbelief: "Here lies Clarimonde, who during her lifetime, was the most beautiful in the world". It was true! All the insane things father Serapion had said that afternoon. Tales of a vampire that preys on the desires of men. Not on their blood but on the power of their adoration and lust for her unnatural body. Spawn of the devil that visited men's dreams and corrupted them in sin.

Was this really all Clarimonde was? Her love a mirage, a dream within a dream?



Father Serapion went to work with a vigour born out of anger. The old priest, his worn and weathered face set in a determined grimace, strained with every ounce of strength he possessed as he struggled to pry open the massive stone sarcophagus. His thin, wrinkled hands grasped the rusty iron handles, his fingers white-knuckled with effort as he pulled and pushed against the unyielding stone. Sweat dripped from his brow, trickling down his face like tears, as he grunted and groaned with each futile attempt to budge the lid. There was something grim and fierce in his zeal which lent him the air of a demon rather than an apostle or an angel. Stone, then wood gave way to his fervour as the final resting place of Clarimonde got desecrated.

Finally, by the dim light of their lantern, they uncovered her remains. Not a dusty corpse, she was beautiful and unspoiled! Not alive. But not dead. Appearing exactly as in Father Romuald's dreams, save for an otherworldly paleness to her skin. Even then in this musty old place, her body was infused with an eroticism that would not leave any untouched. Except maybe the old crow.

Nosferatu!

Cried father Serapion, putting all his hate into the word as he fetched the bottle of holy water he had brought. In sudden understanding, Father Romuald's hand desperately reached out to stop his superior, but it was too late: already the liquid spilled from the spout.

At first, it seemed as though nothing was happening and Romuald let out a sigh of relief. But then, as the silvery fluid sank in, the vampire's skin, smooth and unblemished just moments before, began to dry and wither, like a leaf left too long in the autumn sun. Fine lines and wrinkles etched themselves into her face, deepening into crevices that seemed

to swallow her very features. Her lips, once full and inviting, shrivelled and cracked. Her very essence unraveling like a tapestry torn asunder. Her skin turned to dust, flaking away in great, grey clouds that billowed out around her like a mourner's veil.

As the last of her physical form disappeared, the vampire's spirit seemed to linger, a faint, wailing cry that echoed through the chamber like a mournful sigh. Father Serapion gasped and took a step back as a white apparition fled Clarimonde's crumbled remains. For one last time her beauty shone in that ghostly appearance. As she dissolved into the dark she turned to Romuald and with immeasurable sadness in her voice asked:

Why? Why my dearest? What have I ever done but love you?

Her words lingered long after she has gone. Romuald stood defeated. The love of his life was no more.

Epilogue

Many years later Romuald was himself an old man, lying in a simple bed, worn and tired waiting for death to come. His life had not been a happy one. The loss of Clarimonde had been unbearable! But now, in the final moments of his life, a tear of happiness rolled down his cheek. A frail and trembling hand reached out for one invisible but to his own dying eyes. His last breath, strangely joyful:

Clarimonde!

It is said that the ruins of the Palace Concini are haunted by the spirits of two lovers. On a quiet night, the salacious sounds of their ghostly union can be heard drifting through the dark...

~ The End ~

> This story has always fascinated me. Although the original novella was written in the 19th century, the resemblance between Clarimonde's dream world and the virtual worlds we dwell in today is uncanny. Of course Gauthier in his time would have had no idea of our modern interconnected world and the possibilities it brings. Still, by coincidence his story can be seen as a fable, sent to us from across the centuries, to warn of the possible dangers and consequences of losing one's self in the undeniable allure and seduction of our present day electronic dreams.
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> Curt
