

The Poisoner of Montremos

By Richard Cumberland

A Portuguese gentleman, who I shall beg leave to describe no otherwise than by the name of Don Juan, was lately brought to trial for poisoning his half sister by the same father, after she was with child by him. This gentleman had for some years before his trial led a very solitary life at his castle in the neighbourhood of Montremos, a town on the road between Lisbon and Badajos, the frontier garrison of Spain. I was shown his castle, as I passed through that dismal country, about a mile distant from the road, in a bottom surrounded with cork trees, and never saw a more melancholy habitation. The circumstances which made against this gentleman were so strong, and the story was in such general circulation in the neighbourhood where he lived, that although he laid out the greatest part of a considerable income in acts of charity, nobody even entered his gates to thank him for his bounty, or solicit relief, except one poor father of the Geronzmiter convent in Montremos, who was his confessor, and acted as his almoner at discretion.

A charge of so black a nature, involving the crime of incest as well as murder, at length reached the ears of justice, and a commission was sent to Montremos to make enquiry into the case. The supposed criminal made no attempt to escape, but readily attended the summons of the commissioners.

Upon the trial it came out upon the confession of the prisoner, as well as from the deposition of witnesses, that Don Juan had lived from his infancy in the family of a rich merchant in Lisbon, who carried on a considerable trade and correspondence in the Brasils. Don Juan being allowed to take this merchant's name, it was generally supposed that he was his natural son, and a clandestine affair of love having been carried on between him and the merchant's daughter Josepha, who was an only child, she became pregnant, and a medicine being administered to her by the hands of Don Juan, she died in a few hours after, with all the symptoms of a person who had taken poison. The mother of the young lady survived her death but a few days, and the father threw himself into a convent of Mendicants, making over by deed of gift the whole of his property to the supposed murderer.

In this account there seemed a strange obscurity of facts, for some made strongly to the crimination of Don Juan, and the last mentioned circumstance was of so contradictory a nature as to throw the whole into perplexity; and therefore to compel the prisoner to a farther elucidation of the case, it was thought proper to interrogate him by torture.

Whilst this was preparing, Don Juan, without betraying the least alarm upon what was going forward, told his judges he would save them and himself some trouble if they would receive his confession upon certain points to which he should truly speak, but beyond which all the tortures of the world could not force one syllable.

He said he was not the son, as was supposed, of the merchant, with whom he lived, nor allied to the deceased Josepha any otherwise than by the tenderest ties of mutual affection and a promise of marriage, which, however, he acknowledged had not been solemnized. That he was the son of a gentleman of considerable fortune in the Brasils, who left him an infant in the care of the merchant in question; that the merchant for reasons best known to himself chose to call him by his own name, and this being done in his infancy he was taught to believe that he was an orphan youth the son of a distant relation of the person who had adopted him; he begged his judges therefore to observe that he never understood Josepha to be his sister; that as to her being

with child by him he acknowledged it, and prayed God forgiveness for an offence which it had been his intention to repair by marriage; that with respect to the medicine he certainly did give it to her with his own hands, for that she was sick in consequence of her pregnancy, and being afraid of creating alarm or suspicion in her parents, had required him to order certain drugs from an apothecary, as if for himself, which he accordingly did, and he verily believed they were faithfully mixed, inasmuch as he stood by the man while he prepared the medicine, and saw every ingredient separately put in.

The judges thereupon asked him if he would take it on his conscience to say the lady did not die by poison. Don Juan bursting into tears for the first time, answered, to his eternal sorrow, he knew she did die by poison. Was that poison contained in the medicine she took?—It was.—Did he impute the crime of mixing the poison in the medicine to the apothecary, or did he take it on himself?—Neither the apothecary nor himself was guilty.—Did the lady from a principle of shame (he was then asked) commit the act of suicide, and infuse the poison without his knowledge? He started into horror at the question, and took God to witness that she was innocent of the deed.

The judges seemed now confounded, and for a time abstained from any farther interrogatories, debating the matter amongst themselves by whispers, when one of them observed to the prisoner, that according to his confession he had said she did die by poison, and yet by the answers he had now given it should seem as if he meant to acquit every person on whom suspicion could possibly rest; there was, however, one interrogatory left, which, unnatural as it was, he would just put to him for form's sake only, before they proceeded to greater extremities, and that question involved the father or mother of the lady.—Did he mean to impute the horrid intention of murdering their child to the parents? No, replied the prisoner, in a firm tone of voice, I am certain no such intention ever entered the hearts of the unhappy parents, and I should be the worst of sinners if I imputed it to them. The judges upon this declared with one voice he was trifling with the court, and gave orders for the rack; they would, however, for the last time, demand of him, if he knew who it was that did poison Josepha, to which he answered, without hesitation, that he did know, but that no tortures should force him to declare it. As to life he was weary of it, and they might dispose of it as they saw fit.

They now took this peremptory recusant, and stripping him of his upper garments laid him on the rack; a surgeon was called in, who kept his fingers on his pulse, and the executioners were directed to begin their tortures; they had given him one severe stretch by ligatures fixed to his extremities, and passed over an axle which was turned by a windlass; the strain on his muscles and joints by the action of this infernal engine was dreadful, and nature spoke her sufferings by a horrid crash in every limb; the sweat started in large drops upon his face and bosom, yet the man was firm amid the agonies of the machine, not a groan escaped, and the head, who was superintendent of the hellish work, declared they might increase his tortures upon the next tug, for that his pulse had not varied a stroke, nor abated of its strength in the smallest degree.

The tormentors had now begun a second operation with more violence than the former, which their devilish ingenuity had contrived to vary, so as to extort acuter pains from the application of the engine to parts that had not yet had a full share of the agony; when suddenly a monk rushed into the chamber and called out to the judges to desist from torturing that innocent man, and take the confession of the murderer from his own lips. Upon a signal from the judges, the executioner let go the engine at once, and the joints snapped audibly into their sockets with the elasticity of a bow. Nature sunk under the revulsion, and Don Juan fainted on the rack. The monk immediately with a loud voice exclaimed, 'Inhuman wretches, delegates of hell, and agents of the devil, make

ready your engine for the guilty, and take off your bloody hands from the innocent, for behold (and so saying he threw back his cowl) the father and the murderer of Josepha!

The whole assembly started with astonishment; the judges stood aghast, and even the daemons of torture rolled their eye-balls on the monk with horror and dismay.

‘If you are willing, says he to the judges, to receive my confession whilst your tormentors are preparing the rack for the vilest criminal ever stretched upon it, hear me. If not, set your engine to work without further enquiry, and glut your appetites with human agonies, which once in your lives you may now inflict with justice.’

Proceed, said the senior judge.

‘That guiltless sufferer who now lies insensible before my eyes (said the monk) is the son of an excellent father, who was once my dearest friend. He was confided to my charge, being then an infant, and my friend followed his fortunes to our settlements in the Brasils. He resided there twenty years without visiting Portugal once in the time; he remitted to me many sums of money on his son’s account; at this time a hellish thought arose in my mind, which the distress of my affairs, and a passion for extravagance inspired of converting the property of my charge to my own account. I imparted these suggestions to my unhappy wife, who is now at her accompt; let me do her justice to confess she withstood them firmly for a time; still fortune frowned upon me, and I was failing in my credit every hour; ruin stared me in the face, and nothing stood between me and immediate disgrace but this infamous expedient.

‘At length persuasion, menaces, and the impending pressure of necessity conquered her virtue, and she acceded to the fraud. We agreed to adopt the infant as the orphan son of a relation of our name; I maintained a correspondence with his father by letters pretending to be written by the son, and I supported my family in a splendid extravagance by the assignments I received from the Brasils. At length the father of Don Juan died, and by will bequeathed his fortune to me in failure of his son and his heir. I had already advanced so far in guilt, that the temptation of this contingency met with no resistance in my mind, and I determined upon removing this bar to my ambition, and proposed to my wife to secure the prize which fortune had hung within our reach, by the assassination of the heir. She revolted from the idea with horror, and for some time her thoughts remained in so disturbed a state, that I did not think it prudent to renew the attack. After some time the agent of the deceased arrived in Lisbon, from the Brasils, and as he was privy to my correspondence, it became necessary for me to discover to Don Juan who he was, and also what fortune he was entitled to. In this crisis, threatened with shame and detection on one hand, and tempted by avarice, pride, and the devil on the other, I won over my reluctant wife to a participation of my crime, and we mixed that dose with poison which we believed was intended for Don Juan, but which in fact was destined for our only child. She took it, Heaven discharged its vengeance on our heads, and we saw our daughter expire in agonies before our eyes, with the bitter aggravation of a double murder, for the child was alive within her. Are there words in language to express our lamentations? Are there tortures even in the reach of your invention to compare with those we felt? Wonderful were the struggles of nature in the heart of our expiring child. She bewailed us, she consoled us, nay, she even forgave us. To Don Juan we made immediate confession of our guilt, and conjured him to inflict that punishment upon us which justice demanded, and our crimes deserved. It was in this dreadful moment that our daughter with her last breath, by the most solemn adjurations, exacted and obtained a promise from Don Juan not to expose her parents to a public execution by disclosing what had passed. Alas! alas! we see too plainly how he has kept his word. Behold he dies a martyr to honour! Your infernal tortures have destroyed him.’

No sooner had the monk pronounced these words in a loud and furious tone, than the wretched Don Juan drew a sigh; a second would have followed, but Heaven no longer could tolerate the agonies of innocence, and stopped his heart for ever.

The monk had fixed his eyes upon him, ghastly with horror, as he stretched out his mangled limbs at life's last gasp. 'Accursed monsters, (he exclaimed) may God requite his murder on your souls at the great day of judgment! His blood be on your heads ye ministers of darkness! For me, if heavenly vengeance is not yet appeased by my contrition, in the midst of flames my aggrieved soul will find some consolation in the thought, that you partake of its torments.'

Having uttered this in a voice scarce human, he plunged a knife to his heart, and whilst his blood spurted on the pavement, dropped dead upon the body of Don Juan, and expired without a groan.