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POLITICO-HISTORICAL SIDE OF
THE MONTAGUES AND
CAPULETS, PP. 35-66**

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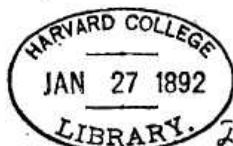
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JOHN MILTON GITTERMAN

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John Milton Gitterman.

IT is the peculiar faculty of the greatest minds to invest the offspring of their genius with such transcendent interest, that even after volumes have been written on their works, the story of their development is of great attraction. Of Shakespeare's plays, Romeo and Juliet has always been considered not only a most wonderfully constructed and charming play, but also a great monument to a very romantic episode of Italian History in a brilliant period. While everyone knows how Shakespeare drew the story of the play of Romeo and Juliet from translations of two Italian novelists, Luigi da Porta and Bandello, and how his genius created this play; the history of the development of these novels is not so generally known. That Bandello elaborated his tale from the noveletta of Luigi da Porta, is generally conceded, but beyond Luigi, the origin of Romeo and Juliet has not been traced. For this, there was apparently the good reason that Dante had mentioned the Montagues and Capulets in his *Commedia* two centuries before Luigi's novel, and when Shakespeare's play had made this family-tragedy world-renowned, it appeared to be a very logical conclusion for Shakespeare's critics, that Dante had spoken of the Montagues and Capulets as the representatives of the two lovers, while many Dante scholars pointed to Shakespeare for an explanation of the connection of these names in the *Divine Comedy*. While our conclusions will differ from both theories, it will appear that Dante unconsciously became the source of both novel and play, Romeo and Juliet, while in fact he was describing the party fights of his time. To show this wonderful fate

which, by a spiritual tie, brings the greatest English and Italian poets into intellectual relationship, if only for one time and one play, will be the aim of this essay.

The question before us, in its simplest forms, may be stated: How came Luigi da Porta to use Dante's *terzine*:

Vieni a veder Montecchi e Cappeletti,
 Monaldi e Filippeschi. uom senza cura;
 Color già tristi, e costor con sospetti,

for a novel, and again, how came Dante to put these four party names side by side? As far as we are concerned, the only question is, how came the names of Montague and Capulet together? In solving this question the entire riddle disappears, and to do so we must leave all *a priori* reasonings aside and simply investigate facts.

Inasmuch as in both Shakespeare's play and Luigi's novel, the scene is laid in Verona, we may begin by studying the Veronese records to find out whether there are any traces of the Montague and Capulet families in that city. A thorough study of all records and every chronicle of Verona shows that, whereas the Montagues are mentioned in many offices, contracts and records, in no instance can a Capulet be found in Verona. Therefore it is our first duty to find out where the Capulets did live, and then, returning to the Montagues of Verona, to see what Dante meant when he connected their names.

As far as our sources permit us to judge, the Capulets were a family of Cremonese knights. In the beginning of the 13th century, two of the family were judges of Cremona; later on the family had become so prominent in Cremonese politics that their name became the party appellation of the nobility in its fights against the rising populace. The people of Cremona had been the staunchest upholders of the great Emperor Frederick II. ever since, by a reversal of political roles, the Pope had been forced to put forward this Hohenstaufen King of Sicily in opposition to the Guelph, Otto IV. The fidelity with which Cremona and its people stood by Frederick brought its reward in many substantial ways dis-

tasteful to the nobles. These had been forced into submission on various occasions, and finally had been driven from Cremona by the people under Frederick's lieutenant, Pelavicini. In 1249 the people were in possession of the government, and under Pelavicini's management a club of 2,000 of the most efficient party workers formed an organization called the Barbarasi or Troncaciuffi (clean shaven) Club, very likely because their opponents had used their caps as a party distinction.

The death of Frederick II, in 1250, gave the exiled Capulets hope to return to Cremona, and henceforth they joined all and every enemy of the people of Cremona, in the hope of accomplishing this. In vain they joined the Mantuans in 1257, and the sinking fortunes of Ezzelino da Romano, Lord of Verona, in 1259. In the meanwhile, the Barbarasi of Cremona were suffering from the want of opposition, and soon were disrupted by internal dissensions, while the leaders had lost their hold on the people. When, in 1266, these troubles led to the fall of Pelavicini, the time was ripe for the Capulets to return. Their absence had rendered them less hateful, all the more so as they represented that party of the Church, which, since its successes in Tuscany and Naples, was called the Guelph. In 1267 the Capulets were enabled to return to Cremona, whence they soon exiled the Barbarasi Club with its remaining adherents, under the leadership of Boso da Dovera, who having ousted Pelavicini, now paid the penalty of party rebellion by long years of exile. In 1268 the Capulets reorganized their club, which was called the party of the commune, people and church of Cremona, on so firm a basis that in spite of the most savage attempts of the Barbarasi, they henceforth never again had to leave Cremona. In the splendidly preserved archives of Cremona, one may still read how every year the Capulet lords spent the party funds to maintain the war against the exiles, whose estates had been confiscated and whose existence had become so pitiable that few objected when, in 1310, the Emperor Henry VII. led the remnants of the Barbarasi back to Cremona. In the course of time the

Amati and other Capulet lords of Cremona did not retain their ancient power and their names disappear.

While it is thus clearly shown that the Capulets never were in Verona, the story of the Montagues, or Montecchi, is the most dramatic in Veronese history. For it was through their contentions with the Counts of Verona, their kinsmen, that the people of Verona attained full political freedom and fell into the clutches of the great political boss, the mighty Ezzelino III. da Romano. In consequence of the assassination of a count of Verona by a Montague, the latter had to surrender the fertile land and stronghold of San Bonifacio, (near Arcole) to the counts of Verona, and from that time the one aim of the Montagues was to re-acquire this castle and to accomplish this end they joined all opponents to the count's party in Verona. The opposition to the counts (or nobles) party at the beginning of the 13th century, was composed of the merchants, who desired peace and unrestricted trade, and of all those who were excluded from office, either because of their belonging to the people or to the Montague faction. In course of time the claim of the people for a share in the offices made this party a people's party, and all the ensuing disturbances and riots were for the people's good. Among those who led the Montagues in their endeavors at controlling Verona, Ezzelino II. of Romano, a Trevisan noble, suffered a severe defeat at the hands of the count's party, and had to leave his son, Ezzelino III., as hostage in Verona, who thus became known to the factions he was to rule in later years. In the course of time the Montagues and their friends obtained offices, and let the merchants and the people fight the battle against the count's party. These popular elements then formed a society, ruled by twenty-four chiefs, under the direction of a "Rector." The programme of the new party was to get offices for the people and to free them from all fiscal dues of the Count of Verona. In 1225 they coalesced with the Montagues, who had been recently exiled, and overthrew the count's party by a clever revolution. The Montagues and friends, however, shut the people out, so that in 1227 a new revolution was

carried out by a man of the people, who ruled Verona as leader of the party of twenty-four. As, however, dissensions had again broken out in Verona, and the count's party were trying to reassert themselves, it became necessary for both Montagues and the party of the twenty-four to call in Ezzelino da Romano, whose skill in organizing men made him first "Rector" of the twenty-four and then boss of Verona.

From 1230 to 1259 he ruled Verona in spite of the most desperate attempts to oust him, showing himself not only the first but the most wonderful boss in Italy. He controlled Verona by the party machinery of the Montague party (the nobles) and the party of the twenty four (the people). Since 1235 the party of the counts of Verona and the greater nobles were kept in exile, in spite of their most strenuous attempts to return to Verona, from which they had been driven six times since 1215. The political machinery administration, justice and finance, gradually came to be so firmly settled in Ezzelino's hands that he was lord of Verona. The people had become freer than they had ever been before, and the Montagues were satisfied, when, in 1243, the great castle of San Boniface, the apple of discord, was taken by Ezzelino and razed to the ground.

For two more years the old party names of a Montague and twenty-four-party existed, to be dissolved in 1245. Ezzelino ruled Verona so firmly, that he had no more need of a party vote to ratify his will. Whoever disobeyed his orders was politically dead and if he tried to organize an opposition, Ezzelino construed this into conspiracy and punished this with death. For by a clause of the party laws, the boss of the party of the twenty-four had free play, if anything were done or attempted against the party organization. The Montagues had offices and were freed from the count's party, the people had achieved freedom and liberty, yet only at the cost of having a boss. Ezzelino enforced implicit obedience by his foreign judges and foreign men-at-arms. Among the officers of state of Verona, Montagues and great popular families are to be found, but all subject to the sway of Ezzelino de Romano. The head of the Montagues, Carnorolo,

was for a time Ezzelino's deputy in Verona and obtained for himself and family quite a large share of confiscated property. For a long time the Montagues prospered, till in 1254, Carnorolo and his family were executed for conspiracy, and thus went the way they had prepared for thousands.

With this event the Montagues disappear from Veronese politics; they were either all executed or else banished. The latter seems likely, for at the close of the 13th century they are to be met with in Goriza, where Ezzelino's cousins ruled. In 1259 Ezzelino died; the people then elected Mastin della Scala ruler of Verona, who followed the old policy of Ezzelino and in 1269 made a league with the exiled Barbarasi against the ruling faction of Cremona, the Capulets.

Thus we see that although the Montagues were a Veronese family they had disappeared entirely from Verona before 1260, while the Capulets of Cremona never had come to Verona and always were opposed to the ruling Veronese faction. We can now revert to the discussion of Dante's lines, and bearing in mind that Sordello is speaking of the disrupted state of Italy, it appears clearly that Dante cannot be referring to a love affair in Verona of 1306, but to the politics in great towns. The difficulty is however this: If the Montagues and Capulets are from two towns, the question naturally arises from what two towns are the other two factions, the Monaldi and Filippeschi? And from this question the difficulty arose. Had Dante spoken of four factions from four towns or three factions from three towns, no questions in interpretation would have occurred to anyone. But with the exception of Dante's son, Pietro, every commentator has tried to find either four or two towns for the four parties. This was continued with more or less ingenuity till Benvenuto da Imola explained the lines in the sense that the Montagues and Capulets were of Verona, while the other two factions, who in previous commentators had figured in every city of the March Ancona, were placed in Orvie. Benvenuto's authority prevailed, and in consequence the tradition arose, that the Capulets were a Veronese faction. This is all the historical basis for the novel. As regards the

other elements of both novel and play, Simrock has shown how the Indo-germanic tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, etc., recurs in a thousand forms, and how even in 1476 an ancient Viennese tale of Masuccio Salernitano, was published, telling a story similar to Luigi da Porta's of a Veronese couple.

JOHN M. GITTERMAN, PH D.

A BIT OF LOCAL COLOR.

CHIAROSCURO, *n.*—light and shade; a drawing in black and white.—
The Century Dictionary.

BY ARTHUR A. ALEXANDER.

HE was as black—well, as black as your last summer's brown hat, was Pete. And he was a wharf-rat in a little Louisiana town. His trousers were largely made of holes, held together by strips of rags; his shirt snapped its ragged banner in every breeze. As for food! the Lord bless you! he didn't get any, save at odd times and places. And yet he was merry. For to stand on the levee, whistling like a jay-bird, and kicking at stray pieces of brown earth with his browned toes, or to lie in the sun on a cotton bale in sleepy forgetfulness of hunger, were not these his hardest tasks?

When I saw him, he was fighting with the flies,—and a horde of other little darkies—for the drippings of a molasses barrel. His shiny face was sticky with molasses, dirt and flies, as he licked the sweet drops from the barrel staves, the wharf, or wherever else he found them. Presently he sauntered off to where a small boat-landing jutted out into the great Mississippi River. Lying down on the end furthest from shore, he lazily watched the white clouds scud across the sky. The wind was blowing strongly, and the little wharf rattled and shook as the water dashed against it.