

# Cerda

By A. C. Benson

There was once a city of Gaul named Ilitro, a heathen city. It was encircled by a strong wall, with towers and a moat. There was a drawbridge, for carts to enter the city, which was drawn up at night, for the country was often disturbed by warlike bands; beside the great drawbridge was a little bridge, which could be lowered and drawn up as well; the great bridge was hauled up at sundown, and no cart might enter the city after that time; but the little bridge could be lowered till midnight for a traveller, if he was honest.

The tower was kept by a porter named Cerda, a rough, strong man, who had an impediment in his speech, and spake with few; he lived all alone in the tower. There were two rooms; in the lower room were the weights which drew up the bridge, and a wheel which wound up the chains, with another wheel for the smaller bridge, and a fireplace where the porter cooked his food; in the room above, which was approached by a ladder, there was a table and a chair, and a bed of boards with straw upon it, where he slept. The windows were guarded by shutters, and in winter time it was sorely cold in the tower; but the porter heeded it not, for he was a strong and rough man; he had a wild air, and his long shaggy locks fell on his shoulders. But though he spake little and few spoke to him, he had a loving heart full of tender thoughts which he could not put into words. He was fond of flowers and green trees, and would sometimes walk in the woods that came up to the castle wall, in springtime, with a secret joy in the scent of the flowers and their soft bright heads; he liked to watch the wild animals, and the birds had no fear of him, for he fed them often with crumbs and grain; and they would come on his window-ledge and chirp for food. Sometimes a child who passed the bridge would smile at him, and he would smile back and be glad; to some children whom he knew he would shyly give simple presents—carts carved out of wood, or a wooden sword; but he was so rough and uncouth a man that their elders were not pleased that he should speak with them; and indeed most people spoke of him as of one who could be trusted indeed to do hard toil punctually like a beast of burden, but whose mind was not wholly sound, but like that of a dog or ox. But he did his duty so faithfully, and was moreover so strong and fearless, if there was any troublesome corner to deal with, that he was held to be useful in his place. He had no courtesy for grown men, who heeded him no more than if he had been a machine; but he was kind and gentle with women and maidens, and would carry their burdens for them into the city, as far as he might—for he was forbidden to go out of sight of the bridge.

One day, indeed, he had some talk to a grave, quiet man, a traveller, who came like a merchant to the city, and yet seemed to have no business to do. He was indeed a Christian priest, who was on his way to the West; for there were then a few scattered congregations of Christians in Gaul, though the faith was not yet known through the land. And the priest, seeing something wistful in the rude porter's eye, something that seemed dumbly to ask for love, asked him if he prayed; and the porter with a stammering tongue said some words of the gods of the land; but the priest, who loved to let the good seed fall even by the wayside, told him of the Father of all, and of the Divine Son who came to teach the world the truth, and was slain by wicked men.

Cerda felt a strange hope in his heart, half pity and half joy; and the priest told him that any man in any place could speak to the Father when he would, and he repeated to him a prayer that he might say; but Cerda forgot all the prayer except the first two words, *Our Father*, and, indeed,

he did not understand the rest. But he would say those words over and over as he went about his work, and he would add, out of his own mind, a wish that he might see the Father; for he thought that He might some day come to the city, to see His sons there—for the priest had told him that all men were His sons. So the porter kept watch for the Father's coming; and he hoped that he might know Him if He came.

Now one day there was a great storm of rain and wind. The wind beat on the tower, and the rain rustled in the moat; and Cerda at sundown drew up the dripping bridges, and made all safe, knowing that he would not be disturbed again that night. He sat long that night listening to the wind, which seemed to have a sad and homeless voice in it, and then he remembered suddenly that he had not eaten, and he began to prepare his food. He had a little piece of meat in the house, which a citizen had given him, and bread, and a few berries which he had gathered in the wood; so he began to cook the meat; and it was about midnight, and the storm was fiercer than ever; when in a pause in the gust he thought he heard a cry out of the wood across the moat. He listened, but it came not again, and so he fell to his cooking. Then all at once the wind stopped, and he heard the rain whisper on the wall, when suddenly came the cry again, a very faint cry, like the crying of a child. He threw open the shutter of the window that looked to the wood, and in the glimmering dark, for there was a sickly light from the moon which laboured among the clouds, he thought he saw a little figure stand on the edge of the moat. It was dreary enough outside, but he went to the wheel and let the small bridge down, and then he went to the little gate and crossed the slippery plank with care.

There, near the lip of the moat, stood a little child, a boy that seemed to be about ten years old, all drenched and shivering, with his face streaming with rain. Cerda did not know the child, but asked him, as well as he could for his stammering speech, what he was doing there and what he desired. The child seemed frightened, and covered his face with his hands; but Cerda drew his hands away, not unkindly, and felt how cold and wet the little arms were. Then the child said that he had wandered from the way, and that seeing a light he had come near, and had found himself on the edge of the moat, and had cried out in case any one might hear him. Then Cerda asked him again what he was doing; and the child said timidly that he was about his father's business. Cerda was vexed that a father should be so careless of his child, but he could not understand from the child what the business might be.

So at last he said that the child must come into the tower with him, and that he would give him shelter for the night, and that in the morning he would make search for his father. But it was not with a very good grace that he said it, because he was now himself wetted; moreover, he was weary, and would fain have eaten his meal and slept undisturbed. Then the child shrank back from the slippery plank, so Cerda lifted him in his arms and carried him across. Then he pulled up the bridge again and shut the door, but the child seemed ill at ease. So Cerda did what he could to cheer him, wrung the water from his clothes and hair and covered him with a cloak and made him sit by the fire. Then he gave him of his own meat and drink, and brought the berries, bidding him see how fair they were. And the child ate and drank, looking at Cerda with wide open eyes and saying nought.

He looked to Cerda a frail and weakly child, and his wonder and even anger increased at those that had let such a child be about at that hour; and then he saw that the child was weary, so he carried him up the ladder, still wrapped in the doak, and laid him on his bed and bid him sleep; and then he went down softly to satisfy his own hunger, and was surprised to see that the food was not diminished but rather seemed increased. So Cerda ate and drank, once or twice ascending the ladder to see if the child slept. And when at last he seemed to sleep, then Cerda

himself went up and sat in his chair and thought that he would sleep too; but before sleep came upon him he said his words of prayer many times over, and added his further prayer that he might see the Father.

But while he did so it came into his mind how often he had said the same thing, and yet that nothing had happened to bless him; and he thought that the old priest had told him that the Father always listened to the voice of His sons; but then he bethought him that the Father had so many sons, and so wide a land to see to—though he only pictured the world as a few villages and towns like his own, with a greater town called Rome somewhere in the East—that he comforted himself by thinking that the Father had not had time to visit his city, and still less to visit one so humble as himself; and then a fear came into his mind that among the travellers who had passed the Father might have passed and he had not recognised him.

Then at last Cerda slept, his head down upon his breast, and the wind died down outside and left a breathless stillness, save for the drops that fell from the eaves of the tower; and then he dreamed a very strange dream. He thought that he was walking in a wood, and came upon a great open space, down into which descended a wide staircase out of the sky. It was all dark and cloudy at the top, but the clouds were lit with a fierce inner light that touched the edges, as in a winter sunset, with a hue of flame. From the cloud emerged a figure, at first dim, like a wreath of cloud, but slowly defining itself into the shape of a man, who came down slowly and serenely, looking about him as he stepped with a quiet greatness; when he came near the bottom of the ladder he beckoned Cerda to approach, who came trembling; but the other smiled so tenderly that Cerda forgot his fears and fell on his knees at the staircase foot; and the man went down to him and said, “Cerda, thy prayers are heard, and thy patience is noted; and thou shalt indeed see the Father.” And as he said the words a great ray of light came from the cloud and seemed to brighten all the place.

Cerda woke with a start, the voice still sounding in his ears; woke to find the room all alight—and he thought for a moment that it was broad day, and that he had for the first time neglected his duty and left the bridge unclosed. But in a moment he saw that it was not the light of day, but a very pure and white radiance, such as the moon makes on the face of a still pool in woods, seen afar from a height. The whole room was lit by it, so that he could see the beams of the roof and the rough stones of the wall. Then he saw that the child had risen from the bed, and that the radiance seemed brightest all about him; it was the same face, but all brightened and glorified; and the child seemed to be clad in a dim white robe of a soft and cloudlike texture. And then all at once Cerda felt that he was in the presence of a very high and holy mystery, such as he had hardly dreamed the world contained, and it came strangely into his mind, with a shock of awe and almost horror, that this was the child to whom he had spoken impatiently, whom he had fed and tended, and whose body he had carried in his arms; and he fell on his knees and hid his face and could not look on the child’s face.

Then he heard a very low voice that was yet so clear that Cerda felt it would be heard all through the city, that said, “Cerda, good and faithful servant of God, thou hast believed and therefore hast thou seen,” and “He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.”

Then there came into Cerda’s mind a great rush of beautiful thoughts; it was as though the tower had burst forth into bloom and was all filled with lilies and roses. He knew that all men were sons of the Father, and that the Father waited for them to come to Him; and he saw that each man’s life was a path which led to the Father, and that the rougher the path was the more surely did it conduct them; and he saw too, though he could not have said it to another, that it mattered not how or where a man lived, or how humble or even hateful his task might be, since

the Father knew best what each of His sons needed, and placed him where he could best find the way; and he saw, too, that those who seemed to wander in misery or even wickedness, were being secretly drawn to the Father's heart all the time; all this he saw, and many other high and holy things which it is not possible for human lips to speak. But he knew in his heart that a peace was given him which nothing, not even the heaviest affliction, could ever trouble again. And then the light died out; and looking up he saw the child once more, but now very faintly, as though far off but yet near; and then all was dark. And Cerda slept the sleep of a little child. And in the morning when he woke, he knew at once that the world was a different place. Hunger, cold, and weariness were but like clouds that hid the sun for a season; but the vision was the truth. And he went about his daily toil with so joyful a heart that it seemed as though his feet were winged.

And that day there came by an old citizen, whom Cerda had heard by report was held to be a Christian; and he looked upon Cerda for a moment in silence, with a kind of wonder in his face. But Cerda could find no words to tell him what had befallen him, till the old man said, "Can it be, Cerda, that you know the truth? for there seems to be something in your face which makes me ask you." And Cerda found words to say that though he knew but little of Christ, yet he believed in Him. "Oh, it matters not," said the other, "what we know *of* Christ, so long as we know *Him*; but you, my brother," he added, "look as you might look if you had seen the Lord face to face." "I think I have," said Cerda. And the old man doubted not, but went away pondering, knowing that the wise and prudent might not know what was revealed unto babes. But no man ever knew why for the rest of his days (for he died as a porter) Cerda slept only in his chair, and never lay down upon his bed; or why, before he closed the little gate, he always knelt for a moment to pray where the feet of the child had stood upon the brink of the moat.