

Pancrazia's Hair

By Robert Hichens

One autumn I was in Sicily, making a number of mountain excursions, visiting remote villages hidden in rocky clefts, or perched boldly on spurs in the eye of the sun, sleeping occasionally at night in humble rooms to which the gobbling turkey and the audacious pig were no strangers. Among my many memories of those free and happy days one stands out—the memory of a tress of splendid black hair.

On an afternoon, near sunset, I rode up to the edge of a hamlet of huddled dwellings, where stood a large, old church, Arabic-Norman in style, and here I dismounted to rest and fill my eyes and heart with the wonder and the glory of Nature.

As I gazed I remember thinking: "How small humanity is!"

A fat old priest shuffled up to recall me from my reveries. He cleared his throat, saluted me, and begged me to come and see his church.

We went into the sacristy, and presently stood before an immense and mouldy cupboard. After much struggling with a rusty key the doors were opened, and I was confronted by a large wooden statue of the Madonna and Child, covered with fading but still hideous colours, and flecked with the dust of ages.

I scarcely noticed the statue, however, for my eyes had fallen upon something else—a great plait of glorious black hair, thick, long, twisted with reverent care, strong strand through strand, tied at the top and bottom by bows of rose-red satin. It hung to the wrist of the Madonna, and was touched by the little outstretched foot of the infant Jesus.

I looked inquiringly at the priest.

"That is Pancrazia's hair, signore."

"Pancrazia's hair! Who is, or was, Pancrazia?"

An expression came into the priest's face that transformed it—a look so human, so tender, even so mystical, that suddenly I loved this old man in his rusty soutane and his wrinkled, patched boots.

I sat down on a wooden box that stood just below the statue, and the priest told me the story of the tress of hair.

I give it in his words, so far as I remember them. But I cannot give the look in his eyes while he was speaking, or the almost childish beautiful simplicity and sincerity of his manner.

"Pancrazia was never a handsome girl, but always she looked a good girl. And then she had the most beautiful hair in the village, or, indeed, in all the country round. When she was a child it was full of gleams of gold, but the underneath was always dark; and, as she grew, the darkness of it crept up, till all over her head the hair was black. Only in the front, by her temples, there remained little feathers of gold, which fell down near her kind, pious eyes—eyes that could be merry, too, and laugh as readily as the eyes of the wicked and the wanton.

"Pancrazia was not one of the melancholy who must cry when they pray. She thought it no wrong to smile at the Madonna; and I have seen her run out of school in the summer days, and blow kisses to the Mother of God—where the shrine is by the gateway of the village—as a child might to her own mother coming down to meet her over the rocks, with, maybe, the little pig trotting alongside. Why not, signore? She had confidence in the Madonna; and what is more

beautiful than the confidence which runs out of a young heart like a stream out of a hazel wood? The Madonna loved it, you may be sure.

“As Pancrazia grew up, despite her piety— she was the purest-minded child I ever blessed—the natural feelings grew with her. They come early, signore, in sunny places; and, thank God, the sun is never long away from us here. She began to know there’s a life for a maiden that follows after the child’s life.

“Ah, signore, I watched over the girl as I have watched over a flower growing in my little garden—you must see my little garden, signore, before you go.

“Often I thought: ‘What a mother she will make!’ And sometimes I would run over the boys of the village to choose a husband for her when she should be a bit older. But somehow it always ended the same way: I never could settle on the husband.

“Well, signore, you know what girls are. She didn’t wait for me to choose, though nobody respected me as she did. She didn’t think so much of herself as I thought of her. And while I was saying to myself: ‘Giovanni won’t do, and Stefano won’t do, and Paolo’s not the one, and may the Madonna preserve her from Giorgio!’ she says to herself: ‘Angelo!’ Not a word more, you may be certain. I can hear her say it, and see her lips smiling over the word—‘Angelo!’

“I’d come to him, in my numbering, and I’d said to myself: ‘Angelo won’t quite do.’ Not that he was a bad boy. And he was a handsome one; strong, merry, and could play the guitar and dance the tarantella, and sing ‘O sole mio!’ till you could hear it from Acireale to Capo Sant’ Alessio pretty near. But— Well, in my eyes, nobody would do for Pancrazia.

“In her heart, all the same, she chose Angelo, and it seemed that in his he chose her. When I saw him with her one twilight by the shrine at the gateway, and saw her kneel down, while he stood beside her, and crossed himself and looked at her as she was praying—for him, signore, you may be sure, knowing women—I understood how it was, and I said to myself:

‘Perhaps the Madonna has done the numbering too, and stopped at Angelo.’

“And so I left it, trusting all was right for that pure child, even in this world of sin.

“Angelo was a seaman, and was often away. One night when I was in my garden watering my roses—they are worth seeing, as you will know presently, signore—I saw Angelo and Pancrazia coming up to the gate together. I set down the pot of water. Pancrazia was smiling, and he looked brave—you know how a boy of courage looks when he’s just found someone who wants to be taken care of, signore?

“I understood, but I pretended not to, and said innocently: ‘What is it, my children?’

“Then she told me, while he just stared at her, with his eyes getting graver at every word she said. They were going to be husband and wife, and I was the first to know it. Angelo had to go away in the morning to Messina. He’d got a job to sail on an orange boat to the Lipari Islands, and was to be away two months in all. For those two months the secret was to be kept among us three.

“It was Pancrazia’s wish. She didn’t want to face the village talk till Angelo could stay beside her. There was always something more retiring about her than about the other girls. It seemed to go with her purity. I blessed them both, and, when I’d finished watering my roses, I prayed for them and for their children.

“Angelo went away in the morning, and Pancrazia kept up bravely. The village folk gossiped and laughed, and spoke of the faithlessness of the men of the sea, but Pancrazia only smiled to herself. And I smiled too. You see, we knew what had been settled, but they, poor, silly souls, were ignorant. Yet, as it turned out, I don’t know—”

“Time went on, and one evening, after a month had gone, Pancrazia came rushing into my garden like a mad thing, with a bit of paper in her hand. Angelo was desperately ill with fever far away in Lipari, and the orange boat had had to sail from there and leave him. I scarcely knew Pancrazia. There was a passion in her I’d never suspected, although I know the fires that slumber in us, who are almost the sucking children of Etna, signore, as you might say.

“ ‘What shall I do? What shall I do?’ she kept on crying out.

“ ‘Pray,’ I said. ‘Pray, my child, to the Madonna della Rocca.’

“When she left me it was night. Very late I walked out to the wall above the precipice to look at Etna and the stars, and there, beyond the gateway, on the stones before the shrine, I saw a figure kneeling, and I heard a little noise of sobbing. I went, and whispered:

“ ‘You must not cry thus when you pray, Pancrazia. The Madonna will think you doubt her.’

“Then, signore, the sobbing stopped.

“A week went by, two weeks, and then came news that Angelo was worse, was dying out there in the islands. That day Pancrazia came again to my house. She was calm, signore, calm, and her face white and still as a pan of milk.

“ ‘Padre,’ she said, ‘shut the door.’

“I shut it.

“ ‘Padre,’ she said, ‘I’m going to give something to the Madonna della Rocca, and no one is to know but you. Will you promise never to tell?’

“I promised solemnly, as she desired.

“ ‘Come with me to the church now, padre.’

“I went with her. She had in her hands a length of red ribbon, and there was a scissors hanging at her waist.

“When we were in the church she shut the door, and said:

“ ‘Unlock the cupboard in the sacristy, please, padre.’

“We went into the sacristy, and I unlocked this cupboard, and looked at her.

“ ‘What is it you are giving to the Madonna, my child?’ I asked.

“She never said a word, but took the scissors from her waist, and before I could stop her she had cut off her beautiful hair. Not that I would have prevented her; no, signore, but it was her one beauty, except the look of goodness in her face. And somehow it seemed to me that the Madonna would have wished—But she was right. We should keep back nothing. She tied the ribbons as they are now, and hung the hair up there upon the Madonna’s hand, and knelt down, and told her that she offered it for Angelo, in the hope that her love of him might be regarded in heaven, and that his life might be spared. That was all.

“She put a shawl over her poor head, and we came out.

“ ‘Well, presently there was a fine to-do in the village. When the folk saw Pancrazia’s head they stared, and asked, and laughed. And the children pointed, and cried out. And the boys—I beat the boys, signore, and never asked forgiveness. But Pancrazia wouldn’t say a word.

“Pancrazia’s offering found favour with the Madonna, signore. Her prayer was heard. Angelo recovered, and returned.”

The old priest paused. His face was working. The mystical expression I had observed in his eyes was replaced for a moment by a very different look. After a silence he continued:

“No one knew then what we all knew later: that he had been nursed back to life—those were Angelo’s words, and a lie, signore, for his recovery was the miracle of the Madonna—by a woman of the islands, and that already his heart was going out to this stranger. He had come

back, though, to keep his word. That I know. But when he saw Pancrazia's poor, shorn head he thought again of the island woman, and—"

The old man coughed, and paused.

"Signore," he resumed in a loud voice, "when Pancrazia saw his look, and that his heart was turned by such a thing, she would not say where, and why, the hair was gone. And I—I had promised. Angelo was but a lad, his passions were hot, the lust of the eye was awake within him, and—God and the Madonna forgive him!—where he should have seen the heart he—"

He paused again.

"Signore, he went back to the islands, and married the woman who had nursed him in Lipari."

"And Pancrazia?" I asked. "Did she not—pardon me if I hurt you—but did she not cease to pray to the Madonna?"

"Cease to pray!" said the old man, and again the mystical look was in his eyes.

He drew out his watch, then softly he whispered:

"Come, signore!"

We went out to the wall above the precipice.

Here there is an old gateway, arching the narrow track by which I had ascended. Just beyond it, under the towering rocks, is a shrine with a crude picture of the Madonna and Child. Now, as the old priest pointed with his finger, I saw on the step before the shrine a plain, dark woman kneeling. A handkerchief was folded over her head, and fell upon her shoulders. Her hands were clasped. Her lips were moving. She was absorbed, and did not see us.

"That is Pancrazia!" whispered the priest.

"She has never married. Each day at this hour she comes here. Do you know why?"

"To ask for—"

"She is asking for nothing. She is blessing the Madonna."

"Blessing the Madonna!"

"For having answered her prayer."

"But—"

"Signore, when Pancrazia gave her hair to the Madonna della Rocca she did not think of self. She only asked that her love might be regarded in heaven, and that Angelo's life might be spared. Her prayer was granted. Angelo lives. And each day at this hour Pancrazia comes here to give thanks to God, and to praise and bless the Holy Madonna della Rocca."

I said nothing, but I thought as I watched the praising woman,

"How great humanity is!"