

THE FORTRESS IN LITERATURE

A number of authors have been inspired by the Fortress and the dramas which unfolded around it, giving it the role of protagonist and lynch-pin of their narrative. Three such pieces, all with their own individual characteristics, have been selected and synthesized here as examples. While all make excellent reading, two in particular, written during the 19th Century, achieved a certain fame, bringing the Fortress itself dramatically into the public eye, during the period when it was still active, allowing us a certain insight into the reality of those times.

Picciola

In 1836, the French writer Xavier Boniface Saintine published a romance with a curious title: Picciola.

It was a great success, translated into a number of other languages, and won the Montjou Literary Award for its author.

But who was Picciola ? Not a young girl, or even a woman, but a simple little plant, growing in a crack in the window-sill of a prison cell in the Officers' Pavilion in Fenestrelle.

Count Chaney, the occupant of the cell, had been sent to Fenestrelle for his anti-Napoleonic activities, and had seen it grow, leaf by leaf, from the time when the wind-blown seed first lodged in the crack. In effect, it became his friend, and he would speak to it and encourage it as it grew, enlivening his long and otherwise desolate days of imprisonment. This form of

affection for the plant brought solace to the prisoner, who looked upon it almost as a companion, a prisoner at Fenestrelle like himself, and gave it a name - Picciola - as if it were a young child.

But as time passed, the plant got bigger and risked dying from lack of sustenance in the small crack where it had taken root. The young Count asked permission to have the crack enlarged a little, but his request was superciliously rejected by the severe Governor of the Fortress.

In a nearby cell, an elderly nobleman, another political prisoner, was also detained. He was in ill-health, and had been accorded permission for assistance by his youngest daughter, Theresa. Moved by what she had heard about Count Chaney and the plant, she decided to try to help him, first by trying to convince the Governor to relent, but to no avail. She then went to Turin and tried to convince one of the nobles to intercede, but again without success. Undaunted, and knowing that Napoleon and Josephine had gone to nearby Marengo as part of celebrations on the anniversary of that famous battle, she decided to try to plead the case with Josephine, who was well known for her passion with flowers and plants.

Theresa managed to convince Josephine to intervene with Napoleon on behalf of Picciola, and set off once again for Fenestrelle to tell her father and Chaney the good news.

But at Fenestrelle, things were not going the way she had hoped. The Governor had been chastised by his superiors in Turin for allowing Theresa too much freedom of action, and for not having been sufficiently forceful in dealing with the situation. He thus decided to have the plant cut down, avoiding any further argument. At the same time, both Theresa's father and Count Chaney were alarmed by the fact that they had not heard from her since she had left a number of days previously for Turin, and had no notice of her whereabouts.

The suspense grows as the guard is instructed about the plant, and preparations are made to deal with it. As in all the best dramas, with the poor plant about to be wrenched out of the crack it had so desperately clung to, at the very last moment, an emissary arrives at the fort with a letter signed by Napoleon instructing that the plant should be saved.

Josephine herself, captivated by the spirit and determination of Theresa, began to take an interest in the welfare of the prisoners, and thanks to her intervention, they began to have improved treatment.

On Theresa's return to the Fortress, she was reunited with her father, and was allowed to meet Count Chaney. Almost inevitably, their friendship grew into love, and when Chaney was released from prison they were married.

Unfortunately, we have not been able to find a copy of this book, but have relied on an account by Prof. Vignetta in his book "Fenestrelle, La montagna non è morta", published by Alzani in 1997, in which he

makes the following authoritative comment: "This very pleasant romance alternates pages of rare delicacy with pages of thrilling adventure".

The romance was also turned into a theatrical play and the name "Picciola" was given to a flower found in the Côte d'Azure.

The Dishonoured

Some years ago the Torinese editorial house "Il Punto" published a novel by Claudio Marcato, a young Torinese writer with a great knowledge of the events which form part of the story of the Kingdom of Sardinia. His book, "The Dishonoured", has the Fortress of Fenestrelle as the scenario around which its tale unfolds.

It is the Spring of 1822, and three officers are proceeding on horseback up the King's Highway of the Chisone Valley. The one in the middle is the twenty-four year old Lieutenant Vittorio Debres of the Royal Corps of Artillery, being transferred by order of his superiors to the Fortress of Fenestrelle. This young officer, of a liberal turn of mind, had become ingenuously involved in the revolutionary fervour and the subsequent uprising which had broken out in Turin the year before. Briefly suspended, he had been readmitted into service, but was ordered to Fenestrelle until the conclusion of the Court Martial into his conduct.

On entry to the Fortress, Debres immediately sought out Colonel Pezza, the deputy Commanding Officer, an enormous man who *"seemed like a bastard, but effectively . . . that is exactly what he was"*.

The first few days were frenetic: he had to get to know the entire fortress, his colleagues, the essentials of the garrison and its duties. He came to realize that many of the officers were in a similar situation to his own "under arrest at the Fortress", and noted with dismay about fifty soldiers imprisoned in chains, "guilty" of having obeyed the orders of their superiors and having found themselves on the wrong side of the famous uprising of 1821. Amongst those he recognized his former Sergeant of Artillery, Donati, his best gunlayer, faithful and serious NCO, amongst those in chains.

The next few days passed routinely except for a long interrogation about the charges he was faced with, until finally Pezza decided he could trust him with some sort of duty. Given the enormous dimensions of the Fortress, carrier pigeons were frequently used to carry messages to and from its various parts. The pigeon house was in the former Dauphinate castle, Chateau Arnaud, located just below Fort San Carlo.

Debres was not particularly enthusiastic about this duty, which consisted of merely maintaining a register of all the messages entrusted to the pigeons. It involved very little work and a great deal of boredom. Fortunately, there was also Sergeant Rabbini, who had lost one arm, but who loved "his" pigeons more than the limb he was now missing. The place seemed more like a chicken-run than an office, but the passion and sagacity of the old sergeant brought life back into Vittorio's heart. Mutual respect grew between the officer and the NCO, and within the limits of military formality, something almost definable as friendship developed.

The days at the pigeon house passed peacefully, occupied only by the few messages to transcribe, looking after the pigeons and endless hands of their favourite game, bacarat, with beans taking the place of money.

One day, right in the middle of a game, a soldier knocked on the pigeon house door and invited Debres to go immediately to Colonel Pezza's office.

Vittorio, shaken by this summons which he interpreted as being the results of the enquiry into his conduct, went immediately up to Fort San Carlo, and found not only the deputy Commanding Officer but also the Governor himself waiting for him. The worst seemed imminent.

Pezza wasted no time with preliminaries, "Lieutenant Debres", he rasped, "You are hereby nominated in charge of a special Company of His Majesty's Royal Artillery Corps, with the task of hunting down a group of French bandits who have invaded the area".

The young officer was overjoyed - finally a real duty to absolve. "Thank you Sir", he replied, "But where are the troops?" With a sarcastic smile, Pezza indicated through the window to the group of soldiers in chains undergoing forced labour. "These are your troops, Debres. You'll have a month to train them. The Company will be based at the Tre Denti Fort." He peered at Debres and glanced knowingly at the Governor. "His Excellency has persuaded me that some recompense for this is appropriate, so despite my misgivings, we have concurred that the men will be

brought back into service and will have their former rank restored - provided that by the end of the year the bandits have been eliminated, otherwise they'll be back in chains".

Knowing full well by then that this was no easy task, and that the "end of the year" really meant only a few more months before the snows came, Debres did not lose heart, but requested that the thin, undernourished prisoners were freed from their chains and given food and clothing. The faithful Sergeant Donati would be the gunnery instructor, not an easy job considering the untrained state and physical condition of the prisoners.

The Company needed a name, and the devious Pezza had no doubts - it was a Company of renegades and gaolbirds in his eyes, "It shall be named *The Dishonoured*," he said, brooking no interference on the matter.

But the "gaolbirds" were loyal and valiant soldiers, and within the allotted month had learned enough to be considered operational, and set out to prove their worth. Even the sceptical Colonel had to admit they had the look of soldiers.

The hunt for the French bandits was in collaboration with the Royal Carabineers from Perosa, and one day, one of their informers told them that the bandits intended to attack Villaretto, one of the small villages nearby, then make their getaway across one of the many mountain passes.

So just before dawn on the 31st of July 1822, the men of the "Dishonoured" found themselves waiting for the bandits at the

point where the informer had said they would appear, their eyes seeking signs that would indicate their coming. Then all of a sudden, from behind them, they heard something that made their blood run cold - over a hundred bandits coming towards them with swords and knives - they had been led into a trap! With double their number coming towards them and no cover, most men would have given the order to try to retreat, but Debres instead gave the order to fix bayonets and to stand firm, even though they could fire only one shot at best. Things were looking bleak, with almost certain death facing them, but the "Dishonoured" did not flinch from their post, ready to give their best before they succumbed. The bandits fired sporadically then began to charge, and then faltered as over the hill came the Carabineers, firing vigorously at them. The combined number of troops now made it a more than even fight, but the bandits had no stomach for equal combat and broke off, escaping into the misty half-light of the rising dawn. The Captain of the Carabineers had suspected a trap and had circled round to try to take them from behind, arriving just in the nick of time. However, two of the "Dishonoured" lay dead on the ground, having been hit by the bandits' fire, the disgrace of the chains they had borne for no fault of their own washed away by their blood. With heavy heart the Company returned to the Fort to bury their dead.

Training continued, as did the daily patrols to seek out the bandits and their hiding place, but for weeks no sign was seen of them, until news was brought that they planned to attack across the Finestre Pass the following day. Debres made his plans carefully, and ordered four cannon, powder and grapeshot made ready, to be in position before dawn to

forestall the attack by the bandits, realizing that this was the only way he could overcome their vastly superior numbers. The Carabineers would wait below in the valley, to catch any who might escape.

The action took place on the 18th of August, with the Company manhandling the heavy four-pounders during the night into a position where they judged they had the best line of fire. It was misty and damp, not good conditions for artillery. Gunpowder absorbs moisture easily, so the cannon could not be loaded without risking a misfire. Loading would have to wait until the enemy was in sight. Sergeant Donati inspected everything over and over again, ensuring that every crew was prepared and ready to load on command. It was vital that all four of the cannons would fire simultaneously to have maximum effect. The training he had so patiently given them would soon be put to the test.

A musket shot rent the air, the bandits had seen the soldiers, and charged towards them shooting and waving their swords, fully aware of the effects of dampness on the cannon, which suffered much more than muskets in these conditions. "Fix bayonets and wait for my command to fire" instructed Debres, knowing that their only chance lay in killing as many as possible in the first (and probably only) salvo. Quickly and efficiently under Donati's eagle eye, the four cannons were made ready, their deadly grapeshot pushed home while the bandits got ever closer. The last cannon was readied with them a mere 20 metres away - "FIRE", came the command and the four cannons belched smoke, fire and destruction amidst the hordes of changing bandits, the

crackling sound of the "Dishonoured's" musket salvo almost lost in the roar of the four-pounders but striking down many who had escaped the devastation produced by the cannon.

"CHARGE", shouted Debres, scarcely realizing that behind the curtain of smoke almost all the bandits lay dead or dying. Their victory was complete, the bandits were destroyed. The "Dishonoured" had fulfilled its mission.

On their return to San Carlo, the honours were all for these ex-gaolbirds, now heroes. The "Dishonoured" was formally disbanded with due ceremony, its men being allowed to return to their former Companies and ranks, as had been promised by the Governor. A few days later, even Vittorio found a surprise - his recall to Turin to join the General Staff, the dream of every young officer with ambition. This meant leaving the austere Fortress of Fenestrelle, and with it, a part of his life.

And so, less than a week later, Debres, with a lump in his throat took his leave of the Fortress and started down the road towards Pinerolo and Turin. Without warning, a cannon-shot reverberated through the valley, high over his head. He spun round to see the plume of smoke still hanging in the air over the battlements of the Tre Denti, the oldest and most uncomfortable of all the forts which make up the complex, but one which had been "home" to the "Dishonoured", most of whom were there on the battlements to salute him, grateful to the young officer who had restored their dignity as men and as soldiers. Leading the salute was the sceptical Colonel

Pezza, now somewhat saddened at losing such a fine officer.

Twenty-six years passed. The evening of the 25th of March 1848, Colonel Vittorio Debres, at the head of his Regiment, crossed the River Ticino heading for Milan. It was the beginning of the Italian Uprising.

Thus the story finishes, but not the emotion which has continually accompanied the reader. It is a romance, the events narrated are fictitious, but the events and their location are described so well and with an accuracy of detail which goes far beyond the realm of the "writer" into nearly that of the historian.

Alle Porte d'Italia

Our third selection is one of these forgotten minor masterpieces - an extract from the book "Alle Porte d'Italia" (At the Gateways of Italy) by one of the most famous of 19th Century Piedmontese authors, Edmondo De Amicis. The extract here is my translation from the Treves edition of 1888¹, and describes the visit by De Amicis and his fellow writer-poet Giuseppe Giacosa to the Fortress in the year 1883. This is possibly the finest first-person descriptions of a visit to the Fortress while it was still operational, and brings us palpably into contact with the exertion of two middle-aged gentlemen who perhaps overestimated their fitness and underestimated the immensity of the Fortress. It lets us appreciate how little things have really changed in the last 120 years!

¹ Recently, this book has been republished by "Piemonte in Bancarella" in an economic paperback edition.

"One of the most extraordinary edifices which could never ever have been even imagined by a painter of fantastic scenes: like a titanic flight of steps or an enormous cascade of overlaid walls dropping down into the valley from the crest of a mountain almost two thousand meters high, a gigantic tower, an unhappy construction . . . A strange thing, huge and really beautiful. It was the Fortress of Fenestrelle."

De Amicis continues:

"And the impression was even more pleasant when we arrived at the foot of the mountain and found ourselves in front of Fort Carlo Alberto, situated there beside the Chisone, standing astride the road like an ancient castle guarding the bye way, its ponderous portcullis lowered onto the drawbridge, covered with grilles, from each of which it seemed as if a menacing voice would be likely to demand our "passports".

Having passed through the Carlo Alberto Redoubt which guarded the main road between Pinerolo and Sestrieres, De Amicis go on to note:

"A grandiose disorder of bare and dark buildings, tortuously mounting one on top of the other, as if they were climbing the mountain on each others' shoulders; high walls going in a hundred directions, at first sight giving no understanding of their purpose; roofs surmounted by roofs, imprisoned between bastions, rocks protruding above the parapets, small forts which raised their heads above the rocks, spiny with lightning conductors, pierced with loopholes, ladders at their sides, the confusing branches of a labyrinth of stone, all acute angles, ups and downs and round and rounds. A fortress never really visible,

one which seems made up of many fortresses one on top of the other and joined together haphazardly, constructed riotously, in the fury of danger, in a thousand different moments. And so intricate, without order, but deliberately so, to confuse any who would assail it. A vision, those who have never seen it should believe it, sufficient to make one want to compose a historic Fenestrellian dance, solely to have that scene as a background - it would make a fortune for the impresario!

Certainly this vision of the Fortress has stimulated their appetites, causing them to stop for lunch at the (still existing) "Rosa Rossa" in Fenestrelle to enjoy a less-than-frugal meal washed down with wine before continuing - but perhaps this was the cause of their difficulty. Over-indulgence at the table demands its own penance!

"Having finished off our trout, we walked up the road towards Fort San Carlo, where we entered the main body of the fortress. We passed over another drawbridge, between enormous walls and stone bastions: everything was grey, cold, severe and fearful. On entering we could see the Officer's quarters, the church, the hospital, the prisons and the Governor's residence, a group of sinister buildings which regarded us with scant kindness through the half-closed eyelids of their windows. We prepared ourselves to undertake the formidable staircase of four thousand steps, cut from solid rock and covered by a bomb-proof roof, which runs all the way from Fort San Carlo up to the top of the mountain.

The Commandant put a Sergeant of the Artillery at their disposal, as a guide to accompany them to the upper reaches of the

Fort. The sergeant courteously asked if they would prefer the covered stairway or the less fatiguing external pathway. With incautious bravado, they choose the covered stairway, and the description of the ascent takes up two full pages of extremely realistic and fully justifiable comments and grumbles concerning this "physical torture" which must be kept dignifiedly disguised from the nimble sergeant at all costs, to keep face. The first few lines are splendidly evocative:

"We ascended the first ramp of stairs with the joyful step of those who were going to the third floor, to some gallant encounter. "We'll be at the top in no time", we remarked, but when after the first flight there was a second and then a third, and after the third a fourth, of about a hundred steps each, our horn of pride began to deflate a little, like the horns on a garden snail. "No problem, we're not in any hurry, we can take all the time we need", we said - but just at that moment we turned a corner and there before us was an enormously long ramp of stairs, at least a hundred and fifty of them which seemed to say, "Oh yes, I'll show you!" To cheer ourselves up we began to tell jokes, inventing the most atrocious punishments for our friends, like being the waiter in a restaurant where the kitchen was in San Carlo and the customers were at the Delle Valli Fort, still so far above our heads. . . and of course we began to perspire - first the occasional drop, which soon became a runnel and then a flood which left our shirts soaking wet . . . while the sergeant continued nimbly up the stairs, two or three at a time, as if he were independent of gravity. And then yet another flight of interminable stairs brought a smile of terror to our faces. It was endless, this ascent, flight after flight of dark grey stone, a

treadmill of purgatory for a thousand years with a cannonball attached to each heavy foot which scarcely had the energy to reach the next step."

However, just above the Tre Denti Fort, they came out onto an open terrace overlooking the Devil's Garret, that formidable lookout post, and continued up the less demanding Royal Staircase on the top of the curtain wall itself.

"Not even that ascent was easy: but for its variety of wonderful views, was most pleasing. We passed through a group of buildings, similar to a village, with tortuous lanes flanked by high stone walls, dark and humid passageways, through open and sunlit squares, ever upwards. And then we came to the strangest place, one hundred times stranger and more beautiful than even the most bizarre imaginings of medieval romanticists. From a dark alleyway cut through an isolated rock, we found ourselves on a drawbridge with precipitous views to left and right, under the arches of two flying buttresses, the steep slopes of the mountain plunging down to beyond the limits of our sight. Once across the bridge, we entered another dark passage, carved through another isolated rock and walled like a castle, from which we emerged onto another drawbridge, extending like the other one across an abyss, with another pair of buttresses suspended in space - as if they were three small isolated domains of three brothers, allied but mistrustful of each other. It was almost impossible to make anything of what lay before us. The magazines, the blockhouses, the angled stairways, the passages and the openings presented such a appearance of confusion that I doubt that even a military engineer could have

understood it all in the space of a single visit. Ever and ever upwards we went, I remember it all so well. Through half-open doors we saw magazines full of charges for cylindrical grenades, charges for spherical grenades, boxes of grapeshot, of shrapnel, of bombs that seemed to have an air of just waiting, impatiently, for their day of thunder. Here and there, from their temple-like emplacements, open on the inner sides, the enormous cannons poked their long sinister necks out of smooth funnel-shaped or cunningly-stepped windows, as if they were peering down the valley with curiosity, looking for some unfortunate intruder to deal with. (. . .)

Step by step we had climbed from Fort San Carlo to the Tre Denti fortress, from that to the Santa Barbara Redoubt, from that to the Delle Porte Redoubt and thence to the Elmo Redoubt of the Delle Valli fortress which has nothing above it except the sky. And we were more than amply recompensed for our not exactly noble sweat by a spectacle which was simultaneously great, severe, strange, sad and incredibly beautiful, lifting one's spirit high like the a hymn of war accompanied by sacred music. That huge variety of great steep lines so violently broken, these enormous corners and vertical precipices, these shapes so grandiosely disordered like a huge pile of fallen boulders, give the appearance of being a silent language which recounts solemn and tremendous events; things which can be heard in a confused manner, without understanding them, but which if capable of being understood would cause one's very bones to tremble, as if from the revelation of some supernatural mystery. On a slope down near the town, the scattered ruins of the Mutin fort built by Louis XIV

can be seen. The other side, behind the fortress, almost at the height of the Delle Valli fortress, beyond a beautiful four-arched bridge (the Ponte Rosso, or Red Bridge) extends a vast field gently sloping down towards Mentoulles, a field made famous by Catinat, who wintered there with ten thousand troops in 1692: a beautiful green extension which seems made for a military parade and which becomes all painted with marvellous flowers in June, giving the effect of an immense Turkish carpet, spread out for a dance of Queens. On both sides of the fortress the sides of the mountain drop away almost vertically, thinly covered with larch and firs which climb practically up to the walls, as if on the attack. (. . .)

All of which is even more beautiful and strange seen from up there rather than from below. You can see all these rocks and walls which descend, in jumps and leaps, in sharp turns, showing a thousand angles and foreshortened views of redoubts, platforms, bridges, vaults, tortuous alleys, deep ditches, but all so difficult, narrow, closed and fearful that if an enemy of Italy should climb there, he would be disturbed by the very thought of one day having the General charged with its assault amongst his descendants. It is impossible, looking down, to not imagine a tremendous battleground, as every form and every aspect of this monstrous building powerfully expresses menace, resistance and death. You even seem to be able to hear the roar of the batteries below, or to see among the casemates the grenades of the assailants raising tempests of splinters with soldiers gasping up the ladders and down in the valley and then on the flanks of the

mountain artillery shells exploding and masses of disordered troops yelling through the woods, strewn with splintered gun carriages and bits of human remains.

The author takes his leave of the Fortress to descend back down the valley and concludes the day seated again at a table in the "Rosa Rossa", where in front of a glass of good wine he listens to the old folk singing a song about the famous Battle of the Assietta.

It is fitting to close this chapter with the poignant words of De Amicis in salutation of the Fortress:

"Goodbye beautiful Italian fortress, faithful bulwark of our Alps . . . You will be here long after our life has ended, and that of our children and their children too, superb and immobile guardian of our independence and our honour. And if the day comes when you are put to the test, may this be for you a day of pure and splendid glory, like the snow of your mountain in the sunlight of the Spring, let your Name become sacred to your Fatherland, and from all the hearts of Italy come a great cry of gratitude to bless the stones of your bastions and the blood of your defenders."