

*
Turbulent
Tales

*
RAFAEL
SABATINI

Author of
"THE
SEA
HAWK"

Over
100,000
English
Copies
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Turbulent Tales



by **Rafael Sabatini**

Author of **THE SEA HAWK** over 700,000 English copies sold

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TURBULENT TALES

by

RAFAEL SABATINI

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THE KNEELING CUPID

THE LISPING YOUNG exquisite in sulphur-coloured silk smiled tolerant disdain, whilst from the group behind him came sounds of a titter ill-suppressed.

“And so you pronounce yourself an artist, eh?” he said. “An artist! It is a rare and admirable thing to be. It needs courage that a man should pronounce himself one; great industry and achievement before others will so pronounce him.”

His irony was not to be mistaken. It brought a faint colour into the gaunt, sallow cheeks of the victim, a young man of not more than three-and-twenty, tall and vigorous, whose face, though bony and rugged, was yet handsome in a rough, masterful way. A thick mane of lustrous black hair curled about his brow and fell in short waves to the nape of his powerful neck; his great eyes, deep-set under a massive brow, glowed with the ever-smouldering fires of a nature passionate in all things. He was dressed in black, but with an elegance which proclaimed that his presence here in the great Cardinal’s antechamber was by no means his first experience of courts. Rich fur trimmed his close-fitting doublet and lined the ample surcoat so loosely worn; a chain of silver, massively wrought and of exquisite workmanship served him for a girdle and hung the heavy Pistoja dagger on his hip.

He would willingly have drawn it now, to sheathe the blade in the windpipe of that smirking young gentleman in yellow. But, though passionate, he could, within certain limits, be patient, and prudently he dissembled the ferocious lust. He answered quietly: “Others have so pronounced me already—generously. But not perhaps more generously than my work deserved, Messer Gianluca.”

Gianluca Sforza-Riario, the fair youth in yellow, led a burst of laughter, which drew the attention of other clients thronging the long pillared gallery.

“You were well-advised, Messer Buonarroti, to come to Rome. Here you will certainly succeed. No artistic reticence will restrain you from bawling your wares in the market-place, and here success comes to him who bawls loudest, thus imposing upon the vulgar, indiscriminating herd. Oh, you will find men enough in Rome who, to their shame, are growing fat on art. The patronage of the ignorant enriches them. So may it fare with you, good sir.”

Still the young artist kept his temper, though his hands might itch.

“Sir, it is possible that you mistake my quality. It happens that until now I have had no patron but one, and he was not a man whom any could call ignorant—Lorenzo, the great Lorenzo de’ Medici. Had he lived, I should never have left Florence.”

“Lorenzo de’ Medici.” Gianluca’s eyebrows rose until they almost joined the yellow thatch above his shallow brow. “You will not tell me that Lorenzo de’ Medici knew anything of art?”

Young Buonarroti gasped for breath. “How, sir?”

“Ser Michelangelo, it is my desire to think well of you; but if you praise me the artistic perceptions of Duke Lorenzo you will render that impossible. A man of crude taste, leaning to the meretricious, to . . . to trivial things designed to trap the senses of . . . of just such men.”

That was but the beginning. Continuing, the aesthetic Messer Gianluca delivered himself at great length and in the choicest terms of an address upon art, under which young Michelangelo felt himself grow faint with wonder. Such great contemporaries as Pinturicchio and Verocchio were tolerantly commended, which is to say that this critic damned them with faint praise; others as great were contemptuously dismissed—especially the prosperous ones, prosperity being in the eyes of Messer Gianluca the seal of worthlessness. Of the younger men the only one in whom he admitted possibilities was Leonardo da Vinci; but he confessed to grave misgivings concerning even him; he doubted if that young man's talents would mature along praiseworthy lines; he feared that he might succumb to work for profit, and thereby damn himself eternally as an artist.

Nauseated, Michelangelo fled the gallery and the palace, and began to ask himself should he not flee Rome as well, cursing the evil hour which had brought him to this city of self-sufficient fools.

You know the story of his boyhood; how at the age of fourteen he was apprenticed for a term of three years to the great Florentine painter, Domenico Ghirlandajo; how before the end of that term he had been drawn from painting to sculpture, and how he had modelled a Laughing Faun which had caught the discerning eye of the Magnificent Lorenzo. The Duke had haled the lad out of the workshops of Messer Ghirlandajo and had installed him in the ducal palace. And young Buonarroti, uplifted and stimulated by this splendid patronage, had justified his noble patron's judgment. It was in this period of his adolescence that he produced his Centaurs, a work the consideration of which in after life caused him so profoundly to deplore that he should ever again have turned aside from sculpture to waste his time on painting. Yet it was during some of the time thus wasted that he painted the Sistine Chapel, and therein accomplished one of the artistic marvels of the ages. That, however, is a digression.

He was barely twenty when Lorenzo died. Piero de' Medici, who succeeded him, discovered in crudest materialism all that he required of life. There was an end to the patronage of artists in Florence. Michelangelo found himself out of employment. Casting about him, he lent an ear to the tales of the great opportunities afforded by the Papal Court under the prodigal and lavish Borgia Pontiff, and of the great interest in art that was being quickened in Rome by the excavations which were daily bringing such treasures of antiquity to light.

Lured by these stories, Buonarroti set out for the eternal city, armed with a letter of introduction from Piero de' Medici to Cardinal Sforza-Riario, who was widely famed as a dilettante, a collector, and a patron of the arts. Through the good offices of this exalted prince of the Church, Michelangelo hoped that he might reach even the foot of the papal throne.

So far, however, he had spent a month in vain solicitings, daily cooling his heels in the great man's antechamber whilst hoping ever more desperately for the audience in which he might present his letter, nauseated meanwhile by the atmosphere of the place and discussions upon art akin to that into which he had just been drawn. He began to realize that he was moving in a world of posturing dilettanti, of pretentious witlings, to whom mere performance in art was naught. True artistic greatness, perception and achievement, it seemed, were to be established only by a capacity for judging the work of others, and judgment usually was based upon standards that were wholly—almost it seemed deliberately—false.

Meanwhile, idleness and the wasted days began to fret him. Also he perceived that at this rate his meagre store of money would soon be exhausted. Therefore of late he had been turning his attention to immediate needs. He had modelled a dancing nymph, a thing of infinite grace and liveliness, although the subject was not perhaps one to which at that age he would naturally have turned. It afforded no scope for the vigorous anatomy which he loved to reproduce. The choice was entirely meretricious. He conceived that he fashioned something calculated to please these lascivious Romans, whose aesthetic sense had been emasculated by an excessive worship of smooth antiquities, particularly the Greek. He bore it—still in the clay, since in those days he had no workshop in which to effect the transmutation—to one Baldassare della Balza, who kept a shop on the Ripa Vecchia, overlooking Tiber.

Many times he had passed the shop, on his way to the Sforza-Riario place, in the Rione di Ponte, and invariably he had paused to study the sculptures exhibited, ancient and modern, in marble, in bronze, in lead, and some in baked clay. But this was the first time that he ventured to cross the threshold in his quality as a sculptor.

He was well received, his nymph commending him to one as shrewd and critical as Baldassare della Balza. This dealer, an untidy, gabardined, elderly man with long, greasy locks of grizzled hair, straggling beard and a pendulous nose that betrayed his Semitic origin, avoided confinement to a ghetto simply by proclaiming himself a Christian, and was left in peace to pursue his trade by the tolerant Roman government of Borgia days.

“The work is good—very, very good,” he deliberately and generously pronounced it. “So good that I do not know a sculptor working now who could do better. And that is much to say, particularly to so young a man. But if I buy . . .” —he spread his hands, and looked up with sorrowful eyes—“where shall I find me a buyer in my turn?”

To Michelangelo this seemed a foolish question.

“Surely among your patrons there will be some who know good work and desire to possess it. How else could you live and drive your trade?”

The little dealer answered him by a cackle of sardonic mirth. He swung round. From a shelf behind him he snatched a marble Hermes, standing some two feet high, and placed it on the table before the young artist.

“Is not that a thing of beauty?” he demanded. “Is it not good work?”

It was good work indeed, a figure not only of entrancingly graceful proportions but so full of arrested movement as to seem almost alive. Michelangelo’s admiring eyes devoured it, his long delicate fingers caressed it lovingly.

“Superb,” he murmured. “The work of a master, my friend.”

“Of one who will become a master,” the dealer corrected. “At present he is young, like yourself, able and eager, gifted with wit to invent, eyes to see, and fingers to reproduce—a great artist, a great craftsman. His name is Torrigiano. If he lives that name will one day be famous.”

“If he lives?” quoth Michelangelo.

“Just so. If he does not meanwhile die of starvation, as well he may. Eleven months has this lovely thing stood in my shop. To each of my patrons in turn have I shown it—to the great Cardinal Ascanio, to the Princess of Squillace, to the Lord of Mirandola, who has great taste and knowledge, to the young Duke of Gandia, to Cardinal Sforza-Riario, who prides himself upon his judgment and whose collection of sculpture is the greatest in Rome. I have implored them to offer me any price in reason. But . . . this thing of beauty

remains to grace my shop, whilst a hundred inferior things are sold, simply because they are old—antiquities dug out of the earth. I tell you, sir, there is no vision among these collectors. Men have gone mad in this matter of antiquities; they have lost all sense of real values. Over these remains of other days they wax lavishly and indiscriminately enthusiastic, and the work of young artists like yourself, even when it is as good as this your nymph or this noble Hermes, remains neglected and despised.” Contempt increased in Baldassare’s voice. “The truth is, they know nothing, these people, and their ignorance leers foolishly through their pretence of knowledge. I am sorry, my young sir. Your nymph is worthy to stand beside this Hermes; but it would stand beside it just as idly. If I cannot sell the one, be sure that I could not sell the other.”

Michelangelo departed sick at heart and in some indignation; he was angry with these empty, pretentious Romans; angry with himself that he should have left Florence merely to be lectured upon art by the fools who thronged the antechamber of the illustrious Sforza-Riario, that renowned patron of art who could pass indifferently by such a piece of work as the Hermes of Torrigiano. Clearly this man upon whose patronage Michelangelo had been depending could be no better than the rest, no better than those posturing clowns who chattered so glibly in his antechamber. To what end, then, he asked himself, did he remain in Rome? Above her gates for such as he should be inscribed the line of Dante’s above the gates of Hell: ‘Abandon every hope, O you that enter.’

Upon that bitter thought he suddenly checked, there in the narrow unpaved street. And then upon another thought that was born of it, he swung round, and went in great strides back to the shop of Baldassare.

“Sir,” he asked, “has it never occurred to you in the pursuit of this trade of yours, that fools were born into the world to be turned to account by men of worth?”

Baldassare smiled gently as he rubbed his plump hands. “I have suspected it,” he confessed. “Sometimes even I may have found my profit in it. What then?”

Instinctively Michelangelo drew nearer and lowered his voice. Anger and scorn vibrated in his every word. But of those emotions Baldassare took little heed. Emotion he knew to be unprofitable. To the actual matter of the young artist’s utterance, however, his mind was entirely given, and as he listened he continued to smile and to rub his hands, occasionally nodding his approval.

“What a dealer you would have made had not the good God made you a sculptor,” Baldassare commended him when at last they parted, and than this the little Jew could hardly have bestowed higher praise upon him.

But since Michelangelo did not see eye to eye with him in this, he had no thought of quitting the precarious path of art for the more secure ways of trade; and as week succeeded week, he was still daily to be seen in the antechamber of Cardinal Sforza-Riario, awaiting that interview which it seemed would never be vouchsafed him. And almost daily was he baited by the Cardinal’s nephew and those other elegant loungers. But he had grown inured to their veiled taunts and open sneers. He smiled, and rarely troubled to strike back, nor was anger ever more than momentarily kindled in those great dark eyes of his.

One day a life-sized Antinous made its appearance—a new acquisition of the Cardinal’s of which he was so inordinately proud that he proposed for a season to leave it in his ante-room, where it could be more generally seen and admired than in the gallery set apart for his collection.

Michelangelo came to admire it with the rest, but soberly, without transports such as all were indulging. Messer Gianluca delivered to the young artist, and to all the others who stood respectfully listening, a lengthy and learned dissertation upon the aesthetics of the work.

In the end he turned to Buonarroti.

“And what,” he asked, with that faint sneering superior smile of his, “is your own judgment, Messer the sculptor?”

“It is very beautiful,” was the quiet answer. “Indeed its fault is that it is too beautiful.”

“Its fault?” Gianluca’s voice grew shrill. “Can excess of perfection be a fault?”

“Excess of perfection is always a fault,” Michelangelo dogmatized. “There is no vice so horrible as excess of virtue.”

“You deliver the treasures of your judgment in the form of paradoxes. Their meaning may well elude such humble wits as ours.” An approving purr commended the suavity of Messer Gianluca’s sarcasm.

“I’ll endeavour to be plain. This thing is beautiful, but as a woman is beautiful rather than a man. It is of an exceeding smoothness. The delineation of the anatomy is without force. The face is perfect; too perfect for significance; a man with so lovely a countenance may be a beast, or a fool, or both; he can hardly be aught else. Is that what the sculptor intended? I doubt it. The limbs lack vigour; the musculature is too vague; they are a woman’s limbs.”

“Ah, but listen, listen all, I beg!” shrilled Gianluca. “An artistic Daniel is delivering judgment. And his canon, it seems, is that art is to express only brawn and thews.”

Sycophantic laughter drowned Michelangelo’s answer, and drove him in anger from the place. For a whole day he fumed, fingering the hilt of his dagger, and in imagination enjoying the delight of thrusting the blade into Gianluca’s windpipe. Violence he swore was the only argument to use with these imbeciles, never suspecting how well Gianluca’s mockery was serving him at that very moment. For the young man, flushed with the victory he accounted his own in that wordy encounter, went with the tale of it to his illustrious uncle. Into the ear of His Excellency—the title of Eminence had not yet come into use—he poured the absurd story of this presumptuous young Florentine who haunted the cardinalial threshold in the hope of audience. He spoke almost with heat of the man’s egregious vanity, of his effrontery, so great that he dared to pronounce an adverse judgment upon the matchless Antinous. Together uncle and nephew laughed over the man’s ridiculous pretensions—as interpreted by Gianluca.

“Decidedly,” said the Cardinal, “I must receive this fellow. It may be amusing, and it is possible that I may afford him artistic salvation.”

And so when next, in accordance with his habit, the young Florentine lounged into that now too familiar antechamber, a chamberlain in black velvet advanced to inquire was he Messer Michelangelo Buonarroti of Florence, bearer of a letter to the illustrious Cardinal Sforza-Riario from Duke Piero? And when young Buonarroti, a little sceptical of this sudden conclusion of his purgatorial term, eagerly acknowledged the identity, he was respectfully ushered into a small room, with gilded walls and an ultramarine ceiling, lighted by a single window beside which there was a richly carved writing pulpit. At this was seated the illustrious Cardinal—a tall, thin man whose countenance derived asceticism from its startling pallor. The story ran that, present at the murder of Giuliano de’ Medici in the Cathedral of Florence, he had been permanently stricken white with

horror.

His narrow eyes looked with assumed benignity upon this young sculptor, who bent the knee to him. He held out a white emaciated hand, on which glowed the sapphire of his rank, and Michelangelo humbly kissed it as his duty was.

“I have just learnt from my nephew Gianluca of the long trial of your patience here,” said a cold, level voice. “I should earlier have been informed of your presence.”

Michelangelo, mumbling amiabilities, proffered his letter. Motioning his visitor to rise, the Cardinal broke the seal, and spread the sheet. He reclined in his capacious, high-backed chair to read the commendations of Duke Piero, and as he read his thin lips curled a little. When he looked over the top of the sheet at the young artist, there seemed a certain wistfulness in his glance.

“His Magnificence here speaks of you as a young man of whose great talents his exalted father Lorenzo had a very high opinion.”

“I had the honour to work in the ducal palace for three years, Excellency.”

The Cardinal smiled a little and sighed. “You realize that from Florence—the Florence of Lorenzo de’ Medici—to curial Rome it is a far cry in matters of art; that what there may be accounted masterly is here often considered elementary, especially in these days when the antiquities that are being brought to light are serving us as a school for the education of our sense of beauty.”

With difficulty Michelangelo repressed a sneer. Here was the same cant that came to nauseate him on every hand. Here, indeed, as he should have known, was one of the very fountains of that cant. He attempted no answer, but waited for the Cardinal to proceed.

“The Duke writes that you are both painter and sculptor.”

“As a painter,” the youth replied abruptly, “I may not be of much account. I do not think I am. There are many better.”

“Ah!” A smile distended the thin lips in that white face which Michelangelo was finding odious. “And as a sculptor?”

“As a sculptor I am not ashamed of what I do, and I am artist enough to know of what I should be ashamed. It is as a sculptor that I offer myself to your lordship, whose discrimination in art is so well and widely known. If here at the court of the Holy Father . . .”

A white hand waved him into silence.

“I have warned you, sir, that the standards here are high. You are still very young and will lack experience.”

“Artists, my lord, are created by God, not by experience. By this I mean that the artist is born.”

A momentary annoyance under that retort flashed from the Cardinal’s eyes. But at once he subdued it, and his answer was coldly smooth.

“I think the assertion has been made before. Or something like it: *Poeta nascitur, non fit*. Perhaps you remember. But come.” The tall figure, clad from head to heel in flowing scarlet, rose abruptly. “Whether or not it may lie in my power to find you employment, you shall not be utterly at the loss of the time you have spent here. Let me show you my collection of sculpture. It is the most perfect and ample collection in Rome, which is to say in the world. To behold it is an education in itself, my friend. Come.”

Familiarly now he took the young man by the arm, and conducted him to a door at the opposite end of the room, where an usher waited. The man opened for them, and they

passed into a long gallery lighted along its length by tall windows that looked upon the inner courtyard of the palace. Facing these windows stood ranged along the gallery from end to end the treasures of sculpture which Sforza-Riario had assembled at the price of several princely fortunes. In all that collection there was little that was modern. It was composed almost entirely of pieces brought from Greece and of others excavated in Rome, in which the Greek influence was strong.

Slowly they moved along the gallery, the Cardinal discharging the office of showman, and discoursing at length upon the beauty of each work in turn, pointing out those subtle virtues of execution perceptible only to the initiate's eye. Here it was the fall of a drapery, there the vigour of a limb, there the modelling of a face, and there the liveliness of the attitude that he desired his guest to observe. And Michelangelo observed faithfully as he was bidden, swallowed his resentment of this patronage of himself, an artist, by one who in the world of art held no place save as a buyer. Since he offered no comment, the Cardinal began to assume that the young man's arrogance was being properly humbled.

"You are silent, my friend."

"I am listening to Your Magnificence," was the bland reply.

"Oh, and something more. Confess that you stand abashed in the presence of such beauty. And well you may, for I venture to assert that there is no man living to-day capable of producing any single piece that adorns this gallery."

"There are certainly not many," the sculptor agreed.

"There is none, my friend. None. Believe me. I know. Not for nothing have I devoted my life to the contemplation and study of art. What I tell you of art, you may believe."

They had come midway down the gallery, and they were standing before a slim boyish figure in old marble that was stained and darkened by the salts of the earth in which it must have lain for centuries. It was less than life size, presenting a stripling whose limbs were just beginning to assume virility and strength. The figure was curiously poised, one knee touching the ground, the head tilted aside, the left hand clenched and held at arm's length, the right in line with it but at the level of the cheek. About the lovely face—almost too virile for so young a body—the hair clustered in thick short curls.

Michelangelo's eyes had quickened with sudden interest the moment they beheld it, and this the Cardinal had perceived.

"Aha!" he laughed. "You begin to profit, I see. You begin to discern perfection for yourself."

The artist wheeled to face him, his eyes glowing, his face flushed. He found the dilettante's insolence ludicrous.

"What . . . what does it represent?" he asked.

"Cupid. A Kneeling Cupid. Not Cupid as any of your moderns would represent him, round, shapeless and chubby; but a clean-limbed, active Cupid, a miracle, as you see, of grace and vigour. He is kneeling, you observe, in the act of taking aim. The bow has gone—lost. But it is not missed; almost, indeed, can you see it, so perfect is the poise of the arms, the expression of the hands."

"And your Excellency says that it is old, this—an antiquity?" quoth Michelangelo in a voice that was small as if awed.

The Cardinal stared at him, annoyed by his stupidity. A faint smile of disdain overspread his white face.

"Look at it," he commanded. "And take your answer from the figure itself. As your

experience widens you will come to understand that no sculptor since Phidias could have wrought so lovely a thing. Consider it, examine it closely. I promise you that it will bear inspection.” Sighing, he placed a hand upon the young man’s shoulder. “When you, my young friend, can make something that is even remotely comparable with this, you may depend upon me to set your feet upon the road to fortune.”

Again the young sculptor swung to confront the great patron, and his rugged face was pale under its tan.

“Your Excellency makes me that promise?”

His Excellency smiled his tolerance of this youthful impetuosity. “I have made it.”

“Then by your gracious leave I shall claim its fulfilment at once.”

The Cardinal looked down his nose.

Michelangelo answered the look. “I have at home a piece of clay that your lordship will confess to be no whit inferior to this marble.”

Sforza-Riario permitted himself a gentle laugh. “You have in abundance the modern quality of assurance, young sir. Almost I might say, of effrontery. But I’ll indulge you. Bring me your clay, and let us see this modelling of which you boast so confidently.”

Michelangelo departed on that errand, and the Cardinal went to laugh first to himself and later with his nephew over the presumption of this young Florentine.

“I had thought,” he said, “to chasten and educate him by a display of my treasures. Instead . . .”

“They are all the same, these moderns,” answered Gianluca. “Ignorant, crude in their work and self-sufficient in their estimate of it. They need humbling.”

The Cardinal nodded. “It is a duty, and a duty that I shall not shrink from performing.”

“Let me be present,” pleaded Gianluca. But the Cardinal, having considered, shook his head. “That were too uncharitable.”

And so when the sculptor and a couple of lads he had procured to assist him came staggering under the burden of a figure swathed in sackcloth, the Cardinal was alone to receive him. Michelangelo begged, and the Cardinal indulgently consented, that he should uncover his figure in the gallery itself, alongside that of the Cupid with which it challenged comparison.

Smiling, the Cardinal accompanied him. Smiling, he stood by whilst Michelangelo, having dismissed his assistants, breathing heavily and perspiring freely, removed the sackcloth. But when the clay figure was suddenly revealed, the smile perished on the Cardinal’s white face. He craned his neck; his brows were drawn together, and some three or four times his narrow eyes glanced from clay to marble and from marble to clay in a bewilderment that was tinged with anger. For saving that the material of which each was fashioned was different, no slightest difference was discernible between the two. In every line and lineament the marble was the very counterpart of the clay.

A dull flush suffused His Excellency’s pallid sunken cheeks. His voice was harsh.

“What imposture is here?”

Michelangelo was no whit abashed.

“The imposture that was necessary to convince dilettanti that at least one artist lives who may measure himself against antiquity, who need not fear comparison with Phidias. It was Phidias Your Magnificence named, I think. No sculptor since Phidias, you said, could have wrought so lovely a thing. And yet, with these two hands I wrought it. I.” And he laughed as he thrust forward those vigorous hands of his for the great man’s inspection.

“You wrought it?” The Cardinal’s voice shrilled upwards, whilst his shaking hand was pointing to the marble. “You—you fashioned that Cupid? Buffoon! Impostor! What are you saying? That statue has lain in the earth perhaps a thousand years. It was excavated . . .”

“From Baldassare della Balza’s garden, where I had buried it not even a thousand hours before. All the demand in Rome is for antiquities. There is no beauty save in antiquities. To live, therefore, I must supply antiquities. And I can supply them. There are dyes and salts that in a few days will act upon marble as would mother earth in the course of centuries. The Cupid’s missing bow I broke off when the modelling was completed. Does your Excellency still doubt? Then look at this.” He tilted the clay figure and pointed to an inscription on the base—a single word in Greek characters. “Aggelos—for Angelo: Michael-Angelo. My signature for this occasion. You’ll find the same upon the base of the marble if Your Excellency will look.”

But His Excellency did not need to look. Evidence enough did he possess already, and in his deep mortification he appeared to shrink under the artist’s smiling eyes. It was some time before he found his voice. At last, “I have been swindled,” he choked, “swindled by that rascal Baldassare.”

“Deceived, perhaps, my lord. Not swindled.”

“What do you say? And the difference, then?”

“Why, to be swindled is to be brought by false pretences to pay for an object more than it is worth; and this Your Excellency has not done, whatever you may have paid. To be deceived is to be led to believe what is untrue. And here even the deception is no more than partial: it concerns only the age of the work, and not its merit, which is at least equal to the best among these pieces of antiquity.”

The Cardinal gasped. “My God! Your modesty!”

“Truth,” said Michelangelo, “is greater than modesty. And yourself has said that no sculptor since Phidias could have wrought so lovely a thing.”

Sforza-Riario glared at him with unmistakable dislike. “You do not, by any chance, presume to amuse yourself? If you think that you have me at a disadvantage, let me warn you . . .”

“Excellency!” the sculptor interrupted him. It was a cry of pained protest. “Could I conceive so base a thought? What grounds, even, could exist for it?”

“Grounds?” The Cardinal shook with passion. His very articulation was blurred: “Do you play the innocent? Are there not grounds enough in the mere fact that a sham has been imposed upon me? Upon a man of my acknowledged judgment?”

“In what, then, is your lordship’s judgment at fault? You perceived in this Cupid a work of such uncommon excellence as to be worthy of a place in your unrivalled collection; and so, naturally, you acquired it. If hitherto your collection has been confined to pieces from antiquity, that surely is only because in modern work you had found nothing worthy to stand beside them. But now, having discovered a sculpture which your lordship recognizes that no man since Phidias could have wrought, could you possibly have forgone its acquisition?” Almost slyly he added: “Is not that how your lordship will account to the world for an innovation which cannot but increase your lordship’s credit?”

Sforza-Riario was almost startled by this indication of a door for his escape from a situation which if published in its bald veracity must cover him with ridicule. He perceived how easily he might snatch triumph from this defeat. But because he perceived

that at the same time he must procure an even greater triumph for this audacious young Florentine who had cozened him, the glance that pondered Michelangelo lost nothing of its malevolence.

When at last his sombre eyes shifted again to the Cupid, his Excellency assumed a musing tone. "What you say is certainly true. My judgment has nowise been at fault. Nor was it necessary to practise upon me this deception." A little colour stirred in his pallid cheeks, and he spoke with a sudden vehemence which Michelangelo judged to be histrionic. "What I find it hard to forgive is that instead of bringing me your Cupid openly, like an honest man, you should have had recourse to this duplicity in order to draw my attention to your wares. That, sir, was an insulting lack of confidence in my judgment."

"Your lordship does me less than justice. It was not I, but Baldassare, who sold you the piece. It was not to you that I bade him sell it, but to any who would buy. Alas, my lord! For three months now I have been in Rome, hoping for audience, and I had to choose between working and starving. So I did the work that Baldassare found saleable. When your lordship considers that starvation was my only alternative, you will not, of your great charity, publish me a swindler or allow the world to know what I was driven by necessity to do."

The Cardinal's keen eyes were veiled. His white face became void of expression. "It would be no less than you deserve," he said.

"Surely, my lord, too harsh a punishment in its results. For it would render impossible the fulfilment of your lordship's promise."

"Promise? What promise, fellow?"

"Can your lordship have forgotten? Your words were that when I could make something comparable with this Kneeling Cupid you would set my feet upon the road to fortune."

"And you have the audacity still to hope for that?" growled the prelate.

"Not if it should become known that I had any part in this fraud of Baldassare's. That is why I pray that it may not be known. It would make it impossible, for instance, for your lordship to present me to the Holy Father."

Sforza-Riario breathed noisily. Nor was he acting now. "To the Holy Father!" His lips writhed. "That is your price, is it?"

Michelangelo's dark eyes were opened wide in guilelessness. "My price, my lord? My price for what?"

"For your silence upon what has happened."

"My silence! O, my lord, should I, then, be so rash as to achieve my own ruin by speaking of it?"

Gloomily and at length the Cardinal pondered him. He conceived that he had to deal with craftily enshrouded blackmail; for it was not so much the ruin of the sculptor that would result from a full disclosure as the submerging in ridicule of his own cherished reputation as an authority upon art.

His compressed lips parted at last and forced a smile. "Enough!" He waved a delicate hand towards the Kneeling Cupid. "You have certainly fulfilled your part," he admitted on a sigh. "Tomorrow," he added abruptly, "I shall present you to His Holiness."

Michelangelo bowed low. "Upon the recommendation of so exalted a judge I cannot doubt that the Holy Father will find employment for my talents."

"That is assured, sir."

The Florentine bowed again. "Have I leave to go, my lord?"

Sforza-Riario waved him away. "Go. Go with God," he said, much as he might have said, "Go to the devil."

In the act of swathing his clay model Michelangelo paused. "One last favour, my lord. Would you tell me how much you paid Baldassare for that marble?"

The figure which the Cardinal mentioned betrayed the sculptor into a muttered oath. It had the effect of restoring to Sforza-Riario some of his lost humour. "I gather," said he tartly, "that I am not the only one whom Baldassare has swindled over this."

"That is so," said Michelangelo. "But to take permanent advantage of me one must be exceedingly alert."

"I can well believe it," the great man sighed, and on that they parted, if not exactly friends, most certainly accomplices.

That evening Michelangelo took his way to the little dealer's shop on the Ripa Vecchia.

"Olà, Baldassare you rogue, I have found you out. You sold the Kneeling Cupid to Cardinal Sforza-Riario for five thousand ducats. Don't forswear yourself, you scoundrel. I have it from the Cardinal's own lips. Don't interrupt me. Our compact was to share equally in the spoil, and you swore to me that all you had was a thousand ducats. You deserve that I should strangle you, you thief. Instead I'll trouble you for the two thousand ducats you owe me, and another thousand by way of compensation for the swindle."

Baldassare, who would sooner part with blood than money, screamed in fury. "The devil take your Florentine impudence! Am I to work for nothing, then?"

"You are to work for what was agreed; and so I'll have my two thousand ducats and another thousand so as to teach you to be honest in the future."

"Oho! Oho! That's how you crow, is it? And what if I refuse? What then, eh?"

"In that case I shall go straight to Cardinal Sforza-Riario and confess the imposture we have jointly practised. You'll be made to disgorge; you'll certainly be gaoled; you may even be given the hoist; and you'll probably be hanged."

Baldassare was astute; but not astute enough to gauge human vanity as accurately as Michelangelo, or to perceive that this vanity afforded him a safe shield from any such reprisals. So for all that he gibbered and danced in rage, yet he yielded to this young sculptor whose feet had been firmly planted by his wits upon the road to that fortune which his talents merited.

BY ANCIENT CUSTOM

THE SIRE Tristan de Belœil standing upon the threshold of Eternity considered perhaps for the first time since his birth, twenty-five years earlier, how much there was in life which could not be left without regret.

Well-born and well-dowered in fortune as in body, the world's best gifts had lain within his easy reach and there had been on his part no reluctance in making them his own, or niggardliness in using them.

The priest who had been sent to shrive him, and who had just departed, might be correctly informed in the matter of the Hereafter, which he had described in such alluring terms. But it seemed to the Sire Tristan that the priest took a good deal for granted; and for his own part he was content enough with the world of men, and would prefer to continue in it, postponing until much later the enjoyment of the delights of Paradise to which the hangman was to dispatch him in the morning.

He leaned on the stone sill of the solidly-barred window of his prison in the Gravensteen of Ghent, and contemplated the sunset. He was not likely to contemplate another, since only the powers of Joshua could postpone the doom which its circling would bring him in the next twelve hours. He took his head in his hands, thrusting his fingers deep into his golden mane, and so far forgot the admirable stoicism which had hitherto supported him as to permit himself a sob. Never had life seemed so sweet and desirable as now that by the justice of the great Duke of Burgundy he was to be deprived of it. This justice, he held, had been too harshly administered by the Ducal Lieutenant. He was prepared to admit that a certain severity may be expedient in legislating for a subject people, especially when they are as stubborn and turbulent as those of Ghent who had given the Duke trouble almost from the very hour of his accession. But even a Ducal Lieutenant should not disregard the claims which the laws of honour make upon a gentleman of birth; and tolerance should be shown whenever these laws are in conflict with no less arbitrary ducal enactments. It was true that the Sire Tristan had grievously wounded a man, and equally true that deeds of blood were of all offences those which Ducal Lieutenants, operating so briskly with sack and cord throughout the Duke's wide dominions, were instructed to punish most rigorously. But, after all, this had been no act of brigandage or scoundrel violence. He had fought honourably with Conrad van der Schuylen, and it was monstrous that he should be required to pay for it by dying a felon's death.

Yet if the Ducal Lieutenant of Ghent—the wooden-faced Sire de Vauvenargues—had confined himself in his judgment to the naked fact and taken no account of its clothing circumstances, the fault was largely the Sire Tristan's own. He had stubbornly refused to inform the court of the grounds of the quarrel, arrogantly claiming that he was within his rights to engage in single combat whenever honour should demand it.

“How,” the Ducal Lieutenant had asked him, not unreasonably, “are we to judge that honour demanded it in this instance unless you disclose the grounds upon which you quarrelled?”

The Sire Tristan, however, would not yield the point. “It is a gentleman's right to

quarrel upon any grounds he pleases. The present grounds are such as I cannot publish without committing a disloyalty. It is in your knowledge that I did not fall upon Messire van der Schuylen unawares, like an assassin; therefore you cannot deal with me as with a common murderer.”

But the court showed him that it could. If he would not defend himself in what the court accounted proper terms, the court must assume that he had no proper defence. Van der Schuylen’s turn would come later when and if he recovered sufficiently to stand his trial. Perhaps he would be less obstinate. Perhaps he would have less cause so to be. Thus the Ducal Lieutenant, who thereupon proceeded calmly to pass sentence of death upon the Sire Tristan de Belœil as an example to all men who might be disposed to practise turbulence within the ducal dominions.

The Sire Tristan was sprung from a family of much consequence, and this family exerted itself vigorously, urging its ancient blood as a last plea why execution should be stayed until appeal could be made to the Duke’s Highness in person. But the Ducal Lieutenant met this plea with that monstrous falsehood of all time that in the eyes of the law all men are equal, and that, therefore, no appeal to the Duke could avail. Thereafter, an advocate had arisen in the grey justice chamber of the Gravensteen to offer on behalf of some person or persons unnamed to ransom the prisoner by the payment of any reasonable fine which the Ducal Lieutenant might see fit to impose as an alternative.

He was curtly informed that the justice of Burgundy was not for sale, and the Sire Tristan was conducted back to his prison, there to prepare himself for his end. He was not even to have the satisfaction of knowing what generous friend had sent that advocate before the court with his mysterious offer. For although the Sire Tristan possessed many friends, yet he could think of none whose love for him would have gone to quite such lengths. The failure of that attempt had closed the last door on hope, and nothing now remained but to prepare himself for to-morrow’s grim journey with the best courage he could command.

They kept him waiting next day until noon, thereby subjecting him to a torment of hope. He perceived the reason when at last they brought him forth from the palace-fortress which once had been the castle of the Counts of Flanders, and conducted him through the mean alleys of the Oudeburg to the great square where the scaffold was erected in the shadow of that Belfry regarded by the burghers as the monument of their power and wealth. The Ducal Lieutenant had chosen the hour when the noon bell summoned the forty thousand weavers of Ghent from their looms to the mid-day meal. They were a turbulent, stubbornly independent class, these weavers, ever ready in defence of liberty to exchange the shuttle for the club or the pike. Their numbers and cohesion made them formidable, wherefore the Sire de Vauvenargues deemed it well to miss no opportunity of intimidating them by a display of the iron hand of Burgundy. The hour of deserted looms was deliberately chosen so that all Ghent might be free to witness this operation of Burgundian justice upon a well-born disturber of the peace.

Under a strong guard of archers, upon the breasts of whose white surcoats was displayed the Burgundian badge of the St. Andrew’s Cross, came the Sire Tristan de Belœil marching briskly to his doom. He carried himself erect, his face composed, if pale, and he had dressed himself in his best as if for a bridal, accounting that his birth and blood demanded that he should make as brave a show as possible on this his last appearance.

His pourpoint was of red velvet, tapering gracefully to the waist, laced in gold across

the wedge of snowy undergarment showing at the breast; his hose was parti-coloured, red and white, his long boots of fine red Spanish leather turned over at the tops.

Beholding him so young and so comely, so elegant and so intrepid, the crowd was moved to general compassion, whilst here and there the feeling became allied with indignation that he should suffer a felon's death for a deed which no equitable justice would have regarded as felonious.

The Sire Tristan was bareheaded, and the abundant hair which hung to the nape of his neck was so lustrously golden that an aureole of light seemed to glow about it as it reflected the sunlight of that fair April noon. This was observed by some and pointed out as a portent, a sign of heavenly grace, a prognostic of beatitude to be earned him by his approaching martyrdom. A woman was the first to voice it.

"There is a nimbus about his head!" she cried. "It is a sign!"

Another took up the cry and amplified it: "There is a throne awaiting him in Heaven, the dear young saint."

Why, this assurance growing amongst them, they should have desired to prevent the Sire Tristan, for whom there was certainly no throne on earth, from at once fulfilling so splendid a celestial destiny, is not immediately apparent. But crowds are moved by emotion; and emotion is rarely the friend of logic. The people began to mutter, to protest against this hanging, and, at last, to jostle and hinder the archers of the guard, so that these were forced to employ their staves in order to thrust back the press and open a way to the gallows.

The Sire de Vauvenargues, looking on from a balcony of the Stadhuis, began to ask himself if, after all, he had been wise in deliberately choosing an hour when the streets were thronged. If a riot were to ensue his harsh master, the Duke, would ask a stern account of him for the event and the dispositions which had made it possible. There was, however, no riot. Before the uncompromising attitude of the Burgundian archers and the resolute wielding of their staves, the crowd permitted prudence to override compassion. Had the Sire Tristan been a Ghenter it might have fallen out differently. But he was comparatively a stranger there, a gentleman of Hainault, and, after all, there was no reason why men of Ghent should get their heads broken on behalf of a Hainaulter, however young, comely and deserving of sympathy. They left him, therefore, to the protection of a Heaven which had already placed about his golden head that startling mark of favour. Heaven, however, showed no sign of intervening to prolong the young man's earthly life, for with his monkish companion he reached the foot of the scaffold and mounted its wooden steps. The Ducal Lieutenant, looking on from his balcony, was relieved.

Under the shadow of the cross-beam, from which the noosed rope of yellow hemp was dangling ominously, the Sire Tristan stood to address the people, as was the right of every man in his extremity. His face was grey; the brave smile on his lips was stiff, frozen and lifeless. Neither could his mind conceive nor his lips articulate any valedictory words for the people upon whom a hush of piteous attention had now fallen. But before the perception of his plight had time to arise, the general silence was broken by a cry, followed by a rapidly swelling and spreading hubbub.

It began at a corner of the square to the left of the Stadhuis, which the doomed man was facing, and appeared to have its source about a lady on a richly-caparisoned white horse, for whom a number of grooms were labouring to open a way through the crowd, a way which opened of itself rapidly enough and almost joyously once her identity became

known and her object—or at least some part of it—suspected.

She was the Lady Margaret of Saint-Gilles, the daughter of an opulent nobleman of Waes, and she shared the esteem and affection in which her father was held throughout Flanders, adding to it even by her own natural endowments. She was unknown to the Sire de Vauvenargues, who was a Burgundian lately brought from Dijon by the Duke and as yet unacquainted either with the persons or the customs of those to whom he dispensed justice in the Duke's name. But there was in her commanding beauty a passport to the favour of any man who was not withered to the marrow. And the Sire de Vauvenargues for all his cold austerity of manner and lean gravity of countenance, was still on the young side of fifty and far from destitute of gallantry. Disturbed though he might be again by these growing murmurs, yet the greater part of his attention at the moment was for this splendid figure in a trailing riding-dress of mulberry velvet, mounted on that richly-caparisoned horse, for which the grooms were opening a way in his direction. She carried her head proudly, he observed, and as she neared the low balcony he occupied, he was almost dazzled by the effulgence of the dark blue eyes glowing in a face as pale as ivory. Her head was crowned by the tall steeple-shaped herrin, from which floated a misty veil of blue, and a jewel of price gleamed in the black frontlet across her brow, as if to proclaim her rank.

When first the eyes of the Sire Tristan had beheld her, a tremor had run through his limbs, a tinge of colour had crept into his pallid cheeks and life had returned to his lacklustre gaze. It was as if the very sight of her had power to conquer his fear of death; as if all his consciousness were suddenly focused in his eyes, and seeing her, he saw nothing else, knew of nothing else.

The Captain of the Archers, standing behind him on the scaffold, had touched his shoulder and bidden him say his say, so that they might conclude the business and go home to dinner. The hangman and his valet had been growing impatient too. But now the attention of captain, of hangman and even of priest, like that of the multitude, was transferred from the doomed man to the lady on the white palfrey. The Sire Tristan had suddenly ceased to be the chief actor in this grim scene.

She had drawn rein immediately under that low balcony occupied by the Ducal Lieutenant, who, in his furred gown and chain of office, was attended by the Burgomaster van Genck and a group of officers. She lifted up her voice, a voice rich, sonorous and musical to match her splendid person.

“A boon, my Lord Lieutenant! I ask as a boon what by our ancient Flemish customs I have the right to claim; that I may be married to this man whom the Duke's justice is about to hang.”

It occurred then to Tristan de Belœil, who had missed no word of it, that all this was not real; that it was not happening at all; that he was still in his prison asleep and dreaming the incredible. The Sire de Vauvenargues, ignorant of those Flemish customs to which she appealed, may have had some similar thought. He flushed and scowled. It seemed to him that this request made a mock of his authority and of the justice of the Duke his master which should be executed with due solemnity of forms. He looked to right and to left, at the fat Burgomaster, grinning like an idol, at the frowning Burgundian captains and at the laughing, applauding people below. He turned to the lady with a curt contemptuous dismissal. But her beauty withered it on his lips. He contented himself with a cold announcement that what she asked was impossible.

Her answer by taking him too literally seemed further to exploit the mockery.

“Not so, my lord. There is a priest on the scaffold there to make it possible at once.” Pale she might be; but she was singularly firm. There was no tremor in her rich young voice, no faltering in the steady gaze of her deep blue eyes.

The Lieutenant’s voice came harsher now and more impatient. “The request is unexampled, an effrontery! You delay the Duke’s justice frivolously, Madame. It is outrageous!” Impulsively he raised his hand to signal to the Captain of the Archers, but found his arm caught in the grasp of the Burgomaster. Mynheer van Genck no longer grinned. His face was very grave, his eyes almost scared.

The laughter and applause below had suddenly changed to angry murmurs, which grew as they rippled through the ranks of the multitude. Clear above the inarticulate mutter of indignation came the shouted words:

“It is an honoured Flemish custom, Lord Lieutenant!”

“The Duke of Burgundy would not trample on our rights and privileges!”

“You are false to your trust, Lord Lieutenant, if you deny this lady!”

Despotic, cold and arrogant, the Sire de Vauvenargues might be; but he was not a fool; indeed, he was a man of some acuteness, else he would not have been raised by Charles of Burgundy to the eminence he occupied. He perceived himself confronted by something which he did not understand. He raised his hand for silence and patience, and was almost surprised by the readiness with which the signal was obeyed.

He turned for guidance to the Burgomaster.

“What is this, sir, of a custom, a right, a privilege?”

“It is as they tell you, my lord. It is an old Flemish custom which gives any woman the right to marry a doomed man on the scaffold, provided that he is marriageable.”

The Lieutenant’s lip curled. “A gruesome custom, faith! And a stupid one. What satisfaction lies in it?”

The Burgomaster shrugged and spread his podgy hands. “Can Your Excellency conceive of no case in which it would yield satisfaction?”

“With difficulty, my friend. But . . .” He shrugged in his turn, contemptuously. “I’ll not provoke a riot by refusing so barren a favour.” He leaned from the balcony. His harsh penetrating voice rang clear. “I bow to your Flemish privileges, Madame. Your request is granted in the Duke’s name. I beg that you will make haste, so that we may conclude the unhappy business upon which we are here.” He seemed to sneer as he spoke. But she took no heed of that. She thanked him shortly, and wheeled her horse about.

A lane opened readily enough through the crowd, and amid acclamations and laughter she came to alight at the foot of the scaffold and to mount its steps to where the Sire Tristan waited. He looked and felt as if he would swoon. He had been no paler when he stood beneath the rope to utter his last words. And now not even that stiff frozen smile which pride had dictated was to be seen upon his lips.

Gently, tenderly smiling, the Lady of Saint-Gilles confronted him. “Do you take me to wife, Sire Tristan?” she softly asked him, and thus seemed to increase his disorder.

His scared eyes sought her glance and fled from it; he made an almost convulsive movement of his arms. “Madame! Madame! Bethink you of yourself. I am not worthy that you should do this . . .”

“It is for me to be the judge of that. It is my wish. Will you deny me? Will you shame me by refusing me here before all these? That were to make me a byword for all the days

of my life.”

He lowered his head, his face flaming scarlet. Subduing his voice, so that only she might hear him, he made his almost agonized protest. “You should not . . .” he was beginning, when she interrupted him, sensing what he was about to say.

“Perhaps I should not.” Her voice was almost wistful now. “But it is done. I am committed to it.” A great sadness seemed to invest her. “Dismiss me if you will. . . .”

He fell on his knees before her there in the sight of all, and it was a spectacle that thrilled the audience. “Lady, it is my worthlessness is the only barrier.”

With one hand she raised him, with the other she beckoned forward the priest.

Messire Tristan protested no more. He could not make a mock of her by refusing this precious gift of herself which he knew she must offer out of pity for him.

Swiftly the vows were exchanged, the words of the nuptial blessing uttered, binding them irrevocably; and already, to the wild acclamations of the crowd, she was leading him by the hand towards the steps of the scaffold, when the Burgundian captain intervened.

“Gently, gently, lady!” His gauntleted hand closed upon the Sire Tristan’s arm. “You’ll leave your husband with us, if you please.”

The crowd perceived his action, those nearest even overheard his words, and he was answered instantly by a roar of fury from a thousand throats. Fists were shaken at him, weapons brandished, and at once the multitude surged forward like a tide to overwhelm the scaffold. Below, his well-trained archers, shoulder to shoulder, made a bulwark against which that first charge spent itself in vain. But other charges would follow which must overwhelm them. He did not understand, being like the Sire de Vauvenargues, a newcomer in these outlying Burgundian dominions. He raised his hand, and at the same time turned towards the Stadhuis balcony for instructions.

The crowd, perceiving this, trusting that orders would follow to correct this rash officer, paused and fell silent. At the head of the steps the Lady Margaret and her bridegroom stood arrested, waiting.

On the balcony the Sire de Vauvenargues was expressing his indignation to the Burgomaster.

“What is this? I accord the boon, I bow to your ridiculous Flemish custom and this is how your people requite me. If insubordination to the Duke’s . . .”

The Burgomaster interrupted him. There was almost a sly humour about the sleek little man.

“By your leave, my lord! I fear you have not quite understood. This old Flemish custom, to the exercise of which you so wisely consented, runs that a marriage-knot tied at the gallows rescues a doomed neck from the halter.”

“Ventredieu!” swore the Ducal Lieutenant in his amazement. Then his anger mounted again! “Why did you not tell me this?”

“I did not think there was the need. The inference seemed plain. What point else would there be in such a marriage?”

“Did you not hear me complain that I found it pointless? You have fooled me, sir. At least, you have tried to fool me. But I am not a man easily fooled, and Burgundian justice is not so easily cozened. That rascal hangs as surely as——”

“In God’s name!” The Burgomaster spoke in dread and horror. “You might have escaped a riot by firmness before. You cannot now. You might have refused to admit the custom. Having admitted it, you cannot trample upon it. You must perceive that, my lord.”

“I perceive that you mock me! I perceive that, by God!” He did, and for all the rage that set him white and quivering, he perceived something more. He perceived that he was on the horns of a dilemma. If he provoked a riot, as he must if he insisted now upon justice being done, he would anon have to face the anger of the Duke. If, submitting to this clamour, he suffered Burgundian justice to be set aside, he would similarly incur his master’s anger. Whatever happened now, the Duke would demand an account of him.

That was the situation into which this sly Burgomaster—the friend, of course, of all Flemish rogues—had manœuvred him. And then he saw light. It was not a bright or encouraging light. But it was the best that the circumstances left him. He would postpone execution whilst referring the whole matter to the Duke. Thus he would avoid, or appear in ducal eyes to avoid, some measure of this hideous responsibility now thrust upon him.

He swallowed his pride and arrogance so as to make the announcement in conciliatory terms.

He complained that he had not been aware of the full import of the custom when he gave his consent to the marriage. But, having given it, he could not do violence to Flemish privileges by insisting now upon the execution of the just sentence passed yesterday in his court upon the Sire Tristan de Belœil. Applause greeted the admission, and he was forced to pause until this had subsided before adding that, on the other hand, being no more than a servant and mouthpiece of His Highness the Duke of Burgundy, whose loyal faithful subjects they all were, it was not in his power to do violence to Burgundian justice by allowing the prisoner to go free.

He was interrupted again, this time by a storm of protests and even threats. When at last he was able to resume it was to make an even further immolation of his pride, by casting himself, as it were, upon the mercy of the people. He represented himself as a man in an extremely difficult situation, a situation indeed of such difficulty that it was beyond the power of his office to resolve it; wherefore he had no choice but to refer the whole matter to the Duke himself. He added, however, and quickly before they could again interrupt him, an assurance that in laying the matter before his Highness, he would himself plead the cause of the prisoner if it became necessary and urge observance of the Flemish custom to which appeal had been made. He could not think that the Duke would desire to violate it, but he dared not take the responsibility of acting upon that assumption. He closed his little oration in conciliatory words, which almost choked him, whereby again he cast himself upon their mercy.

Despite this unusual humility in a Ducal Lieutenant, he would not have won out of his difficulty so easily if the little Burgomaster who had so deliberately tricked him into it had not come now to his assistance by endorsing all that he had said, supporting his appeal and even adding a word of warning as to the consequences of any rioting. This warning, which, from the Ducal Lieutenant in such an hour would have had the effect of infuriating the people, was heeded by them because coming from their own Burgomaster. There were offensive and rebellious mutterings, it is true. But no resistance was offered to the removal of the prisoner under guard, and presently the people dispersed, the more speedily perhaps because the hour of dinner was already over-past.

That same afternoon the Ducal Lieutenant set out for Brussels with the Sire Tristan and an escort of fifty Burgundian lances. He submitted to the Lady Margaret’s insistence to attach herself and her attendants to his train, since it was not really in his power to prevent it. But he bore the Lady Margaret no love for the difficulty in which she had

placed him, and he refused her permission to communicate in any way with his prisoner, however much that same prisoner might now be her husband.

This was distressing not only to her, but also to the Sire Tristan, who was still all bemused and bewildered by the event, and who desired at least an opportunity of expressing his gratitude and some other things to her before they strung him up, as he was quite convinced that they would presently be doing.

Travelling swiftly they reached Brussels late that night, too late for audience. The Sire de Vauvenargues bestowed his prisoner in one of the dungeons of the Cour des Princes, where the Duke had his residence, quartered his men, and went to seek a lodging for himself in the palace. The Lady Margaret made shift for herself and her attendants at the Lion of Brabant, whither the Sire de Vauvenargues grudgingly undertook to send her word in the morning of the ducal decision.

Betimes next day he presented himself for the bad quarter of an hour which he had every reason to expect. He was introduced to the Duke's closet and received with a scowl such as that with which he, himself, was in the habit of intimidating suppliants.

"By what authority, sir, do you leave your government?" the Duke demanded before the Sire de Vauvenargues had time to speak.

He bent himself almost double. "I trust the case, when your Highness shall have heard it, will justify me."

"Is there a revolt among these mutinous Ghenters?" The Duke detested all Flemings, and of all Flemings he detested the Ghenters most, having had a taste of their insubordinate quality.

"There might have been had I not decided to seek the guidance of Your Highness."

"So, so!" The young prince heaved himself up. A man of middle height was this Charles of Burgundy, whom history knows as the Temerarious, powerfully built and swarthy of complexion which with the dark eyes and black hair advertised the Portuguese extraction of which he was so proud. His countenance might have been handsome but for the forward thrust of his aggressive jaw. He was dressed with sober richness, his pleated pourpoint of purple velvet latticed with gold across his breast, and he wore for only ornament the collar of the Golden Fleece about his sturdy neck. Harsh, impetuous, choleric of nature, the very suggestion of insubordination to his authority now put him in a passion, and he loosed it in threats of what he would do to make the Ghenters realize once for all that he was master. Thereafter he invited his Lieutenant to state the case.

Sire de Vauvenargues told his tale none too well. The Duke's manner did not help him. Therefore it was some little time before His Highness caught the drift of it. When at last he did, he laughed ferociously.

"So that the threatened revolt, then, was of your making, Sir Lieutenant?"

"Of my making, Highness! I did not know——"

"Just so. You did not know and had not the wit to inform yourself, nor indeed, it seems, the wit to discharge any part of your duties. First you choose to make a public show of this hanging, appointing for it the hour when the looms are deserted and all these turbulent weavers in the streets; then you pledge me to a crazy custom which makes a mock of my justice. But my justice, sir, is not to be mocked. So you will get you back to Ghent with your prisoner and there execute the sentence you passed upon him in my name."

The Lieutenant was aghast. "If I hang him, the Ghenters will certainly hang me

afterwards.”

“God give them joy of it,” said the Duke. “What else are you fit for?”

“Nothing else if Your Highness thinks so. But to hang me is, after all, in a sense to hang Your Highness, since I am Your Highness’s representative.”

The Duke merely sneered. “I could bear to be hanged by proxy. Indeed, it will be a satisfaction if you are the proxy. And it will give me the right to read these Ghenters the sharp lesson in submission which they appear to need. I will avenge you roundly. Be comforted by that.”

But the Sire de Vauvenargues saw no comfort in it. He was actually driven by the prospect to become in earnest the advocate of the Sire Tristan. “Highness, if I dare presume so far, since the error is committed, is it prudent, or . . . or . . . even expedient to allow the life of one man to . . . to . . .”

The glare of the Ducal eye brought him faltering into silence.

“It is not the life of a man that is in question. It is my authority. Don’t you see that you have placed me on the horns of a dilemma? Your blundering gives me to choose between a riot, perhaps a revolt, in Ghent, and the flouting of my laws. There can be no hesitation for me. This man of yours must hang whatever the consequences and in spite of all Flemish customs.” Then contemptuously he added: “Show me how to avoid it without weakness and I will overlook your wooden-headed blundering which is responsible.”

If the Sire de Vauvenargues felt, as many another has felt, that the service of princes is the service of the thankless, he choked the feeling down, and applied his wits to discovering a way of escape for himself.

“If, Highness,” he suggested, “in your revision of the case, you were to discover that my sentence had been unduly severe, there would no longer be any question of pardoning the offender or bowing to any custom. Both would be avoided. Your Highness would simply cancel my sentence and reprimand me.”

The Duke raised his black brows; his eyes gleamed momentarily from some inward quickening. Then he was frowning again.

“Tell me this man’s offence again,” he commanded. “Let me understand it clearly.”

Nothing could have been clearer than the account the Lieutenant had already rendered. And all that he could now do was to repeat it. When he had done so there followed a long pause whilst the Duke’s dark eyes pondered him inscrutably. Suddenly they blazed, and his harsh voice was raised.

“By St. George!” he swore. “And do you sentence men of birth to death in Ghent upon no better grounds?” He raged on from that, heaping invective upon the head of the unfortunate Lieutenant, who could not be sure whether His Highness was snatching at a pretext to avoid the real issue, and merely acting, or whether he was sincere. In this doubt he found it necessary to defend himself.

“The orders of Your Highness left me no doubt or choice——”

“Will you argue with me, wooden-head?” The Duke’s fury lashed him. “Get you back to Ghent, and remember what I have said. I will deal myself with this prisoner of yours.”

The Sire de Vauvenargues went out backwards, thankful to make his escape, convinced that the Duke’s anger was so much make-believe, and more persuaded than ever that the service of princes was as thankless as it was perilous.

The Sire Tristan de Belœil, brought before the Duke, was clearly informed that His Highness, having sifted the matter of his offence, had reached the conclusion that in the

sentence passed upon him the Ducal Lieutenant in Ghent had used him with excessive rigour. It was because of this, and because of this only, and not out of deference to any plaguy Flemish customs—and the Sire Tristan was desired to publish the matter widely upon his return to Ghent, lest a misunderstanding of the facts might lead others into error—that he was permitted to go free and rejoin the lady who had perhaps rashly taken him to husband.

That lady the Sire Tristan found at the Lion of Brabant when presently he came there, conducted by one of her attendants who had lain in wait for him in the courtyard of the Cour des Princes. Of all the trials and anxieties that had been his since he was sentenced, this was by no means the least he was called upon to face. He entered her presence in trepidation. She rose in a trepidation still deeper to receive him.

For a long moment they just stared at each other across the width of the room in which they found themselves alone together.

“Madame,” he said, between plaintiveness and reproach, “why have you done this?”

“Surely, surely, sir, the reason is plain.” She was still a little short of breath; but her words came glibly, almost as a lesson learnt by heart. “It is in the consequences. To save your life. I know I forced it upon you. You could not humiliate me by preferring the hangman’s knot to mine. You were too gallant for that. But I hoped that the sweetness of life itself would make amends. That you would choose to avoid the bitterness of death at any price.”

“At any price!” he echoed, with a little twisted smile on his pale lips. “Yes. At any price to myself. But not at any price to you, Madame.”

He saw her eyes quicken at that, saw the flush that crept into her pallid cheeks. “But if I was glad to pay the price?”

At that he fell to trembling. “It is not possible, Madame.”

“Is it not?” She laughed a little, but sadly. “Does it need that I tell you what it was that urged me to save your life; or are you under the impression that I make a habit of rescuing men from the gallows by marrying them?” She paused. “Although I am your reluctantly espoused wife, I beg that you will spare me a deeper avowal.”

He gazed, bewildered, at this lovely lady whom he had silently worshipped in the past, between whom and himself hitherto no single word of love had ever been uttered. She hung her head, her trouble deepened by his silence.

“I cannot have done you a great wrong,” she murmured. “At least you have your life. Surely it is better to live even in a wedlock that is not of your own choosing than not to live at all. I beg—I implore that you will do me the charity to say at least so much.”

What he said was something very different. “You knew,” he asked her, “why I was to have been hanged?”

She looked at him, a puzzled frown between her fine brows. “Because you wounded Messire van der Schuylen in an irregular duel which had no proper witnesses.”

“Ah yes. But why I fought him?”

“How could I know that, since you refused to disclose it even at your trial? It was your silence that provoked your sentence.”

He smiled now, and advanced a little. “You do not ask. Have you no curiosity? It was because he spoke lightly of you, Madame.”

It was her turn to tremble. He saw the colour fade again from her cheeks, the widening stare of her eyes and the tumult at her breast. “Of me?” She pressed a hand to her heart. “It

was for that . . . for me, that you fought? Why?”

“Madame, must you be asking? Do you not know the answer? For the same reason that moved you to rescue me.”

After that they continued gazing raptly at each other, until at last they fell to laughing, joyously as children laugh.

If there had been between them no wooing such as usually precedes wedlock, they perceived that they might make blissful amends for it now that they were man and wife.

THE SCAPULARY

THE UNEASINESS THAT had been disturbing Gaspard de Putanges ever since the King had visited the wounded Admiral de Coligny reached a climax that night when he found his way barred by armed men at the Porte St. Denis, and a password was demanded of him.

"Password!" cried that Huguenot gentleman in amazement. "Is a password necessary before a man can leave Paris? And why, if you please? Are we suddenly at war?"

"Those are the orders," the officer stiffly answered.

"Whose orders?" M. de Putanges was impatient.

"I owe you no account, sir. You will give me the word of the night, or you may return home and wait until morning."

Perforce he must turn his horse about, and, with his groom at his heels, ride back by the way that he had come. The vexation which at any time he must have felt at this unwarranted interference with his movements was now swollen by misgivings.

He was one of the host of Huguenot gentlemen brought to Paris for the nuptials of the King of Navarre with the sister of the King of France, a marriage which the pacifists of both parties had hoped would heal the feud between the Catholic and Protestant factions. But the Guisard attempt upon the life of Coligny, the great Huguenot leader, had now rudely dashed this hope. M. de Putanges had been one of that flock of Huguenot gentlemen who that day had thronged the wounded Admiral's antechamber, when the epileptic king and the sleepy-eyed Queen Mother came to pay their visit of sympathy. He had listened with misgivings to the braggart threats of his co-religionists; with increased misgivings he had observed the open hostility of their bearing towards Catherine de' Medici what time she stood amongst them with Anjou, whilst the king her son was closeted with his dear gossip, M. de Coligny. These hot-headed fools, he felt, were fanning a fire that might presently blaze out to consume them all. Already the Hôtel de Guise was in a state of fortification, filled with armed men ripe for any mischief, whilst others of the Guisard faction were abroad exciting public feeling with fantastic stories of the Huguenot peril, stories which gathered colour from the turbulent, thrasonical bearing of these Huguenots, enraged by the attempt upon their leader's life.

And now, finding the gates of Paris barred for no apparent reason, it seemed to M. de Putanges that the danger he had been apprehending was close upon them, though in what form he could not yet discern.

It was therefore as well that he should be forced to postpone his journey into the country, however necessary, and that he should remain to watch over his wife.

Now this was a consideration in which M. de Putanges discovered a certain humour. He was a thoughtful gentleman with a lively sense of irony, and it amused him after a certain bitter fashion to observe his own mechanical obedience to his sense of duty towards the cold, arrogant, discontented lady who bore his name. You know, of course, of the beautiful Madame de Putanges and of the profound impression which her beauty and wit had made upon the Court of France upon this her first appearance there. It is even rumoured—and not at all difficult to believe—that amongst those who prostrated themselves in worship before her was the very bridegroom Henri of Navarre himself. But

at least the lady was virtuous—her one saving grace in her husband’s eyes—and of a mind that was not to be discomposed by the flattery of even a royal wooing. It is not without humour that the only quality M. de Putanges could find to commend in her was that same cold aloofness which so embittered him. It was a paradox upon which he had found occasion to comment to his friend and cousin Stanislas de la Vauvraye.

“The gods who cast her in a mould so fair have given her for heart a stone.”

That was the formula in which habitually he expressed it to Stanislas, conscious that it sounded like a line from a play.

“I curse her for the very quality that makes my honour safe; because this quality that in another woman would be a virtue, is almost a vice in her.”

And Stanislas, the gay trifler who turned all things to cynical jest, had merely laughed. “Be content, Gaspard, with a blessing denied most husbands.”

Yet however little M. de Putanges might count himself blessed as a husband, he was fully conscious of a husband’s duty, and his first thought now that he suspected trouble was for his wife.

He made his way to the *Veau qui Tête*, where his horses were stabled and his grooms were housed, and, having dismounted there, set out for the small house he temporarily occupied close by, in the Rue Bellerose. The summer night had closed down by then, but there was a fair moon that rendered the use of flambeaux unnecessary. As he stepped out into the street he came upon a man bent double under a load of pikes. It was an odd sight and M. de Putanges stood arrested by it, watching the fellow as he staggered down the narrow street until he was absorbed by the shadows of the night. Yet even as he vanished a second man similarly laden came stumbling past. M. de Putanges fell into step beside the fellow.

“Whither are you carrying that arsenal?” he demanded.

The perspiring hind looked up from under his sinister load, to answer this brisk authoritative questioner.

“It is for the entertainment at the Louvre, Monsieur.”

As a gentleman in the train of the King of Navarre, M. de Putanges was bidden to all court functions. Yet here was one of which he had not so much as heard, and well might he ask himself what entertainment was this that was being kept so secret and in which pikes were to be employed. It was difficult to suppose that their purpose could be festive.

With ever-mounting uneasiness M. de Putanges lengthened his stride for home. But at the corner, where the Rue Bellerose cuts across the more important Rue St. Antoine, he ran into a group of men on the threshold of an imposing house that was all in darkness. At a glance he perceived that all were armed beyond the habit of peaceful citizens. Headpiece and corselet glinted lividly in the moonlight, and as he approached he caught from one on a note of sinister laughter the word “*Parpaillots*”—the nickname bestowed on members of the Huguenot party.

That was enough for M. de Putanges. Boldly—he was a man who never lacked for boldness—he mingled with the little throng. Others were joining it at every moment and already some were passing into the house, so that his coming was hardly observed; it would be assumed that he was one of themselves, bidden like them to this assembly. Perceiving this, and overhearing from one of those beside him the boast that by morning there would not be a whole heretic skin in Paris, M. de Putanges determined to push on and obtain more complete knowledge of what might be preparing. Heedless, then, of risks,

he thrust forward to the threshold and attaching himself to a little knot of gentlemen in the act of entering, he went in with them, and up a broad, scantily-lighted staircase. At the stair-head the foremost of the company knocked upon a double door. One of its leaves was half opened and there ensued between someone within and each of those who sought admittance a preliminary exchange of confused murmurs. M. de Putanges pushed nearer, straining his ears, and at last from one whose mutter was louder than the others he caught the words: "France and the Faith." A moment later he was giving the same countersign.

He won through into a spacious gallery that was tolerably lighted by four great girandoles, and already thronged by men from every walk of life. All were armed and all were excited. From what he observed, from what was said to him even—for there was none here to recognize this gentleman of Béarn, or to suppose him other than one of themselves—he quickly came to understand that the thing preparing was no less than a massacre of the Huguenots in Paris.

Anon, when the room was filled almost to the extent of its capacity and the doors were closed, a lean, fiery-eyed preaching friar, in the black and white habit of St. Dominic, mounted a table and delivered thence at length what might be called a "sermon of the faith", a fierce denunciation of heresy.

"Hack it down, branch by branch, tear it up by the roots; extirpate from the land this pestilential growth, this upas tree that poisons the very air we breathe. About it, my children! Be stern and diligent and unsparing in this holy work!"

Those terrible final words of incitement were ringing in his ears when M. de Putanges quitted at last that chamber, with its physically and morally mephitic atmosphere, and was borne out upon a brawling, seething human torrent, into the clean air of early dawn. The human mass broke into packs which turned away in one direction and another to the cry—fierce and menacing as the baying of hounds upon a scent—of "Parpailots! Parpailots! Kill! Kill!"

He won free of them at length, forearmed at least by knowledge of what to expect—by knowledge and something more. In that chamber, whilst the sermon had been preaching, someone had tied a strip of white calico to his left arm and set in his hat a cross made of two short pieces of white ribbon. These were the insignia of the slayers and in themselves would have afforded him immunity in the open streets, but that upon an impulse of unreasoning disgust he tore one and the other from him and flung them in the kennel. This as he plunged at last down the Rue Bellerose towards home.

In a measure as the sounds of his late companions receded from him, ahead of him grew an ominous rumble, coming from the quays and the neighbourhood of the river; and then, a crackling volley of musketry rang out abruptly from the direction of the Louvre.

M. de Putanges stood still and wondered a moment whether the faint flush in the sky was a herald of the early summer dawn or the reflection of fire. He became suddenly aware that the Rue Bellerose was astir with flitting shadows. He came upon a man setting a mark in chalk upon a door, and, peering, beheld another similarly engaged on the opposite side of the street. He understood the meaning of it, and doubting if he would be alive by morning, he considered almost dispassionately—for he was a dispassionate man despite his southern blood—that it but remained him to seek his wife and await his fate beside her. If they had never known how to conduct their joint life becomingly, at least he hoped they would know how to die becomingly together.

In this frame of mind he reached his own threshold to find one of the doorposts

bearing the chalk sign that marked the inmates down for slaughter. How well informed were these cursed *papegots*, he thought; how well considered and well organized was their bloody work! With his sleeve he rubbed out the sign of doom. So much, at least, he could do in self-defence. And then he stood arrested, with pulses faintly quickening. Within the shadows of the deep porch something stirred, and at the same moment upon the deep-set inner door fell a triple knock three times repeated.

M. de Putanges stepped forward. Instantly the thing within the porch swung about and sprang to meet him, taking definite shape. It was a tall cowed figure in the white habit and black scapulary of a brother of St. Dominic. M. de Putanges realized that he came no more than in time, if, indeed, he did not already come too late. He felt his heart tightening at the thought, tightening with icy dread for the cold termagant he loved. And then, to increase his fears, the friar pronounced his name and so proclaimed that he was not there by chance nor attracted by the mark of doom upon the doorpost, but with sure knowledge of the house's inmates.

“Monsieur de Putanges . . .” the man exclaimed, and got no further, for utterance and breath were abruptly choked by the iron angers that locked themselves about his throat.

The fellow writhed and struggled, thrusting out a leg to trip his aggressor, clawing fiercely at the hands that were crushing out his life, and tearing them with his nails. But tear as he might, those hands would not relax their deadly grip. Soon his struggles weakened; soon they became mere twitchings. His body sagged together like an empty sack. He went down in a heap, dragging his assailant with him, and lay still at last.

M. de Putanges stood over the fallen friar, breathing hard; the beads of sweat upon his brow resulted partly from the exertion, partly from horror of a thing done in such a cold, relentless fashion. Mastering himself at last, he went forward towards the door. To his surprise he found it open, and remembered then that the friar had knocked upon it a moment ago. The latch was worked by a cord from the floor above and must have been so worked in answer to that knock.

M. de Putanges paused in the act of entering. It was not well—particularly considering that his house had been marked—to leave that thing in the porch where it might be discovered. He went back and, taking the limp body by the arms, he dragged it across the threshold into the hall. And then the instinct of self-preservation that had guided him so far urged yet another stop. In that *papegot* livery it was possible that he might find safety for himself and his wife from the perils that were so obviously closing round them. The faintly reflected radiance of the moon afforded sufficient light for the simple task. In a moment he had unknotted the man's girdle and relieved him of habit and scapulary. Over his own clothes he donned the Dominican's loose white habit, and drew the cowl over his head. Then he closed the door, and set foot upon the narrow stairs, even as from the street outside a sudden shrieking of women was silenced by a fusillade. The massacre, he perceived, was in full swing already.

Overhead a light gleamed faintly; looking up from the darkness that encompassed him, he beheld in the feeble aureole of a candle, which she was holding, the face of Madame de Putanges. She was peering down, seeking with her glance to pierce the darkness of the staircase. He must speak at once, lest the sight of his monkish figure should alarm her. But even as he conceived the thought her silvery voice, strained now on an anxious note, forestalled him.

“How late you are, Stanislas!” she said.

In the gloom of the staircase, Gaspard de Putanges stood petrified, whilst through his mind that welcome meant for another echoed and re-echoed:

“How late you are, *Stanislas!*”

After a moment our gentleman’s wits resumed their wonted function, sharpened now perhaps beyond their usual keenness. He scarcely needed to ask himself who could be this *Stanislas* for whom she mistook him. It could be none other than his dear friend and cousin, that gay trifler and libertine *Stanislas de la Vauvraye*. And she was expecting him at a time when she must suppose *M. de Putanges* already far from Paris. Was it possible, he asked himself, that he had thus by chance stumbled upon the explanation of her cold aloofness towards himself? Was *Stanislas* the Judas who simulated friendship in order that he might the more conveniently betray? In a flash a score of trifling incidents were suddenly remembered and connected to flood the mind of *M. de Putanges* with the light of revelation.

“*Stanislas!* Why don’t you answer?” rang the impatient voice he knew so well.

Whence this absolute assurance of hers that he was the man she expected? He bethought him of that curious triple knock thrice repeated with which the friar had sought admittance, and in response to which the door-latch had been so promptly lifted from above. It was a signal, of course. But, then, the friar . . .

On a sudden suspicion amounting almost to certainty, *M. de Putanges* stepped back.

“*Stanislas!*” came again *Madame de Putanges’* call.

“A moment,” he answered to quiet her. “I am coming.”

He ran his fingers swiftly over the face and head of the man he had choked. Here was no tonsure; no shaven cheeks. The hair of the head was full and crisp; moustachios bristled on the lip, and a little peaked beard sprouted from the chin: there was a jewel in the left ear which, like the rest, was as it should be with *Stanislas de la Vauvraye*. The garments were soft and silken—a slashed doublet and the rest. No doubt remained. All that remained was the mystery of how *Stanislas* should have come to be muffled in that monkish robe. That, however, could wait. It mattered little in comparison with all the rest. In his cursory examination of the body, *M. de Putanges* had ascertained that the man still breathed. He had not quite choked out his life. It was perhaps as well.

He locked the street-door and pocketed the key; then he went up the stairs with a step that was as firm and steady as his purpose.

When at last his cowed monkish figure came within the circle of light of the waiting woman’s candle, she started back.

“Why, what is this? Who are you, sir?” Then remembering the covenanted knock to which she had opened, she partly explained the monkish travesty. “Why do you come thus, *Stanislas?*”

“That,” was the quiet answer, “we may ask presently of *Stanislas* himself.”

She staggered at the sound of her husband’s voice, and a deathly pallor overspread her face. Her dark eyes opened wide in terror: her lips parted, but instead of speech they uttered a mere inarticulate sound of fear and horror, almost piteous to hear. Then she recovered, as he flung back his cowl and smiled upon her, grim, and white-faced as herself.

“You!” she gasped.

He observed that she was dressed for travelling, cloaked and hatted, and that a valise stood beside her at the stair-head.

"I thought you were gone to Poldarnes," she said stupidly, a mere uncontrolled utterance of her mind.

"I am sorry, madame, to discompose you by so inopportune a return. Circumstances compelled it, as I will presently explain."

Then at last the termagant in her recovered the sway momentarily extinguished by surprise.

"It needs no explanation, sir," she answered with angry scorn, and angry unreason. "You returned to spy upon me."

"O fie, madame! To accuse me of that! But how unjust, how foolishly unjust! Had you but honoured me with your confidence, had you but informed me of your intent to elope with my dear friend and kinsman, I should have left you a clear field. I am too fond of you both to attempt against you so cruel a frustration of your designs."

"You mean that you would have been glad to be rid of me!" was her fierce reproach.

M. de Putanges laughed his bitter amusement that even in such a situation she must make her own the grievance.

"Not glad, perhaps: but fortunate, madame," said he. "Once the hurt and humiliation of it were overcome, I might have seen in my dear kinsman Stanislas my best of friends."

She fastened swiftly upon this admission. "That is why I am leaving you."

"But, of course. Do I not perceive it? I have, madame, a more sympathetic understanding than you have ever done me the justice to suppose."

She answered by no more than an inarticulate expression of contempt.

"I shall hope to prove it to you to-night, madame," he insisted. "You may come to account it as fortunate for yourself as it is unfortunate for me that I returned. If you will be so good as to step into the salon, I will fetch my dear cousin Stanislas."

This was to arouse her alarms afresh. "You will fetch him!" she gasped. "Where . . . where is he?"

"He is below."

She was suddenly suspicious, glaring, fierce as a tigress. "What have you done to him?"

"Oh, be reassured!—no permanent injury. He is a little . . . out of breath, shall we say? But that will pass."

"Let me go to him."

He barred her way. "It is not necessary. He shall come to you. In no case can you depart just now. The streets are not safe. Listen!" Vague, hideous sounds of the foul business that was afoot penetrated the silence in which they stood, and filled her with wonder and some dread. He enlightened her. "They are murdering the Huguenots in Paris to-night. That is what brought me back, supposing you would need protection, never dreaming that you would have the dear, brave Stanislas so near at hand."

He took advantage of her amazement to add: "If you will forgive the impertinence of the question, how long has M. de la Vauvraye been your lover, madame?"

She flushed to her eyes. "Why must you insult me?"

"You are susceptible then to insult?"

Her anger, goaded by his cold mockery, raced on. "Should I have stayed a single moment under your roof after taking a lover?" she demanded passionately. "Do you think me capable of that?"

"I see," said M. de Putanges, and sighed. "You possess a casuist's mind, madame."

You swallow camels yet strain at gnats.”

“Maybe. But I am honest, monsieur.”

“After your own fashion, madame; strictly after your own fashion.”

“After my own fashion, if you will. You have a great gift for mockery, monsieur.”

“Be thankful, madame. The man who does not know how and when to laugh, sometimes does very foolish and very painful things. And so, you were saying that you are honest . . .”

“I think I prove it. Having taken my resolve, I am leaving your house to-night. I am going away with M. de la Vauvraye.”

She was defiant. He bowed to her will.

“Why, so you shall, for me. It remains to take measures for your safety, considering what is happening in the street. Be so good as to wait in the salon, whilst I fetch this dear Stanislas.”

He took the candle from her limp hand and went down the stairs again. He found his kinsman sitting up, in bewilderment—a bewilderment which the sight of M. de Putanges transmuted into stark fear.

But M. de Putanges was of a reassuring urbanity. “Be good enough to step up to the salon with me, my dear cousin. Henriette desires a word with you, whereafter you may carry out or not your fond intentions. That will depend. Meanwhile, be thankful that I have returned in time, as I gather from what madame tells me. If the harm were already beyond repair I should for my honour’s sake be compelled to renew, and this time to complete, the strangling of you. That would be a painful matter for us both, for I have a horror of violence, as you know, my dear Stanislas. Fortunately the affair may still be amicably decided. The circumstances of the night are particularly propitious. Be so good, then, as to come up with me.”

M. de la Vauvraye, his mind benumbed by this extraordinary turn of what should have been so simple and delightful an adventure, followed his kinsman up the stairs with an obedience of such utter helplessness as to be almost entirely mechanical.

In the salon they found Madame awaiting them. She stood by the heavy, carved table of dark oak well in the light of the dozen tapers that burned in a gilded candlebranch. Her beautiful face was pale and haggard, yet neither so pale nor so haggard as that of the lover she now confronted in circumstances so vastly different from all that she had expected of this night.

She had declared to him but yesterday that it was to be the most fateful night of her life, and in that, indeed, she appeared to have been a true prophet.

Of the three, the only one at ease—outwardly at least—was M. de Putanges. Tall, erect, virilely handsome, a man in the very flower of his age, bronzed, intrepid and aquiline of countenance, he made the golden-headed trifler la Vauvraye seem so sickly and effeminate by contrast that it was difficult to discern how any woman could have come to prefer him.

“Be seated, pray.” Suavity itself, M. de Putanges waved each in turn to a chair. “I shall not keep you long.”

La Vauvraye, under the woman’s eyes, realizing that he was in danger of cutting a poor, unheroic figure, summoned impudence to his aid. “You relieve my fears, monsieur.” With a shrug and a half-laugh he sank to an arm-chair. He was not as successful as he thought, for his crumpled ruff and dishevelled hair lent him an appearance which dignity

but made the more ridiculous.

“Your fears?” quoth M. de Putanges.

“Of being wearied by futile recriminations. Weariness is the thing in life that I most dread.”

“Reassure yourself. You are in no danger of it. Indeed, the night should bring a surfeit of excitement even to such a glutton for high adventure.”

La Vauvraye stifled a yawn. “If you will but explain,” he begged on a half plaintive note.

“Of course. But first a question: How came you by this Dominican frock in which I found you?”

“Oh, that!” M. de la Vauvraye was casual. “You will know by now what is afoot to-night. I, too, discovered it as I was coming here. At the end of the Rue Bellerose I came upon a shaveling I had met once or twice at Court. Unfortunately for him, he knew me too, and calling me by name threatened me with a heretic’s doom. It was rash. I had a dagger . . . I silenced that too garrulous friar, and left him in a doorway.”

“Possessing yourself of his habit?”

“Why, yes. I realized that on such a night his scapulary would possess the virtues that are claimed for scapularies, would be a panoply against all perils. You would seem to have been of the same mind yourself when, taking me unawares, you became possessed of it and donned it in your turn.”

“And then, dear cousin? Continue, pray.”

“What more is there to tell?”

“Why, that you counted upon the frock to shield not only yourself but this Huguenot lady with whom you had planned an elopement for to-night.”

“Oh, that, of course.” The nonchalance was almost overdone.

“It was my notion, too. Since we are both agreed as to its excellence, there is no reason not to act upon it.”

The affected languor passed from M. de la Vauvraye’s eyes. They became alert and keen to the point almost of anxiety. M. de Putanges proceeded to explain himself.

“Madame de Putanges must be saved,” he said quietly. “That, you will realize, is the paramount consideration. She must be carried out of reach of this bloodshed before it is too late. Escorted by a brother of St. Dominic the thing is easy. We have but to determine which of us shall assume the frock and take her hence, which shall remain behind to die nobly for her sake. Since we both love her, the decision should be easy, for neither of us should hesitate to remain. Rather do I fear a generous emulation as to which shall go.” He dealt so delicately in irony that neither of his listeners could be certain that he was ironical.

With blanched cheeks and bulging eyes, M. de la Vauvraye stared at his cousin, waiting. The handsome woman seated in the high-backed chair looked on with parted lips, her breathing quickened, and waited, too.

M. de Putanges resumed: “But for what is taking place in Paris to-night, my dear cousin, it might be necessary to choose some other way of resolving this painful situation. As it is, our common concern for Madame de Putanges points the way clearly. One of us goes. The other stays behind to die. Ideal and complete solution. It but remains to determine our respective parts.” He paused and the silence within that room was tense and heavy. Outside was uproar—the baying of the fanatical mob, the crash of shivered timbers

and the screams of luckless victims.

M. de la Vauvraye moistened his parched lips with his tongue.

“And how . . . how is that to be determined?” he asked in a quavering, high-pitched voice that cracked on the last word.

“What way but one could gallantry conceive? It is for Madame de Putanges to choose.” He bowed deferentially, as he consigned into her hands that monstrous decision.

M. de la Vauvraye expressed in a gasp his immense relief, never doubting Madame’s choice, never observing the stark horror that distorted her lovely face, nor how that horror deepened at the sound he made.

But M. de Putanges had something yet to add. He was being extremely subtle, where neither of his listeners suspected subtlety.

“Thus, madame, you shall have at last the choice that should have been yours at first. It is in your power to-night to repair the injustice that was done you three years ago when, unconsulted, you were driven into a wedlock of arrangement.” He sighed. “Perhaps had I wooed you first and wed you afterwards all might have been well with us. I realize to-night the profound mistake of reversing that natural course of things, and I am almost glad of the opportunity to correct it, by giving you now, late though it be, the choice that is a woman’s right. So pronounce, madame. Determine of your own free will which of us shall assume the frock and bear you hence, which shall remain to die.”

On that he ended, looking with solemn inscrutable glance deep into the eyes that stared at him out of his wife’s white, horror-stricken face. He knew—unless he knew nothing of human nature—that the woman did not live who could take upon her conscience the responsibility of such a choice: and upon that knowledge he was boldly trading.

To help him to his deep end, came the bleating voice of his foolish rival, urgent with an obvious meaning that he dared not actually express in words. “Henriette! Henriette!”

M. de Putanges observed her shrink and cringe before that appeal, as if conscious only of the meanness and cowardice that inspired it. Upon something of that kind, too, had he counted. He intended to compel her to-night to look, as she had never yet troubled to look, into his soul. And he intended no less to lay bare the little soul of the trifler for whom she would have left him. She should have the free choice he offered her; but first there should be full revelation to guide her in her choice.

“Well, madame?” He loosened the girdle of his monkish habit, as if to stress his readiness for renunciation at her bidding. “Which of us shall wear the frock, the scapulary of salvation—more potently protecting to-night than any consecrated prophylactic?”

And again from M. de la Vauvraye—now half risen—came the appeal—“Henriette!”

Madame de Putanges looked with the glance of a hunted creature from one to the other of those men. Then a shudder ran through her; she twisted and untwisted the fingers of her interlocked hands, and faintly moaned.

“I cannot! I cannot!” she cried out at last. “No—no! I cannot have the blood of either of you on my soul.”

M. de la Vauvraye flung himself back in his chair, his lip in his teeth, his hands clenched, whilst M. de Putanges smiled with wistful understanding.

“Yet consider, madame,” he urged her, “that unless you choose we are likely all three of us to perish here together.”

“I can’t! I can’t! I will not choose. It is monstrous to demand it of me,” she cried.

“Demand?” echoed M. de Putanges. “Oh, madame, I do not demand; I invite. But to spare your feelings, since you prove so tender in this matter, it shall be determined otherwise; and that I must deplore, because in no other way could your future happiness be assured. Still . . .” He broke off, and flung the Dominican frock and scapulary, of which he had now divested himself, upon the table; then he turned to a tall press that stood against the wall, and took from one of its drawers a dice-box. Rattling the cubes in their leathern container, he looked across at his kinsman.

“Come, cousin. You love a hazard. Here is one in which the stakes are something rare: love and life are here for one of us.”

M. de la Vauvraye, who had risen, shrank back in fear. If he loved hazards, he loved them not quite so hazardous.

“No, no,” he cried, thrusting out his hands in a violent gesture of denial. “This is a horror.”

“What else remains?” asked M. de Putanges. “Come, man. I’ll lead the way.”

He threw recklessly as he spoke, thereby committing the other to the adventure. The three cubes scattered and rattled to a standstill on the polished oaken board. Madame’s glittering eyes followed them and remained expressionless when the throw was revealed—two aces and a deuce.

M. de Putanges laughed softly, bitterly. “That is my luck,” said he. “You should have known that I was not to be feared, Stanislas. You’ll scarce hesitate now to throw against me.”

Yet he was pleased enough in the heart of him. Fortune could not have served him better. Now that no risk remained M. de la Vauvraye would be as eager as before he had been hesitant, and so should make yet further self-revelation. And eager he was. It was his turn to laugh as with trembling fingers he gathered up the dice; a hectic flush tinged his cheekbones as he threw—two fives and a four.

“Mine!” he cried, and snatched up the frock in exultation.

M. de Putanges bowed with quiet dignity.

“My congratulations, cousin; and to you, madame, since surely Fortune must have determined as you wish, yet dared not pronounce out of a generous thought for me. For that thought I thank you. What now remains for me will be the easier in the knowledge that it comes not from you, but from Fortune.” He became matter-of-fact and brisk. “You had best make haste away. There is danger in delaying.”

“Indeed, indeed—he is right,” M. de la Vauvraye now urged her, as he shook out the folds of the frock and with trembling fingers knotted the girdle about his middle.

But Madame made no answer to either of them. With eyes of wonder she looked from one to the other, contrasting the noble calm in adversity of this husband she had never known, with the meanly selfish eagerness of the shallow courtier whom she had imagined that she loved. M. de Putanges had promised himself to afford her full revelation; and he had succeeded beyond his hopes.

M. de la Vauvraye took a step towards her. “Come, Henriette,” he was beginning, when suddenly she laughed so oddly that he checked. She looked at him with shining eyes and oddly smiling lips.

“Do not wait for me, monsieur. All that it was yours to stake upon the throw was the scapulary that will shield your life. You have won that, and so you may win to safety. But I do not go with the scapulary. Good-night and good fortune to you, M. de la Vauvraye.”

He stared at her, dumbfounded, stricken in his scanty wits and in his monstrous vanity. "What?" he cried. "You will remain?"

"With my husband, if you please, monsieur."

Quiet and self-contained in the background beyond the table M. de Putanges looked on and wondered. M. de la Vauvraye rapped out an oath. Then anger bubbled to the surface of his shallow nature. His tone became vicious.

"Good-night, madame."

He turned on his heel; but as he reached the door her voice arrested him.

"M. de la Vauvraye!"

He turned again.

"A man in your place would have acted perhaps more generously. A man would have remembered all that is involved. A man would account that my final decision overrides the decision of the dice. He would have proffered the scapulary to the true winner. A man would have done that. But you, it seems, are something less. Since it has been tested, I am the more content to stay."

He looked at her from the depths of the cowl which he had already pulled over his head, so that his face was no longer visible. Without answering her he went out, closing the door with expressive violence. They heard his steps go pattering down the stairs, and then the sound of them was drowned in the uproar from without.

They looked at each other across the table. M. de Putanges sighed as he spoke.

"Did I conceive him worthy of you, madame, I should not have suffered you to have had your way. Even now I doubt——"

"Gaspard," she interrupted him, "I am content. I have chosen, even though I have chosen too late." She held out a hand to him, and he saw that she was weeping. He took the hand and very tenderly stooped to kiss it.

"My dear," he said, "it but remains for us to forgive each other."

As he spoke the air was shaken by a sudden roar, deeper, fiercer, nearer than any that had gone before. She sank against him shuddering in sudden fear. "What is that?"

"Wait." Swiftly he quenched the lights. Then in the darkness he groped to the shutters, opened them and flung the window wide. Screened by the gloom above, they looked down into the seething, furious mob revealed by torchlight and the breaking day.

In the clutches of a knot of frenzied men, a Dominican friar was struggling wildly.

"Let us look at your face," they were howling. "Let us make sure that you are what you seem—that you are not the villain who murdered Father Gerbier and stole his frock."

The cowl was suddenly torn back, and the livid, distorted face of Stanislas de la Vauvraye was revealed.

"We have found you at last, you murdering heretic!" cried a voice and a pike was swung above the Huguenot's luckless head. A roar arose:

"Kill! Kill! Death to the Parpaillot!"

M. de Putanges pulled his wife back and closed the window, and the shutters. She clung to him in the dark.

"My God!" she moaned. "Had he been generous: had I been mad . . ." She said no more; she fell on her knees to pray.

Through the remainder of that night of St. Bartholomew they waited hand in hand for death. It was, they said thereafter, their true nuptial night. But death did not seek them. M. de Putanges, you will remember, had rubbed the sign of doom from the doorpost with his

sleeve, and the house was not molested. Three days later, when the reaction had set in, they quietly slipped out of Paris unchallenged, and made their way back to Béarn having found each other.

THE REMEDY

GEORGE JEFFREYS, BARON JEFFREYS OF WEM and Lord Chief Justice of England, rolled away in his carriage through the September twilight, from Taunton Castle, and the labours of the day. Morose beside him sat the Deputy-Lieutenant of the County, Sir John Kirkby, whose hospitality his lordship was temporarily enjoying at Kernstone Park.

A single flaw destroyed the satisfaction my lord might have taken in the consciousness of ruthless duty ruthlessly discharged. The day had been a busy one. Fully one fourth of the six hundred prisoners awaiting trial on charges of more or less direct implication in the Monmouth Rebellion had been dispatched, and upon some fifty-three of these sentence of death had been passed. Expedition marked the course of that Assize, to be known to posterity as the Bloody. Because His Majesty King James II had been badly scared by the rebellion of his bastard nephew, the Protestant Champion, vindictiveness sharpened the natural cruelty of his egotistical soul. His orders were clear. No mercy was to be shown the unhappy rebels who because of the nature of their offence were by law denied legal assistance. The Lord Chief Justice, understanding that he was concerned not with justice, but with vengeance, addressed himself to his ugly task with a ruthlessness that faithfully reflected the wishes of his master. With malignant zest he laid the souls not only of prisoners, but of such as dared to appear as witnesses for the defence, upon the rack of a ferocious, hectoring cross-examination, and from their tortured writhings he appeared to derive a voluptuous satisfaction.

Sir John Kirkby, practically compelled by his official position to afford his lordship hospitality, was constrained to use him with the courtesy due from host to guest. But he did not find it easy. The heart of this honest upright gentleman was filled with abhorrence of the cruelty he had seen that day unleashed. He had heard sentence of death passed where the grounds of offence seemed far from proven, the evidence in favour of the accused being fiercely rent to shreds by his lordship before it could be examined, and the jury browbeaten into finding verdicts against reason and against conscience.

It had been the more appalling to Sir John because amongst the prisoners still awaiting trial there was one very dear to him, a young squire of Chitton, Godfrey Mohun by name, whose only offence lay in that he had sheltered a wounded friend who had been in the fight at Sedgemoor. Godfrey Mohun was betrothed to Sir John's only daughter, whose anguished fears Sir John had soothed with assurances that a heavy fine would be the utmost penalty exacted from her lover. And this Sir John had believed. But what he had seen to-day not merely shattered the belief, it dejected him with the conviction that Godfrey was foredoomed.

He had witnessed the case of a Bridgewater surgeon, taken in the act of patching up the wounds of one who had been out with Monmouth. This surgeon, a bold-eyed, masterful Irishman named Peter Blood, had rested a spirited defence upon the humane ground that what he had done had been in the discharge of his surgeon's office; that all his concern had been with the sufferer's wounds, and none with his politics; and he had offered to bring a score of witnesses to testify that he had detested the rebellion.

This defence Jeffreys had swept contemptuously aside. He had taken his stand upon

the legal axiom that who knowingly comforts, harbours or succours a rebel is himself guilty of rebellion, and upon that, with much blasphemous calling upon God to witness against the proud, insolent carriage of the accused, he had sentenced the surgeon to death.

Thereupon that bold fellow in the dock, his arrogance untamed by the doom pronounced upon him, had dealt the judge measure for measure.

“Your lordship, being the justiciar,” he had said, his clear, metallic voice ringing through the hushed court, “speaks with knowledge of what is to come to me. I, being a physician, speak with knowledge of what is to come to your lordship. And I tell you that I would not exchange the halter that you fling about my neck for the stone that you carry in your body. The death to which you send me is a light pleasantry by contrast with the death to which your lordship has been doomed by that Great Judge with whose name your lordship makes so free.”

Those acquainted with the savage moods to which my Lord Jeffreys so freely yielded had waited in awe for an outburst that never came. The authority of those words had numbed a brain upon which they were seared as by an acid. The judge sank back in his great chair, bathed from head to foot in sweat, and in the grip of such sudden renal torture that it was as if the pronouncement of that physician had possessed the power to arouse the virulence of the disease from which his lordship suffered.

Still haunted by those words, haunted by the intrepid countenance and bold glance of that vile fellow, Jeffreys sat hunched now in the coach, vainly seeking comfort in the vindictive thought that the villain who had cast this spell upon him—for so he was by now supposing—would presently hang, and his head and quarters, boiled and tarred, be set up as a warning to others of his rascally kind.

That night, at Sir John’s hospitable board, my lord drank to an excess that was secretly reprobated by his sober host. This was my lord’s common practice. When in the grip of an attack, he sought and found in strong drink a temporary relief, only to make payment for it in increased suffering on the morrow. In this some have charitably seen the source of his ferocity upon the bench. To-night he quaffed his host’s Nantes as if it had been mere sack, in an endeavour not merely to lull his pains, but to exorcise the haunting ghost of Doctor Peter Blood’s sentence.

They sat more or less in silence, these men of about the same age, both under forty, each sunk in his own preoccupations. They were both tall men, but whereas Sir John was of a robust vigour and the ruddy, weathered countenance resulting from a life in the open, Jeffreys was delicately and elegantly shaped. His pallid face within the frame of the heavy black periwig was more than ordinarily handsome; it was finely featured, with great liquid eyes and a full-lipped mouth, shapely enough, yet holding something that lessened the attractiveness of the whole.

Observing the deep drinking of this guest with whose nature he was still but indifferently acquainted, Sir John conceived a hope that his lordship might be of those whose natures are softened in their cups. For, in his despair, it was in his mind to plead for Godfrey Mohun’s life, however much his clear commonsense might warn him that to plead with such a man in such a cause would be idle and might even be dangerous.

Whilst he still hesitated, Fate took charge of the matter. The brandy with which he made so free was weakening my lord’s stern will, urging him to open his mind and disclose its tormenting obsession. He came to it almost imperceptibly.

“You do not drink with me, Sir John,” he had complained.

“I lack your lordship’s occasion,” was the civil answer, in reference to an earlier allusion by Jeffreys to the anodyne power of the Nantes.

“Occasion? Odslife! May I burn forever if good brandy needs occasion.” He drained his glass, and reached at once for the heavy decanter. “It’s an elixir vitae, no less. You’d be the better of another glass, Sir John.”

But Sir John waved away the proffered decanter. “I have never yet taken a servant likely to become my master.”

“Ah!” Jeffreys sneered. To his sophisticated mind there was a crudeness in this rustic sobersides. In his view the fellow betrayed a spirit akin to that of the snivelling, canting jack-presbyters responsible for the recent troubles in the West. “You little know what medicine this is.”

“I am glad your lordship finds recovery in it.”

“Recovery?” Jeffreys fetched a sigh, and followed it by a saturnine laugh, short as a gasp. “Lord God! There’s no recovery for such an ill as mine. You heard that rebel doctor rogue in court to-day, giving me back sentence for sentence to ease his spite. Yet—damn his soul!—a shrewd, discerning dog to read so much in a face.” It was my lord’s delusion that his malady was a secret unsuspected by the world at large. “But not physician enough to supply a remedy. Because I was so foolish as to suppose it, would you believe that I made myself a butt for his further spite?” He paused before explaining himself. “When the court rose I sent my man Greaves to question him. The scoundrel laughed. ‘Tell my lord,’ says he, ‘that the only known remedy for his ailment is the very one which he has prescribed me for mine. A hempen necktie.’ And the dog laughed! Let him laugh in Hell, when the hangman’s done with him.”

“What else could you look for,” ventured Sir John, “in a man who conceived himself so harshly used?”

“Harshly? Harshly, d’ye say? Well, maybe. Justice is harsh, sir. And he had justice.”

“That he had no mercy is more certain. And all his own offence lay in being merciful, in practising Christian charity, in taking no thought for himself where suffering had to be relieved. Bear with me if I say that, my lord.”

“Say it, and be damned,” growled my lord rudely. “It’s but the snivelling cant he urged in his defence. D’ye suppose I am come into these parts on an errand of mercy? His Majesty’s orders are precise. An example is to be made. Were I to fail in my duty through mercy, I could look for no mercy, myself, from a justly outraged master.” Then his tone changed. It became reflectively maudlin. “Yet this dog of a surgeon might have found it. He should have known that in mocking my misfortune he mocked his own. For just as it was sentence for sentence between us, so reprieve for reprieve might have followed.”

Sir John raised his head sharply. There was a startled quickening of his glance.

“Despite His Majesty’s orders? Despite the law and to a man convicted of high treason?”

“Despite the fiend himself. I’d have taken the risk of giving him a reprieve in exchange for a sure remedy, as any would in my case.”

Sir John continued to stare at him, and that curious startled look in his clear blue eyes had the effect of exasperating my lord into further explanation.

“Have I, then, no duty to myself?” The fine white hand made an impatient gesture. “Do you conceive the pain that grips and rends my entrails when I am under an attack of this damned disease? And to suffer without hope of ultimate surcease; to know that I must

continue at times to endure, until one day; be it soon, be it late, this thing will make an end of me!" He laughed, bitterly saturnine. "That rebel doctor to-day has made me feel as if my end is near, as if I, too, am under sentence of death. Think of the haunting horror of that. The King might not forgive me if he knew that I bought relief at the expense of duty to him. But, as God's my life, I might forgive myself. My conscience would be at ease."

He reached for his glass, and took another pull at the brandy, whilst Sir John, moved to a deeper abhorrence by this squeal for pity from one who was himself so pitiless, sat very still awhile, his eyes lowered. When at long length he spoke, he used a quiet reflective tone.

"Strange how little our men of medicine can help a sufferer in his need, how seldom they can cure your graver ills even when they detect them. Yet I believe that people who in other matters are as barbarians compared with us in England are not so helpless. The savage Redskins of America, I am told, possess medicines of which we are ignorant. Why, in these parts there is a gentleman, Godfrey Mohun by name, a country squire who spent some years in Italy, who is reputed to have come home again with secrets of healing and lore of medicine of which our doctors here know nothing." He paused there, to add slowly: "I believe—I will not make oath upon it, but I believe—that I have heard it said that the stone is among the supposed incurable diseases for which he possesses a sure remedy."

My lord's attention, at first indifferent, was now suddenly alert.

"Lord God! What do you tell me? A sure remedy? You know such a man?"

A little smile of deprecation hovered on the lips of the Deputy-Lieutenant. "I have good cause to know him—officially. He lies at present under your lordship's hand. He is among those awaiting trial in Taunton Castle."

"Another rebel dog?"

Sir John shrugged and sighed. "Your lordship is in a county in which the canker of rebellion was widespread."

"Ah! But a sure remedy for the stone? That is what you said?"

"That is what I believe is said."

The handsome face of the judge was darkened by thought. His hand shook as it set down the glass.

"Was he actively in arms?" he asked.

"Why, no. Far from it. Of this, at least, my knowledge is positive. Loyal to his King, he abhorred the rebellion, as all the country knows. But he sheltered a fugitive from Sedgemoor."

"Ah!" said my lord, and again took thought for a moment. A febrile flush had crept to his cheekbones, and a glitter to the eyes that were sharply levelled on his host. "I may have cause to thank God for that," he said at last. "The fool may be eager enough to earn acquittal. I will see him to-morrow before the court sits."

Sir John's glance avoided the fevered eyes of his guest. "I see," he said, and added after a moment's thought: "In that case would it not be best to have him brought here? Shall I send an order to the Governor of Taunton Castle?"

"That's it." Jeffreys' voice trembled. "Have him fetched. Have him fetched early."

Sir John's obedience was punctual. Himself he brought the prisoner from the Castle on the following morning, and went to awaken Jeffreys with word that Mohun was at hand to wait upon his lordship.

The reckless haste in which my lord sprang from the great canopied bed brought a grinding pain to his loins that momentarily crippled him. It brought, too, a flood of blasphemy to his lips. When the spasm had eased, he passed, wrapped in a flaming bedgown, his cropped head swathed in a silken kerchief, into the adjacent ante-room.

There Jeffreys found a soberly-dressed young man, tall and well-knit, of an olive-skinned face that was grave, intelligent and kindly. Without embarrassment he bore the cold appraising glance of this Chief Justice who, for all his shortcomings, was something of a judge of men.

After that sharp scrutiny my lord found himself a chair, and Sir John came to stand beside him. Jeffreys spoke gently.

"It grieves me, sir, to discover a gentleman of your parts in such sad case. I ask myself what influences can have seduced you into treason."

"I have committed none, may it please your lordship." Mohun's voice was pleasant, its tone quiet and level. "Not only had I no part in the late rising, but I used all my little influence against it, as I shall prove by witnesses when I come to trial. It is true that after Sedgemoor I gave shelter to a misguided friend who had been in the battle . . ."

There Jeffreys interrupted him. "That, sir, was your treason. Were you not aware of the law? Who comforts or succours a rebel is thereby, himself, guilty of rebellion."

"Concern for my friend was my only thought, my lord."

"That is no answer, sir, not though it had been your own brother, or your father. The Attorney-General's instructions from His Majesty are definite; wisely and prudently definite. Strict justice will be meted out in this assize; but no mercy, because the offence against our Sovereign Lord admits of none." He paused a moment before continuing. "If in spite of this I have sent for you, it is because I must regret that a man of your attainments should pay with his head for such an indiscretion, and that all the knowledge which Sir John tells me you have amassed abroad should be lost to mankind."

Mr. Mohun inclined his head. "I am very sensible of your lordship's interest."

His lordship's liquid eyes solemnly considered him.

"Sir John tells me that in Italy you came by much unusual medical lore."

"In Italy and elsewhere. It was my fortune to find men generously ready to communicate their knowledge, and in the East I came by some precious secrets which it has been my hope to employ for the relief of sufferers."

"I commend the desire, sir. Your claims are high. I wonder if I might put them to the test. Do you suppose, for instance, that you could detect what ails me?"

There was a lift of Mohun's brows, as if he were given unsuspected news. "Your lordship is ailing?"

"You shall tell me in what. Thus I may judge your worth."

Mohun made bold to approach him. "By your lordship's leave." He took my lord's wrist delicately in hand. After some moments he delivered himself. "The pulse is weak. Too weak, and too irregular." With a forefinger he drew down my lord's eyelid, looking carefully. "Poverty of blood," he opined, and abruptly asked: "Where do you suffer pain?"

"Did I speak of pain?"

"I should judge it to be present. If it is not, then the mischief has not yet gone far. But without pain to point the way, I can travel no farther, my lord."

"Then I will help you." Jeffreys stood up and carried a hand to the right side of the small of his back. "It is here."

Mr. Mohun set his fingers to the place, and pressed until his lordship squirmed and cursed him.

“A renal mischief,” the young man pronounced. “Is the pain constant?”

“Not constant. No. Sometimes I have relief for days. Sometimes for days I suffer like the damned.”

“As if a knife were being turned in your entrails. You break into cold sweats; your senses swim; you are taken with nausea. You find relief in strong drink, only to pay for that relief by acuter pain upon the morrow.”

Jeffreys’ eyes reflected his astonishment. “You describe me very exactly.” He sat down again, pulling the bedgown about his limbs. “And the cause? Do you discover that?”

Mr. Mohun’s eyes were grave with sympathy. “Your lordship is troubled with a stone; a hideous guest to harbour.”

“And one for which they tell me no remedy is known.”

There Mohun smiled. “Not to those who tell you so.”

“And to you?” My lord betrayed a sudden breathlessness.

“I know of a remedy as sure as it is swift. It is commonly prepared from a herb grown in the East.”

“What herb?”

For a moment Mr. Mohun seemed at fault. Then, “It goes by the name of Cannabis,” he said.

“Cannabis? Cannabis?” His lordship was searching a memory that the word had stirred. “I’ve heard of it. But what? Ah, yes. A drug that intoxicates the senses, does it not? Conjures voluptuous dreams?”

“That is Cannabis of another sort, commonly known as Cannabis Indica. The Cannabis that will cure your ill is Cannabis Pensilis.”

“Cannabis Pensilis,” his lordship repeated after him slowly. “And a sure remedy you say?” Briskly he added the question: “How long to fetch it from the East?”

“The preparation from it that will serve your lordship’s case can be found in England in abundance. I could procure it for you.”

The unexpectedness of the answer produced a sudden frenzy of eagerness. “How soon? I am in haste, man. These days I have been suffering the torments of the pit. How soon can you procure it?”

Mr. Mohun was cool. “As soon as I am acquitted.”

That gave Lord Jeffreys pause. He glared in sudden resentment.

“God’s my life! You make sure of acquittal. Do you make too sure? What if you should not be acquitted?”

Mr. Mohun spread his hands. “Being without liberty to seek the remedy I should be as sorry for your lordship as for myself.”

My lord conceived himself with his back to a wall before the point of a sword. It was a position of ignominy that he resented. But he realized that resentment here was a wasted emotion. “I wonder,” he said, “are you to be trusted.”

“As your lordship pleases. I can do no more than pledge myself to supply so much of this Cannabis Pensilis, properly prepared, as will give you swift and permanent relief.”

“Swift and permanent relief! That is your promise, is it?”

“No less.”

Jeffreys rose. “Look you: if there is compassion in your nature, you, who from your

knowledge must be aware of what I suffer, will not dare to fail me, even without the debt that you will owe me after trial.”

In that implied promise the Lord Chief Justice reckoned without the Attorney-General, Mr. Pollexfen, whose instructions from the throne were as definite and merciless as his own. For when Godfrey Mohun came up that day for trial in the hall of Taunton Castle, and made his plea of “Not guilty”, Mr. Pollexfen, a large, dark man, swung with a gesture of wrathful impatience to the bench and the four commissioners in their scarlet robes over whom Jeffreys tyrannically presided.

“May it please your lordships to take notice that we have here yet another forsworn rascal who being taken red-handed in treason would none the less waste the time of this overburdened court by a plea that cannot be sustained.”

Jeffreys’ tart answer was startling in its unusualness.

“Look you, Mr. Attorney, you are not to usurp our functions. It is for you to submit evidence of the facts alleged, and for us—not for you, as you seem to think—to deliver judgment.”

Stunned for a moment by that rebuff, Mr. Pollexfen stared, open-mouthed, from under scowling brows, his large, swarthy face empurpling.

My lord sat back in his high chair, dabbing his lips with a filmy handkerchief. He was very pale and there were deep stains under his eyes. The pain in his loins was acute that morning, his irascibility at fever pitch, and to delay a conclusion that was to bring him a step nearer to relief was merely to quicken his ferocity.

Still shaken, Mr. Pollexfen called his first witness, the officer who had arrested Mohun upon discovering the fugitive rebel in his house. Jeffreys reclined, with closed eyes, whilst the man gave his evidence. At the end of it, Mr. Pollexfen addressed the bench.

“I have six more witnesses in attendance if your lordships think it necessary to hear them.”

My lord opened his eyes wide at that and let them blaze on the Attorney. “If they take us no further than this one, you will but waste our time, Mr. Attorney.”

“So I judged, my lord. This rebel’s guilt could not be more fully established.”

“I hope that is merely your submission,” was the acid answer. “But I tell you, sir, that it does not satisfy me. It is our duty, who sit here, to hold the scales of justice level.”

In all his experience Mr. Pollexfen had never heard so monstrous a lie. Amazement crumpled him, whilst the Lord Chief Justice for the first time in the course of that ruthless assize went about dealing with a witness for the prosecution in the manner which he usually reserved for the scarification of witnesses for the defence.

“Now prithee tell me truly, sirrah, is it within your knowledge that the accused was aware that this man Netley had been at Sedgemoor?”

The officer, entirely at his ease, was answering jauntily: “It is evident, my lord, from the fact that he concealed him . . .” when, to interrupt him, Jeffreys leaned forward over his writing pulpit, and for scorn and wrath and menace his voice was like a sword.

“I did not ask, sirrah, what is evident from the fact. I asked what is the fact. As God’s my life, I think there are too many judges in this court this morning. Mr. Attorney, there, delivers judgment before the evidence has been heard, and you, it seems, presume to emulate him.” His voice swelled up. “I would not terrify you to make you say anything but the truth; but assure yourself I never met with a lying, sneaking fellow but I always treasured up vengeance for him. Therefore look to it that you do not prevaricate with me,

for be sure you'll come by the worst of it in the end. Now I ask you again—and I counsel you to answer me straitly—will you take the God of Heaven to witness that Mohun knew that Netley had been in the battle?”

The officer, brave enough no doubt in the field, trembled now under the lash of that viperish tongue. He shuffled his feet, pawed the bar before him with nervous hands, and his voice shook as he faltered: “To be sure I cannot swear that . . .”

But he had said enough for Jeffreys. To let him say more might be to spoil it.

“You cannot swear!” his lordship interrupted, roaring. “God! In what a generation do we live? You come here to swear away the life of a fellow-creature, and when I press you, you confess to ignorance of the fact, the only material fact, upon which you are here to speak. I have done with you. Stand down, sir. Stand down.”

In the terrified hush of the crowded court, that formidable dispenser of justice swung again to the bewildered Attorney-General. “If your other witnesses are of this kind, Mr. Attorney, you do well to say that we need not hear them. I must, as I've a conscience, direct the gentlemen of the jury that there is no evidence to support the indictment of Mr. Mohun.”

“No evidence, my lord?” Furiously Mr. Pollexfen gathered his scattered forces, and drove straight at the heart of the Judge. “With submission, my lord, the evidence of this man's hideous treason is stronger by a deal than was the evidence upon which you yesterday convicted a Bridgewater surgeon who had mended a rebel's wounds.”

“Do a man's antecedents count for naught?” Jeffreys stormed back. “That rascally surgeon was widely known for an adventurer of a turbulent ungodly kind, just such a man as is always to be found ranged against authority. And it is as widely known that the present accused has ever been a God-fearing, loyal subject of the King.”

“With submission, my lord, there is no evidence of that before the court.”

“No evidence? I wonder what you would consider evidence. Is there not general knowledge of the fact? I have informed myself that there are half a score of witnesses at hand who are ready so to testify.”

“Perhaps when we come to examine them . . .”

But Jeffreys would let him get no further. “I perceive no occasion for it until something is proved—proved, Mr. Attorney, not merely alleged—against the accused. And since you admit that all your witnesses are in the same case as that rash presumptuous fellow we have heard, it is useless further to waste our time. Get on, man. Proceed to your address.” And he sat back, closing his eyes once more.

In a rage and in defiance of his lordship, Mr. Pollexfen strove desperately so to prejudice and terrify the jury that no subsequent direction should turn its members from their stern duty. He stressed the inferences that were to be drawn from the fact that Netley had been in hiding in Mohun's house. He insisted that here was positive evidence of Mohun's treason, since only a traitor would harbour a traitor. With ponderous vehemence he hammered this into the minds of the jurymen.

“You are to remember that who comforts or succours in however light a degree a man known to be in rebellion against his Sovereign Lord the King is himself to be adjudged guilty of that same hideous crime.

“No later than yesterday, in this very court, his lordship reminded us that so, very properly and wisely, runs the law in England. It were idle to pretend that this man Mohun did not know that Netley had been in the fight at Sedgemoor on the side of the traitor

Monmouth. Why else must the King's men ransack the house before Netley was discovered? If Mohun had not been fully conscious of the traitor's guilt would he not at once have disclosed the man's presence? To that there can be only one answer.

"The law is clear, and I have told you what it is. The preservation of the government, the life of our Sovereign Lord the King, the safety and honour of religion depend upon your verdict. In considering it," he ended sternly, "I warn you against being moved by pity, as Mohun may say that he was moved, into succouring him as he has succoured another, lest in your turn you render yourselves guilty of the odious crime for which, if you do your duty, Godfrey Mohun must die."

Mr. Pollexfen sat down abruptly, mopping the sweat from his brow.

A shuffling sound ran through the court to be instantly stilled again as Lord Jeffreys stirred and opened his eyes. Sombrely they pondered the Attorney-General, and as sombrely the jury. He coughed, dabbing his lips with his kerchief, then began to speak in a thin voice that was charged with acid irony.

"You have listened to a very eloquent address from one of those great advocates who are the glory of the English courts. You are not come here, however, to be swayed and drugged by eloquence, but to consider facts; and of facts Mr. Attorney has been as sparing as he has been prodigal of words."

Thus Jeffreys, who throughout that dread Assize had been less a judge than a bullying prosecutor, mercilessly intent upon hanging all who came before him, began a speech for the defence as brazen and hectoring as were usually his insistences upon conviction. The jury must accept his denial that Mohun's awareness of Netley's rebellion had been proved. There was, his lordship declared, no proof upon which he would consent to hang his enemy's dog, much less a gentleman so esteemed in the county and of such well-known loyalty to his King. He not merely invited the jury to pronounce the prisoner innocent, he seemed to threaten them with vague ominous consequences if they did not. The jury shambled out, his lordship retired, and the ruffled Mr. Pollexfen was observed to be very hotly in talk and extravagant of gesture with his colleague Mr. Mundy, from which his fury might be gauged.

After an absence of half-an-hour the jury returned, but not yet to deliver a verdict. The foreman, pleading a doubt, demanded more directions. The nature of the doubt was never known, for Jeffreys lashed him so ferociously that he had not the temerity to utter it.

"I cannot help your doubts," his lordship had interrupted, "or know what would satisfy them. Lord God of Heaven! Have we not wasted time enough? I tell you there never was a clearer case."

Mr. Pollexfen's savage laugh was ignored by his lordship.

"You have had from me the clearest directions on the verdict you should deliver according to the law of which it is for me to tell you. In God's name, then, gentlemen, trouble me with no doubts or hesitancy where none should be, but let me hear from you without more delay."

Cowed, the twelve men spiritlessly filed out again, but for little more than a moment's absence. When they returned they delivered a verdict rare indeed in the course of that assize. "Not Guilty."

Mr. Godfrey Mohun departed a free man, and Mr. Pollexfen, casting prudence to the winds in his fury, widely declared that night that Jeffreys must have been drunk so to have conducted the trial. He also ventured the opinion that it would be likely to go hard with

the Lord Chief Justice if the matter should come to the ears of the King.

Sir John, to whom the Attorney-General's words were reported, accounted it his duty to report them in his turn to Lord Jeffreys. But his lordship was not perturbed. The prospect of the remedy to come made him tolerant of the Attorney-General's strictures.

In the matter of this remedy his patience was not tried. On the following evening, when again he sat at table with Sir John Kirkby, after a day which had ended the Taunton trials in the course of which his lordship had passed upwards of a hundred and fifty sentences of death, a messenger arrived at Kernstone. He brought a letter and a box for Jeffreys.

With eager fingers my lord tore the lid from the box, then paused before taking from it the only thing that it contained; a slender rope some two yards long. Amazement excluded all other emotions. "What's this?" he croaked, then sought in the letter the solution of the riddle.

My lord (he read),

True to my promise, I have procured and send you the remedy which will afford you the swift and permanent relief of which I assured you, not only from the stone, but from all other ills. It is the Cannabis Pensilis of which I spoke, which in English may be rendered as "hanging hemp". I send you a sufficient quantity for application secundum artem, as the doctors say. Your lordship will now perceive that on the subject of your regrettable disease I am entirely in agreement with the Bridgewater surgeon whom two days ago you sentenced to death upon such scanty grounds.

His handsome face distorted into a mask of evil, Jeffreys tossed the letter across the table to his host.

"Read me that," he snarled. "Then let me hear from you, Sir John. And as I've a soul to be saved, it shall go hard with you unless you can satisfy me that you had no hand or part in it."

Sir John took up the letter with one hand whilst with the other he waved the servant from the room. When he had read, he looked up, and there was a bland smile on his ruddy, honest countenance. "A poor latinist, I fear, our friend Mohun. It should, of course, have been *Cannabis Carnificis*: hangman's hemp. But perhaps he feared that that would prematurely have told your lordship too much."

Standing at the table's foot, fingering the lace at his throat as if it choked him, Jeffreys' eyes were terrible. "By God, sir, do you join in this knave's gruesome mockery? A poor latinist, you say. The devil damn your smirking impudence! You and he shall both have Latin enough before I've done with you, may I burn else. I'll have that smug cheating villain back in gaol if I have to scour England for him; and as I've a soul to be saved, I'll see him hanged with this very halter."

"Shall you so? And upon what charge, my lord?"

"Charge?" His lordship's face was inflamed, a knot of veins swelled at his temple. "Was he not taken harbouring a rebel?"

"But on that charge he was tried yesterday, and it is beyond even your lordship's power to recall the verdict which you bullied the jury into finding. By the law of England Godfrey Mohun may not be tried again for that offence."

"You'll teach me law, will you? You shall find that I have law enough to hang you

with him as his accomplice in this heartless fraud.”

But the Deputy-Lieutenant remained unperturbed. His broad countenance lost none of its high colour, or any of its blandness. “To attempt it might be to find your own self charged with treason. Best walk warily, my lord.”

“Charged with treason?”

“Have you not committed it?”

“Committed it?” Froth gathered on his lips. “I?”

“Have you not succoured a man guilty of an act that at law makes him a rebel? And does not that at law make you a rebel, too? Is not the offence increased in your case by your abuse to that end of your high office and of the trust reposed in you by a King whose nature is not forgiving?”

Slowly the blood receded from my lord’s face until it was of the hue of lead. The vicious lines of his mouth—the flaw that corrupted and belied the nobility of his countenance—became more apparent. He attempted to express scorn in laughter, to summon to his voice a minatory note. But he failed in both.

“Either you know too much law, sir, or too little.”

“This is no question of law, my lord, but of fact. To a man whose guilt was clear you sold an acquittal for personal ends.”

“And if it were so? Who would dare to indict me?”

For once in his honest downright life Sir John was sly. “Does your lordship not fear that as a loyal subject of the King, whose commission I hold, that might be my duty? And if I were to bell the cat, would there be a lack of those who would hunt it to the death? Mr. Pollexfen, for instance, a person of some weight and no little vanity, would hardly forgo the chance to avenge the hectoring that so diminished him yesterday in court. My lord, be advised by me in friendliness. Do not seek to undo what you did yesterday for Godfrey Mohun.”

In a final fierce boiling up of rage Jeffreys brandished the length of hempen rope. “And what this rascal has done for me? Is that to be forgiven? Am I to be mocked as well as cheated?”

“If your lordship does not like the remedy that Godfrey Mohun has sent you, that is the more reason why you should not risk its being prescribed for you by an inclement master.”

My lord must have reached the same conclusion; for no attempt was ever made to upset the verdict in the case of Godfrey Mohun.

THE CONSTABLE OF CHARD

THE CONSTABLE OF CHARD nursed a bitter sense of wrong.

For the official salary of ninety shillings a year no man, he reflected, would be a constable. His real emoluments were the fees, ranging from five shillings a head for rogues and vagabonds to ten pounds for a highwayman, a housebreaker or a coiner. With these were now rated the rank and file of the rebels who had gone into hiding after Sedgemoor. Therefore the rising in the West should have proved a rare windfall for the constables. Instead, however, they were merely left the gleanings of a field that had been reaped by the military. By the time that Colonel Kirke, who was discovered to be selling pardons at from twenty to forty pounds apiece, was recalled to London and put out of that very profitable business, the round-up was all but complete. The gaols of the West were crowded, and the Lord Chief Justice Jeffreys was setting out on his famous assize.

Some odd rebels, however, still remained in hiding, and Tom Hatherley, the Constable of Chard, set about doing the best he could by excess of zeal and lack of scruples. He was shrewd enough to perceive that to a government in a state of panic suspicion was as good as evidence, and it is to be feared that he supplied the too-ready gallows with more than one poor devil whose only offence was that he held the Nonconformist views which had led so many to follow the banner of the unfortunate Monmouth.

Still, it was hard work, and poorly paid, in the disgruntled Constable's view. His thoughts turned longingly to those richer prizes, those odd missing leaders of the rebellion upon whose heads special prices had been set; and one day at last he read a proclamation on the walls of Taunton Gaol touching a fugitive gentleman whom he had cause to suppose might well be hiding somewhere within the restricted area of the Constable of Chard's activities.

It bore the alluring heading, "One Hundred Pounds Reward", and announced that this sum would be paid for the apprehension of the notorious and wicked traitor Richard Foulkes of Wincham, known to have been with the Duke of Monmouth in the Late Horrid Rebellion.

Hatherley knew of the Honourable Richard Foulkes what all Somerset knew. The eldest son of Lord Thorold, whose great estates lay Wincham way, the county had scarcely seen him since he was a lad, a circumstance which was to his advantage now that he was a fugitive from justice. He had gone early to Court, as a page. There he had attached himself to Monmouth; he had accompanied the Duke abroad and had shared his exiled wanderings, and he was known to have landed with him at Lyme Regis and to have been close in his rebel councils.

Two other pieces of information were in the possession of Tom Hatherley, to serve him now as pointers. Squire Brunton, of Moll Park near Otterford, was a kinsman and close friend of Lord Thorold; and Moll House, built in the time of Elizabeth, notoriously contained a priest's hole that was said to have baffled every search in the days of the religious persecutions.

It was the very place to be harbouring the wanted man since it had been well established that he was not with his father. Not only had Lord Thorold's house been

ransacked from cellar to attic by Kirke's men after Sedgemoor, but it had since been kept under the closest surveillance.

From asking himself whether it was not probable that the young rebel, who had so completely disappeared, had gone to ground in the priest's hole at Moll House, it was but a step—guided by the hope of that dazzling reward—to a settled conviction that this must be the case.

Hatherley went cautiously to work. So as to spy out the land, he borrowed a couple of tything-men from a remote district and sent them, in the guise of simple rustics seeking employment for the apple-harvest, to see what they could discover from the servants at Moll House. The result was not encouraging. The tything-men brought him word that Moll House was almost destitute of servants. Squire Brunton, reputed a fierce King's man and suspected of popery, had shown himself so ruthlessly intolerant of all followers of the Protestant Champion that he had driven away two men and a woman who served him on no better grounds than a suspicion of their being in sympathy with the cause of the rebel Duke. He was left only with old Giles, his butler, a man born at Moll Park and of the Squire's own age, Giles's wife who was his cook, and a rustic half-wit who was serving as footman and from whom the tything-men had drawn this discouraging information.

The Constable's disgust was profound. He had already known the Squire for a hard-drinking, foul-mouthed, dissolute old scoundrel. Now he condemned him for a curmudgeon who, having a safe hiding-place in his house, had not the charity to shelter in it the fugitive son of his friend and kinsman. He felt himself swindled of a reward which he had been regarding already as good as in his pocket. Upon further reflection, however, it occurred to him that the Squire's fierce loyalty might well be a sham. The harsh dismissal of his servants was not only a part of this comedy, it could be a measure made necessary by his guilty secret: the timely removal of witnesses who might betray him.

Having persuaded himself of this, and in the hope of discovering confirmation of it, he set his men to watch the place, and three or four days later one of them reported that a closely-muffled man, whom he had afterwards followed to Wincham and positively recognized for Lord Thorold, had visited Moll House by night, and had stayed there for a couple of hours.

That was enough for the Constable. There could no longer be any doubt. If Lord Thorold went at such a time, and in secret guise, to Moll Park, it could only be because his son was hiding there.

Hatherley took action.

He came to Moll House in the dusk of a September evening, thrust aside the shock-headed footman who opened to his knock, and strode masterfully into the hall. He sniffed at the broken-down air of the place, now dimly seen by candlelight: the bare laths of the ceiling where the plaster had fallen away, the rusty stand of arms in a corner, the torn tapestry on one of the walls, and finally the footman in his greasy, threadbare livery, with his matted, tousled yellow hair, his smeared face vacant of all intelligence, who seemed to have been made expressly to match this dilapidated household.

His roared demand for Squire Brunton seemed to paralyse the servant. The fellow gulped and stared. "Eh! Zquire be at zupper, he be."

"Take me to him." Big, powerful and florid, of a countenance that displeased by being commonly too pleasant, the Constable towered over the scared zany.

"Begummers, I cood'n. I durs'n. Not whiles a's at zupper."

The Constable cuffed him aside, and strode on to a door from beyond which he had heard the rattle of platters. He threw it open, and across a tarnished candlebranch beheld the Squire at table, a corpulent, untidy man of fifty, with a red face about which there was a lot of loose skin. Deeply embedded in it twinkled a pair of small eyes that showed little of the whites. They were normally both kindly and shrewd, but they held little kindness in that moment of glaring, indignant surprise. He sat very much at his ease before a round of beef, with a tankard at his elbow. His shabby coat of mulberry velvet was undone, his neck-cloth was loosened, and he had discarded his wig, so that his head looked like a vast grey hedgehog.

“Give you good evening, Squire,” the Constable greeted him.

“Do you?” The Squire choked. “What the plague do you want here? And have I no servants to keep my door that any scurvy nodcock can walk in on me whiles I’m at table? Burn your impudence!” He caught sight of the footman beyond, and heaved himself up in a towering rage. “And you, you noggerhead, for what do I house and feed you?”

“A wudden lissen to I,” the lackey bleated. “I tawld an . . .”

“Get out of my sight, both of you.”

The servant obeyed in scared haste. But the Constable stood firmly planted. “Easy now, Squire, easy!” he begged. “I do be come on a matter that’s mighty important. It touches my Lord Thorold’s son, Mr. Richard Foulkes.”

Squire Brunton stared at him blankly, his wrath apparently diverted by astonishment. “Rot him for a rebel,” he said at last, “and rot you for an idiot! What have I to do with him?”

“That’s what I’m come to ask ’ee, Squire.”

“Curse your impudence, then.”

The Constable came a step nearer. He leered. His tone and manner were of unpleasant cajolery. “I thought as your worship might save trouble by telling me where he be.”

“So that’s what you thought? Ha! Damn you for a fool.” Brunton reached for his tankard, raised it, and for the time it took him to drain the vessel his face was lost in it. He set it down with a bang. “Didn’t you hear me? I said damn you for a fool. And that’s all I have to say to you.” He raised his voice. “Nat! Hi! Nat! Where the plague is that flea-bitten rascal of mine? Nat!” The footman came sidling into the room. “The Constable’s leaving, Nat. See him to the door.”

But Hatherley wagged his head. “Na, na, Squire. Not yet. I be acting on information, I be. There’s more known than ye’ld maybe think, and I has got to ask you when you last did see Mr. Foulkes.”

“Don’t know as I’ld know him if I saw him,” the Squire growled. Then he considered. “I saw him as a lad of thirteen or fourteen, before he went to Court. He’ll have changed a lot by now.”

“Oh, ay, ay! And what was my Lord Thorold doing here two nights since?”

He watched the Squire keenly for the effect of that bombshell, as he conceived it. But the Squire only sneered at him.

“Spying on me, are you? Much may it profit you, you dirty catchpoll. But since you ask me, I’ll tell you. He made the mistake you are making. He supposed—rot his impudence!—that I’m a man to harbour rebels.”

“Meaning as how he asked you to hide this son of his, and you refused.” He leered again. “Your worship could easily persuade me that.”

“Burn me, I’ll refuse you nothing that’ll rid me of you.”

“Then just let me be taking a peep into that priest’s hole o’ yourn.”

“Priest’s hole?” Hatherley’s watchful eyes seemed to detect a flicker in the Squire’s little eyes. “What cock-and-bull tales have you been listening to, numskull?”

“It’s no cock-and-bull tale that ye’ve a priest’s hole at Moll House. All the county knows it.”

“Be damned to what the county knows. And to you.”

“Squire, Squire!” The tone was wheedling. “Ye wouldn’t ha’ me fetch the Sheriff to search the house?”

“Fetch the devil.”

“Ye’ll know that harbouring rebels is a hanging matter. Ecod! If the Sheriff finds Richard Foulkes here ye’re a lost man, Squire. But if you’ll deliver him up to me none need ever know where I took him. For I wouldn’t tell. It’s a great chance I be offering you Squire.”

“I’m obliged. And I’m sorry that I have no rebels for you. So good night to you, Constable, and be damned.”

Hatherley became more truculent. “Ye’ll not get rid of me so. I’ll not leave this house till I’ve looked into that priest’s hole.”

The veins rose in a knot on the Squire’s forehead. Violence seemed imminent. Yet all the explosion of it that came lay in snatching up his napkin and flinging it viciously among the dishes.

“Come along, then,” he said. “Nat, take up that candlestick and light us up the stairs.”

The servant leading with the candlebranch, Squire Brunton shuffling after him on slipped feet, and the Constable treading firmly in the rear, they went processionally across the hall and up the stairs. Midway up the first flight the Squire stopped. “Hold the light, fool,” he growled. He set a foot upon the oak skirting, and at the same time threw his weight against the wainscot. The pressure of his foot had evidently raised a latch, for to the weight of his body a narrow door, so contrived in the panelling that it ran to the summit of it, swung inwards.

At his master’s harsh bidding, the servant advanced the light, and a chamber was revealed, some six feet square, furnished only with a table and a stool. The Squire stood aside to wave the Constable in. “Satisfy yourself, rot you.”

From the threshold Hatherley stared chapfallen into that dim emptiness. Behind him the Squire continued to jeer. “Satisfy yourself,” he said again. “Get inside, and make quite sure, damn you.”

A sudden vigorous kick on his hindquarters propelled the Constable forward, to sprawl upon the dusty floor.

He was followed by an unpleasant laugh, the soft thud, and click of the closing door, and utter darkness enveloped him.

He heaved himself up, and in a precipitate leap towards the spot where he knew the door to be, he fell over the stool, bumped his head against the wall, and came heavily to the ground again. He sat up, roaring curses, threats, and finally terrified intercessions. His voice boomed back at him, whilst no faintest sound reached him from outside. Soon he was in a cold sweat of horror at the thought that he might be left here to perish and rot. Already in that impenetrable, close-smelling, musty blackness he had the sense of being entombed.

Deliverance from so dread a prison, on the following morning, should have earned his thankfulness. But when the Squire let him out, thankfulness was the last emotion of which Hatherley was capable. Rage submerged even his relief, and was in turn bridled only by the fear with which a taste of the Squire's ruthlessness had inspired him.

"Ye'll have had time to satisfy yourself that there's no one hid there," was the mockery that greeted his crawling forth. "Maybe ye'll ha' learnt at the same time that I'm not a safe man to be plagued by officious catchpolls. Ye'd better look for your cursed rebels in likelier places. If ye weren't a noggerhead ye'd know that I'm the last man in Somerset to risk my neck for any damned traitor."

The emptiness of the priest's hole had shattered all the Constable's assumptions, and a natural conviction that only a guiltless man would have dared proceed with such high-handed ruthlessness was the cruellest of his torments. It left him without hope of avenging his maltreatment, and robbed him of all prospect of that hundred pounds upon which he had so confidently counted.

The desire for vengeance, however, abode. That, and the baffled covetousness in which he took his hang-dog departure from Moll Park, stirred his wits to fresh activity. He recalled two assertions of Brunton's which he had not believed last night, but which now he no longer doubted: the first was that the Squire had not seen Richard Foulkes since he was a lad of thirteen or fourteen; the second, that he would not know him if he saw him. Gradually they showed him how the Squire might be made to pay for the cruel indignity he had inflicted. If the sheer rascality of the notion gave Hatherley pause at first, he was presently strengthened in it by the perception that it offered him an easy way to the gold that seemed to him to have melted in his grasp.

On an afternoon some three days later, Squire Brunton was awakened from his after-dinner slumber in the library by a persistent tapping at the window. He roused himself in annoyance, removed the bandana from his head and countenance, and glared in the direction of the sound.

Against the window-pane was pressed a young face under a slouched hat.

The Squire struggled out of his chair, went puffing and grunting to open the lattice, and abusively to inquire who the fellow might be and what the devil he sought.

"I am sent to you by my father," the stranger panted. A slight, fair lad of any age between twenty-five and thirty, he was out of breath, and his air blent timidity with mystery. His thin-nosed, pointed face was alert and keen, his blue eyes of an engaging candour. He wore his own hair, which was long and thick, and his modest sad-coloured garments showed pretensions to gentility. "I got away last night," he explained. "I've been hid since dawn in the coppice yonder by the river." He set a hand on the low sill. "By your leave, sir," he begged, and with nimble alacrity had vaulted into the room before the Squire, in his amazement, could raise a hand to stay him. "Father," he announced, "was sure you'd never have the heart to refuse me."

The Squire's eyes protruded from an inflamed countenance. "Father was sure of it, was he?" he growled. "Ecod! Father's easily assured. And who the plague may Father be? Who the plague are you?"

The stranger pulled the window to, but in his haste didn't stay to latch it.

"Come away, sir. Come away. We might be seen."

Amazement still leaving the Squire in a sort of numbness, he suffered himself to be drawn by the sleeve across the chamber to the shadows by the empty hearth. There he

found his voice again. "Will you answer me, burn you? Who are you?"

"Is it possible ye don't remember me, sir? I'm Dick."

"Oh, you're Dick!" The Squire displayed sarcasm. "Everything is now explained, Dick, saving only why I shouldn't kick you back through the window. And it's what'll happen, Dick, unless you can show some good reason against it."

"Lord! Ye don't know me yet!" The lad seemed distressed. "I'm Dick Foulkes."

"What's that?" The Squire advanced upon him with a brow of thunder. "You . . ." He checked abruptly. His jaw had fallen, and his shrewd little eyes had almost disappeared. In wrath or stupor his colour was more apoplectic than ever. By a gesture that seemed spasmodic he reached for a hunting-crop that hung above the overmantel. But his hand fell away empty again. Slowly he recovered his normal poise. "And you've the damned impudence to come here in spite of what I told his lordship! Didn't I make it plain enough that I'd harbour no cursed rebel in this house?"

The fair young face was overcast with dejection. The candid eyes were filled with entreaty. "But my case grows desperate, sir. The hunt is closing in upon me. And there's your old friendship with my father. He made sure you'd help me because of that; that ye wouldn't turn me away if I came to you. There's the priest's hole. He thought I could lie snug there until the hue-and-cry dies down, and none the wiser. It would cost you naught, sir, and it would save my life."

The Squire had let him run on, watching him closely the while from under beetling brows. He grinned now, as the intercession ceased.

"I wonder ye should suppose me concerned to save your plaguy life."

"Ye wouldn't ha' my death on your conscience!"

"I shan't." The Squire chose to be brutal. "Your death's no business o' mine; nor your life neither. Ye may be Dick Foulkes as you say. But that's no reason why I should commit treason."

"My father's great love for you . . ."

"Has cost me a mort o' good money, let me tell you. I've no mind to add my neck to what he owes me. So be off, out of here, my lad: and be thankful I don't have you laid by the heels as my duty is."

The young man's hands were held out in supplication. "Surely, sir, you'll never be so hard! You'll never . . ." He broke off. Panic invaded the eyes that were looking past the Squire, towards the window. A groan escaped him. "Oh, my God! Too late."

The Squire looked over his shoulder. The unlatched lattice had been softly pushed open, and above the sill appeared the bulky bust of Tom Hatherley, his arms leaning upon it, and in one of his hands a heavy horse-pistol.

He was grinning maliciously. "Good day to you, Squire. And good day to you, Mr. Richard Foulkes. I knew that patience would be rewarded. And—ecod!—I've caught you red-handed, as ye might say." On that he climbed into the room.

"So that's the way of it, is it?" said the Squire, and he laughed.

"That's the way of it," the Constable agreed. He came forward, a massive, towering man. "You'll not bubble me this time, Squire."

"'Od rot your soul! I'm not thinking of it. There's your man. Take him, and be damned to you."

"Oh, ay, to be sure I'll take him." The pistol was freely displayed to the shrinking fugitive. "But there's yourself, Squire." He shook his head gravely. "An ugly business for

you.”

“For me?” Momentarily the Squire appeared taken aback.

“Harbouring a rebel,” Hatherley explained. “A hanging matter, no less, in these days. Ye’ll not suppose as I bears malice for what happened t’other night. Far from it. I’d let the gentleman go an’ I could, only so as not to bring trouble on yourself. The Lord knows it’s no pleasure to me to be sending poor devils to the gallows.”

“Then why the devil do you do it?”

“Why? What else is a poor man to do? He’s worth a hundred pounds to me, is Mr. Foulkes.”

“Is that all you think of?”

“Well, now . . . Ye see, I’ve a wife and four children, and I can’t afford to be lordly. Ye’d surely not blame me?”

The fugitive interposed. “D’ye mean if you had a hundred pounds you’d be willing to . . . ah . . . not to recognize me? Is that what you mean?”

The Constable’s air became embarrassed. He coughed. He laughed sheepishly. “Faith, now, if you’d make it worth my while like that, I’d be real glad, I would, not to march you off to Taunton Gaol.”

The young man swung passionately to the Squire. “You hear that, sir?”

“Ay, I hear,” said the Squire dryly. Planted squarely on his hearth, he was, indeed, all attention, looking from one to the other of them.

“Then you’ll buy me off? You’ll lend me the money? My father will make it good.”

“Will he? My lad, I’ve told you already, your father’s that deep in my debt I lie awake o’ nights thinking of it.”

“But it’s yourself I’m thinking of,” the lad protested.

“That’s cursed kind of you.”

“Don’t you be taking it lightly, Squire,” the Constable boomed in. “If I arrests Mr. Foulkes, I’m bound to declare where and when he was took, and that’ll mean a warrant for you, Squire.”

“And for a hundred pounds you’ll go your ways in peace, will you?” the Squire asked.

There was an oily smile on the Constable’s face. “For two hundred, Squire. I wouldn’t price your worship at less than Mr. Foulkes.”

“Burn you for a rogue!” the Squire roared at him, and pulled the bell-rope.

The Constable was startled. “What now?”

“I want witnesses to see me pay the money, you dirty thief, or I may have you back here blackmailing me for more.”

“Your worship!” The Constable was in an agitation. “Here’s no matter to be done afore witnesses. Codso, I’d be putting my neck in a noose.”

“That’s where it ought to be. D’ye think I’d trust you, you scape-gallows? You were so mighty close on the heels of your rebel that you must ha’ been following him. You must ha’ seen him come in by that window. But it don’t suit you to believe the truth, which is that he thrust himself in here unbidden.”

“That’s for the justices; not for me. All I know is as I caught you here together. Let the justices say whether you was harbouring him. And ye’ll know what they’ll say as well as I do.”

The door was opened by the shock-headed Nat, the greasy lad who had been a witness of the Constable’s humiliation.

“Did a’ ring, Zquire?”

“Did I ring, ninnywatch? Who else should ring? Fetch Giles, and be lively, slug.”

“Ay, ay, Zquire.” The ninny vanished.

The Constable’s agitation bordered on panic. “This bean’t reasonable, Squire. Such a thing can’t be done at all unless it be done secret.”

“So that at your pleasure you may forget that it was done, and come back to do it again. I know your scurvy kind.”

“Look you, Squire.” Haste to conclude before the summoned witnesses arrived made the Constable desperate. “To keep it between ourselves, pay me the hundred pounds for Mr. Foulkes, and I’ll not trouble you any more.”

The Squire laughed at him. “If a hundred pounds is all you want now, there it is.” He pointed to the desolate-looking Mr. Foulkes. “That’s the price on his head, you say. Take him and go to the devil.”

“Sir, sir,” whined Foulkes. “You can never mean that!”

“I can. I do.”

The Constable was livid. “Be that your last word? I tell you, it’ll mean a warrant for your arrest.”

“So you said before.”

“But you don’t believe me?”

“Ah! Here’s Giles.”

Old Giles shambled in, ushered by Nat. “God zave ee, zurs,” he greeted them, and remained with his fellow-servant by the door awaiting orders.

Quizzically defiant, the Squire looked at the Constable. “Well, Hatherley? What’s your choice?”

The Constable shook with rage. “Thought to take me in another trap, eh? Same as t’other night. Bribe me afore witnesses, and then swear an information ’gainst me. Mighty cunning, Squire. But not cunning enough for Tom Hatherley. Maybe ye’ll be sorry when they come for you.” He swung, snarling, to the dejected rebel. “Come on with you, Mr. Foulkes. We’ll be going.”

The servants stared with startled eyes. Nat seemed to awaken momentarily out of his somnambulism. “Begummary!” he ejaculated, “that bean’t never Mr. Foulkes?”

The Constable thrust him roughly aside. “Out o’ my way, zany.”

He went out, driving his prisoner before him, and at a sign from the Squire, Giles followed, to speed him from the house.

Nathaniel remained. But it was a transmogrified Nathaniel. The vacancy was gone from his eyes, the leer from his face. He seemed in an instant to have gained full and intelligent consciousness as he looked across at the Squire.

“Does the fool believe that that’s Dick Foulkes?” he asked.

The Squire grinned. “No more than he believes that you are. An impudent swindle that’s misfired. Likely he thought to get level with me that way. But, rot him, I’ll turn the tables on him. I’ll break the thieving hound.” He made his way to the desk. “I’ll send a letter to the Sheriff to let him know that Richard Foulkes was taken here to-day by the Constable of Chard, just as he had come to ask me for shelter. That’s something this rascally Constable won’t be expecting. He may sweat himself to death in explaining to the Sheriff what he’s done with his prisoner. And he’ll find himself in gaol as sure as my name’s Harry Brunton and yours is . . .”

“Hush,” said the lackey, a hand familiarly on his master’s shoulder. And added: “Aren’t you playing with fire?”

“To be sure I am. But it’s others who’ll be burnt.” His eyes twinkled. “Trust me, Dick. You were all set on going to earth in the priest’s hole. Where would you be now if I’d consented, with all the county knowing about it? I told you then, my lad, and I tell you again, if you want to hide a thing so as it won’t be found, never thrust it into lurking-holes where folk are sure to look for it.”

THE CATCHPOLL

THE CASE OF BEAU WITHERINGTON, by which is meant his notorious adventure with Captain Evans, aroused at the time a deal of mirth in idle, fashionable circles. But then the laughter of those who avoid failure by attempting nothing is easily excited, and as idle as their wits. After all, it may reasonably be contended that Mr. Witherington deserved praise rather than derision. It is at least commendable in him that, at so early an age, and despite his success in the world of fashion, he should have wearied of its vapid entertainment, aspiring to more profitable activities than could be found in rout and masque, at Almack's, Ranelagh and the Ring. Forsaking the haunts he had adorned as a pattern of the elegancies, he took coach for the country in a laudable spirit of knight-errantry, seeking adventure. He had not long to wait for the gratification of his quest, but the adventure that he found was hardly of the romantic and heroic quality of his dreams.

On the dusty highway that skirts the Vale of Itchen, in the pleasant county of Hampshire, the progress of his chaise was stayed on an afternoon of Spring by the most engaging and acquisitive horseman that it had ever been Mr. Witherington's fortune to encounter.

The beau had dined very heartily at *The Angler's Rest* at Alresford. A surfeit of trout and white Burgundy, combining with the warmth of the afternoon, had induced in him a soporific condition from which he was harshly aroused by the jarring suddenness with which the chaise, obeying an imperious order to halt, was brought to a standstill.

A horseman drew alongside. He was well mounted on a tall roan with a white blaze, and, saving the square of black crêpe that covered his face, no appearance could have been more demure than his. The sober black of his garments, the plain white neck-cloth, the grizzle tie-wig and the little three-cornered hat lent him an almost clerical gravity. Gravely courteous, too, was the tone in which he invited our gentleman to surrender his purse, his rings, his watch, the diamond clasp that flashed on his solitaire, and such other elegant trifles as go to the make-up of a man of fashion.

Now, as you may already have gathered and as will further appear, whatever else Mr. Witherington might or might not be, he was certainly a man of spirit. Deliberately he laid aside the book over which he had been dozing. It happened to be a copy of the *Odes of Horace*, although you are free to conclude that *The Gull's Hornbook* would have been in better case to serve his needs. He laid aside his Horace, then, and snatched up a brace of barkers which he carried within reach against just such an emergency. Thus armed he boldly faced the situation.

A resolute fellow, caring nothing for half-measures, and determined to handle the matter with finality, he incontinently discharged first one pistol and then the other point-blank at the tobyman's breast. He had every reason to account himself something of a marksman; but even had this not been the case, even had he now handled a pistol for the first time, it must have been impossible to miss so fair a mark at a range of no more than an arm's length. Yet, having discharged his pistols, he was astounded to discover that the horseman had not so much as flinched under that close fire. Unmoved, and apparently unconcerned, he continued to sit his nag, with a steadying hand upon the reins.

Whilst Mr. Witherington stared, mystified and chapfallen, the gentleman of the toby urged his mare forward and sideways by a pace or two, so that he was brought within touch of the chaise. He addressed the beau in a pleasant, affable voice, and with an accent that was by no means that of the underworld.

“Now that you’ve burnt your powder, vented your heat, as it were, perhaps we may come to business.” And he put out his hat, “For all the world,” Mr. Witherington afterwards related, “as if he were putting forth the plate in church.” He may have been helped to the comparison by the rascal’s quasi-clerical garb.

The rage blazing in Mr. Witherington’s stare was met by a soft laugh.

“Come, come, sir. Let your good sense be at the level of your courage, and superior to your marksmanship. Do not put me to the coarse necessity of using threats, of drawing a barker in my turn. It would distress me to use violence with a gentleman of such elegant parts as Mr. Witherington.”

“You know me, do you, you rascal!” cried the furious man of fashion.

But if this had brought him fresh surprise it also brought him illumination. Not believing in miracles, his wits, which were by no means sluggish, had been probing for an explanation of the highwayman’s seemingly miraculous imperviousness to bullets. It was now supplied him. In the boot of the chaise there was a portmanteau on which Mr. Witherington’s name was stamped, and the chaise had stood in the yard of *The Angler’s Rest* whilst Mr. Witherington was dining. It was enough. Mr. Witherington registered a vow that when alighting at a country inn in future he would take his pistols with him, instead of leaving them in the chaise where any passing rogue might tamper with the charges.

Meanwhile that detestably suave voice was answering him. “Not know the famous Mr. Witherington, that ornament of the beau monde! La, sir! I protest it’s an honour to be asking for your purse. If you please, now.” The hat was insistently agitated.

Mr. Witherington’s sullen glance surveyed the road ahead. From its dusty emptiness he gathered that, his pistols having failed him, the situation must be accepted lest worse should follow. With rage in his heart he delivered up his valuables.

“It’s a pleasure to do business with you,” the horseman commended. “And, faith, I couldn’t suffer the meeting to cause you inconvenience. So here’s five guineas for your more pressing needs. I’ll be wishing you a very good day, in the hope that we may meet again when your purse is as well furnished.”

“Stab my vitals!” snarled the beau. “It’ll be a cursed sorry day for you if ever we do meet again.”

A laugh was his answer from behind that black mask. Then the tobyman wheeled his horse, and, with a flourishing lift of his hat in farewell, he was off at a canter, leaving the depleted Mr. Witherington free to continue his journey.

The post-boy, who had dismounted, came to the window of the chaise. There was an oafish grin on his lumpy countenance, so little did he realize the ferment of anger in our gentleman’s soul, the lacerated pride of the adventure-seeker who has met adventure only to be undone by it.

“That be Cap’n Evans, for sure, that be. A rare ’un he be.”

“Be he?” growled the beau, in savage mimicry. “Not rare enough. He’ll be a friend of yours, I suppose?”

“A friend! Lawks, sir! It’s the third time this half-year I be held up hereabouts by he.”

“Good God!” said Mr. Witherington. “D’ye tell me he’s been working this road for a half-year?”

“Aye, I do so. And mighty hard he works it. But he be a rare ’un. Always merry.”

“Cursed merry.” Mr. Witherington looked with loathing at the leering oaf. “Is there no plaguery Sheriff in this poxy county?”

“To be sure there be. Sir James Blount be High Sheriff.”

“So! And where does this cursed High Sheriff live, if so be that he’s alive at all?”

“Over to Compton Mallet, t’other side o’ Winchester.”

“Take me there,” said the beau, on a sudden impulse. In the Sheriff he had suddenly perceived his most urgent need; someone upon whom to vent the fury of humiliation that was choking him. “Get on!” he exploded, and so drove the postilion back to the saddle and his duty.

An hour later they were rattling downhill into Winchester, which the disgruntled man of fashion cursed for a town at the bottom of a well. They climbed out of it again on the other side and, as the shadows were lengthening, came to Sir James Blount’s untidy parklands of Compton Mallet.

The four-square, red-brick, sash-windowed mansion proved as ill-kempt within as without. Admitted by a lean, elderly, knock-kneed servant in a greasy livery, with tattered wristbands and dirty, slack white stockings, Mr. Witherington was ushered into the presence of the Sheriff. He found a shaggy, loose-limbed man, gaitered in leather to the thighs, wearing a coat of faded red and carrying a peck of snuff on his neck-cloth. In the fastidious eyes of his angry visitor, Sir James was in harmony with his setting. No wonder the roads in his care were infested by robbers. The fellow’s mind, Mr. Witherington supposed, would be as slovenly as his person and his dwelling. His manners, however, left no cause for complaint. He welcomed with affability Mr. Witherington’s radiant splendours of gold-laced, blue velvet coat and flaxen wig, and conducted him to the gun-room, which announced itself for his main abiding-place. It was a room of a certain fusty cosiness, smelling of leather, gun-oil, dust and stale tobacco. In Mr. Witherington’s view, a disgusting room in which to entertain a gentleman. Some antlered skulls adorned the dark wainscot, serving as racks for such objects as dog-collars, whips, powder-horns and the like; the moth-eaten masks of a couple of foxes snarled from the overmantel; a brass lantern-clock ticked on a corner bracket.

Sir James, rejoicing in the entertainment of a visitor from the great world, thrust him into the best chair, a roomy machine of leather, faded, rubbed and greasy, called for a jug of October and a couple of pipes, and required to know in what he could be of service. The beau, having disdainfully refused both tankard and tobacco, told his tale with such calm as his simmering wrath permitted.

The Sheriff’s jovial surface was scarcely ruffled. “Looked like a parson, and rode a roan mare with a white blaze, eh? Faith, it would be that damned Welshman, Tom Evans. Captain Evans, they call him.”

“So the post-boy said. And he tells me the blackguard has been infesting your roads for the past half-year.”

“Every day of it,” the Sheriff agreed heartily and shamelessly. “Ever since he made Shropshire too hot for his hoofs.”

“Ah! I take it that he finds no such troublesome heat in Hampshire. I found him cool enough to-day.”

Sir James suspected no sarcasm. "Cool!" he almost chortled. "An old maid for coolness. Slippery as an eel and wily as a fox. That's Tom Evans. And a man of parts, as I gather. They say he was brought up to be an attorney, but, seemingly, he prefers to find his profit outside the law."

Standing with wide-planted feet, his broad shoulders to the overmantel, the burly Sheriff laughed boisterously at his own jest. Mr. Witherington considered him with horror. His sarcasm deepened.

"My post-boy thought him amusing. He described him as a rare 'un. I gather you're much of the same mind."

"Impossible to be of any other," Sir James agreed. "Lord, sir! The rascal may be a thorn in my flesh, but that don't keep me from laughing at his waggishness."

"I see. A thorn that merely tickles," said Mr. Witherington, striving with his disgust.

Still unconscious of his guest's acidity, Sir James became engrossed in contemplation of the waggishness of Captain Evans.

"Ye'll not have heard tell of the end of him in Shropshire. Stab me! It would make an undertaker laugh. He was actually in the custody of the Sheriff's officers, and they were taking him to Shrewsbury with his feet tied under his horse's belly. He was as unconcerned as you please, easy and jocular with his captors, and keeping them in laughter with his quips and his sallies, till they must ha' thought it a shame to take so jolly a rascal to be hanged.

"They were coming along a country lane when they put up a fine cock pheasant that was feeding on acorns. The bird flew up into the oak and perched there. The Captain fetches a sigh and cocks a melancholy eye at it.

"'I mind me the time I used to go a-fowling,' says he, maudlin-like. 'And there was never a better shot than me in England. I don't recall ever missing a bird.' Then he sighs again. 'Pity to let that one bide,' says he, 'a fine plump fowl like that. It would make a savoury supper for a poor man.'

"Now this set the fool of a constable a-watering at the mouth, as our rascal reckoned it would. 'D'ye think ye could bring it down?' says he.

"'Blindfolded,' says the Captain, drawing rein and holding out his hand. 'Here! Lend me your piece.'

"He had so won upon them by his easy ways, and his manner now was so natural and casual, that the fool fell into the trap. 'About it, then,' says he, and hands me his fowling-piece to the Captain. And what think you, sir, the rascal did?"

"Nothing in human folly could surprise me," said Mr. Witherington.

"He clapped the muzzle to the constable's belly, and swore to blow his insides out unless his men at once threw down their weapons. He was so fierce and resolute that they durstn't deny him. Next he ordered them to cut his bonds. Then he took a brace of pistols, and the best horse in the company, wished them a very good day, and rode off to come and plague us here in Hampshire."

His boisterous laugh almost made the windows rattle. But Mr. Witherington did not join in it. He waited until the explosion had subsided. Then:

"And here in Hampshire," he said, "he roams at large to rob the quality to his heart's content without interference. Stab my vitals! I can understand it since you regard him with such amusement. I take it the blackguard has won your affection?"

"Affection!" Sir James sobered. At last he began to perceive the beau's humour.

“Gadsmylife! D’ye jest, sir?”

“I don’t. I’m not in the mood. I’ve been robbed of a purse of twenty guineas and some odds and ends worth twice as much. That’s not the kind of jest I relish, though it may amuse your worship.”

The blood darkened in Sir James’s pendulous cheeks. Yet he preserved a commendable tolerance under provocation. “La, now, ye’re sore, and I don’t wonder. But ye’re not to suppose that I’m careless of my office. I’ll have the dog by the heels yet, I promise you. The devil of it is that he bribes every waiter and drawer and ostler between Guildford and Portsmouth. They’re all in league with him.”

“That I can well believe,” said Mr. Witherington, remembering what had happened to his pistols. “A pretty state of things, as I live. And nothing done about it.”

This time the Sheriff’s forbearance cracked under the strain. “Nothing done? What the devil do you mean, sir? That’s no way to speak to me. I’m the Sheriff of this county.”

“That’s what I complain of. It was my suspicion that the county had no Sheriff and no posse comitatus. Half a year this scoundrel has been at his robberies on the roads in your charge. Half a year! Sink me, it’s a scandal. A damned scandal, sir.”

His countenance purple, Sir James strove with his wrath. “That’s what you came to tell me, is it?” he rumbled as a beginning, and squared himself to amplify it.

“Before putting the matter to my friend Lord Carteret,” the beau explained.

This timely mention of the Secretary of State saved Mr. Witherington from a major explosion, but did not avert a minor one.

“Lord Carteret! By God, sir, you’re mighty glib. What, pray, do you suppose Lord Carteret could do?”

“Tell you what any man of sense and authority would have done long since. See that you clear your roads of this pest.”

“Sense and authority!” echoed the indignant Sheriff. “I’ll make bold to ask you, sir, in which it is that you find me lacking. But, faith, you need not answer. For, since I possess the authority, you must account me to lack sense. Damme! I’m much obliged to you. You’ll have gathered a great notion of your worth from crowing on your own little dunghill of Ranelagh or Vauxhall. You should be Sheriff of Hampshire for a month. It might teach you humility.”

“Yet you don’t appear to have learnt it,” was the retort. “Gadslife, sir, in your place I’d clear the highways of this gadfly in a week.”

The assertion, lightly and recklessly made, as assertions are made in the heat of acrimonious argument, provoked the obvious, angry rejoinder. “A safe boast, sir, since it isn’t likely to be tested. Or is it? Would you care, now, to exhibit your talents and lay bare my infirmities? Faith, you have my leave to attempt it, and all the county will be in your debt if you succeed.”

Mr. Witherington’s stare was cold and scornful. “Gad, sir! What next? I am no catchpoll.”

The Sheriff gave him back scorn for scorn. “That’s what I expected you to say.” And he ran on, gathering angry momentum as he went. “Ye’re a very pretty fellow, Mr. Witherington; but I wonder are you anything besides. I mean to say, I’ve some acquaintance with your kind, and it leaves me wondering if, in all your life, you’ve done more than boast of what ye might do.”

Our man of fashion flushed under the other’s withering eye. “You account me

boastful?" said he, more in amazement than in anger.

"What else? You come hectoring me that my work is ill done, and vowing that you could do it better. But you're careful to refuse the challenge that would prove you. Bah, sir! I wonder at my patience with you."

"A challenge, was it?" Mr. Witherington became soberly thoughtful. Suddenly he uttered a little laugh. "Why not? Why not?" Again he laughed. "Sir, I came into the country seeking adventure to enliven a dull life. I seem to have stumbled upon what I sought. And, egad, I'll not lie under the imputation that I boast of more than I can perform."

Sir James's annoyance was overlaid now by surprise. "Ye don't mean ye're so rash as to turn thief-taker?"

"To prove myself, as you say. And to prove you at the same time."

"What you're like to prove yourself is a laughing-stock."

This was merely a goad to Mr. Witherington. "I'll take the risk of that and more." He stood up suddenly. "Will you back your confidence, Sir James? Will you take a wager of fifty guineas that within ten days I'll bring you this tobyman bound neck and heel? Will you take it?"

"It would serve you right if I did," growled the Sheriff. "You've been robbed enough for one day. I'll not be adding to your losses."

"Faith, sir, you're like the fox in the fable," said Mr. Witherington, and became so furiously insistent that in the end, losing all patience, the Sheriff accepted the wager.

In doing so under that offensive provocation, he was not perhaps quite honest. There was something that he did not tell the beau. He did not disclose that the authorities, sharing Mr. Witherington's opinion of Sir James's supineness, had not merely sent him sharp remonstrances; they had instructed him to proclaim a reward of a hundred guineas for the apprehension of Captain Evans. Saying nothing of this, he lent Mr. Witherington twenty guineas for his immediate needs, and sped him with an ironical blessing upon a quest which Sir James regarded as preposterous.

On the very next morning, to complicate matters, a riding-officer from Bow Street arrived at Compton Mallet. His name was Baldock, and he enjoyed the repute of being the most astute and enterprising thief-taker in the country. The government, in its determination to make an end of Captain Evans, and in its despair of the activities of Sir James Blount, was permitting Bow Street's most efficient officer to set about earning the proclaimed reward.

Sir James did not view the matter amiably. He perceived in it a reflection upon his zeal, and found no consolation in the prospect of winning fifty guineas. At the same time he accounted it no less than his duty to acquaint Baldock with the fact that another was ahead of him already upon the quest. When the riding-officer, dismayed at first, learnt that his competitor was Beau Witherington—well known to him by reputation, as he was, indeed, to all the town—he was uproariously amused, and went off with no faintest misgiving to cloud his prospective enjoyment of the prize-money.

A sturdy fellow of middle height, with the jaw of a mastiff and the thews of an ox, Baldock was attended by a brace of scoundrels who, under his suasion, had deserted the army of priggers to enlist with the sleuths of Bow Street. The three of them sought the trail with diligence and cunning. The inn folk might be friendly to Captain Evans, but it was in Baldock's experience that such friendships can be diluted. In every town and hamlet

through which he passed he set up a copy of the proclamation of the reward for the highwayman's capture. To every ostler whom he questioned he offered from ten to twenty guineas of the blood-money for information that would enable him to earn it. He never doubted that sooner or later he would find one whose affection for the Captain would not survive such a temptation. And in the matter of Mr. Witherington he was not concerned to play fair. However slight his fear of being forestalled by the man of fashion, he thought it would do no harm to foul his chances. So from the outset he took care to publish the story of the wager in every quarter whence there was a chance of its being reported to Captain Evans. He justified himself by the reasoning that to put the Captain on his guard against Mr. Witherington might serve to throw him off his guard against Baldock himself.

Had Mr. Witherington been aware of this, it might have damped the enthusiasm and confidence with which, being committed to it, he was embracing the novel office of catchpoll. Confidence to succeed in whatever he took in hand was a commodity with which the beau was abundantly supplied. He certainly did not lack for courage, and he was practised in the use of arms. So that he counted his only obstacle to success the difficulty of coming upon the Captain. In order to discover him he employed all his resourcefulness. Remembering the Sheriff's assertion that every drawer, waiter and ostler, between Portsmouth and Guildford, was in the Captain's pay, he sought amongst them, by tactics similar to Baldock's of artful inquiry and lavish bribery, the necessary information; and although he was careful to say no more than his needs demanded, yet inevitably he must say a little more than might be prudent.

At the end of three days of this assiduity, all the information that he had gathered was that a zealous riding-officer from Bow Street was hot upon the highwayman's trail. This was an unexpected and disquieting intervention until suddenly, on the fourth morning, by a stroke of fortune, he was placed in possession of the very news of the Captain that he sought.

It was brought to *The George* at Alton, where Mr. Witherington had lain the night, by a young gentleman whose dress and air proclaimed the country squire. He stalked into the common room of the inn, complaining furiously within the hearing of Mr. Witherington that he had been held up and robbed by a tobyman who looked like a damned parson, and crying—as Mr. Witherington himself had cried—shame on Sir James Blount for keeping no better order in the county.

“That would be Cap'n Evans for sure,” said a sympathetic landlord.

“Of course it was Captain Evans. Don't I know him? And don't the whole county know him and that roan of his with the white blaze? And it's not the first time that he's robbed me.” He flung himself into a chair, and called for a pint of claret laced with Nantes. “For which,” he added, “you'll have to give me credit; for the dog has cleaned me out.”

Mr. Witherington took this for his cue. He had been scrutinizing the newcomer. A well-knit lad, his attractive, open countenance under his own copper-coloured hair, simply queued, invited sympathy. In dress, from his fine riding-boots to his dove-coloured coat with its black silk buttonholes, he was irreproachable. The blue-and-gold elegance of Mr. Witherington sauntered across to him.

“Permit a fellow-sufferer to be your host on this occasion.” He waved the landlord away upon the execution of the order received, and then, in answer to the stranger's hard, frowning stare, he presented himself. “My name is Witherington; Geoffrey Witherington.”

The frown vanished. The fine dark eyes became alight. "Not Beau Witherington?" the young man cried, rising, as if respect impelled him.

Gratified, Mr. Witherington made a leg. "Your humble, obedient," he declared. "Shall we sit?"

"I am honoured, sir. Deeply honoured. I am Sir John Vanbrugh of Lettons, very much at your service."

They sat down to improve the acquaintance over the claret, and in the course of the confidences exchanged between them, Mr. Witherington heard again of the coming of Baldock into Hampshire.

"Not before he was needed, egad," swore Sir John. "For there's no hope in Blount. The old dodderer sleeps at his post. Sleeps like the dead, stab me. Gad! If I but had the luck to run into Baldock now, I could show him how to make a quick end of this cursed thief."

Mr. Witherington's attention quickened. He begged Sir John to be more explicit, to confide in him how the thing was to be achieved.

Sir John obliged him. "Don't I know where Evans stays? In the Staunton Thicket. He lurks there under cover, like a fox watching a hen-roost. He bounced out of it to-day, just as he did when last he robbed me, and he vanished into it again. I'll make oath he's there at this moment, waiting for his next victim. And if I but knew where to find this riding-officer, and could find him quickly——"

"You may do better," Mr. Witherington interrupted, now quivering with excitement. In a dozen words he told of the wager he had laid. "I've sworn to deliver him to the Sheriff tied neck and heel, and you arrive in the very nick of time to save me from being forestalled by this Bow-Street fellow. If he's where you say, it should be easy to draw him. Let us ride forth together past this thicket, tempting Captain Evans to come and rob us. Between us, and forewarned, we should easily make his capture. What say you?"

What Sir John said was not stimulating; he was so full of doubts that Mr. Witherington began to fear he wanted spirit. He argued that seeing two able-bodied horsemen the Captain might hesitate to show himself. These gentlemen of the road were cautious, craven dogs, who became shy when they espied more than a single victim.

"Then we'll oblige him," said Mr. Witherington with confidence. "Put me on the road to this thicket, and then leave the rest to me."

"You'll face him single-handed?" Sir John displayed consternation. But the beau laughed with the careless confidence of the knight-errant.

"As you please, since you're resolved," said Sir John. "I can certainly put you on your way. I'll ride with you as far as Tupper's Corner, which is no more than a stone's cast from Staunton Thicket."

He yielded to Mr. Witherington's impatience to set out at once, lest even at this eleventh hour the Bow Street man should forestall him. And, indeed, there was less time to lose than even his eagerness imagined; for Baldock's artful diligence had just borne fruit. Within two or three hours of Mr. Witherington's meeting with Sir John Vanbrugh, a stable-lad at Faringdon, dazzled by the glitter of promised gold, was able to inform the thief-taker that Captain Evans was reported to have robbed a gentleman that very morning near Staunton Thicket, between Alton and Farnborough. To this the lad added the opinion—evidently shared with Sir John—that the thicket was a favourite lurking-place of the Captain's, and that it was likely enough he might be found there.

Thus it fell out that by noon of that same day Baldock and his men were pounding along the road by which Mr. Witherington and Sir John had ridden a few hours earlier. They were approaching Tupper's Corner when round it, at a trot, came a well-mounted gallant in a gold-laced blue coat and a flaxen wig. Advancing towards them, the resplendent figure drew rein, and held up a hand to stay them.

"Well met," was his greeting. "You'll be the Bow Street men sent after Captain Evans?"

"Faith, sir, ye've shrewd eyes," said Baldock suspiciously.

"It has been remarked before. But there's little need for them at present. You wear a sort of livery that's not to be mistook, and it's known you were sent from London to mend the Sheriff's shortcomings. My name is Witherington. Ye may ha' heard of me."

Such was the shock that it was a moment before Baldock found breath to loose a great horse-laugh. "'Eard o' ye!" He choked in his sudden mirth as he scanned the splendours of our frowning gentleman. "'Eard o' ye! Blood and 'ounds! You're him what undertook to catch Tom Evans. Ha, ha! Ha, ha!" He held his sides, and squirmed, convulsed, in the saddle.

His satellites, no less quick to perceive the humour of this mincing dandy's presumption, abandoned themselves to a like hilarity, whilst a limp mocking hand was flung out by Baldock to feed the derision.

"And . . . and I suppose ye'll ha' taken him by now," spluttered the catchpoll.

The gallant sat his horse, one hand on his hip, his head thrown back, such a curl on his lip and so haughty a blaze in his eyes that they were gradually brought to a sense of the deference due from men of their station to a gentleman of his. When he had reduced them by his stare to a sheepish silence, his lip curled further.

"Stab my vitals!" said he. "Now that the thorns have ceased from crackling under the pot, I'll inform you that, in effect, I have taken Captain Evans."

"You . . . you've taken him?" gasped Baldock.

"Ready for delivery to Sir James, bound neck and heel as I wagered. You see me on my way to Alton for a chaise." With cold authority he added: "Since I've met you, I'll require you to lend a hand." He touched his horse as he spoke, and, without waiting for an answer, rode past them and on, leaving them to follow.

The three looked at one another in crestfallen awe, and then obediently fell in behind him.

The tobyman, he was to tell them later, with immense condescension, was bestowed in a cottage near the village of Foyle, a cottage which had long served the scoundrel as an unsuspected hiding-place. Later he was to tell them also, and with becoming loftiness, that, being no professional catchpoll, he would scorn to claim the reward. He did not soil his hands with blood-money. That would be for Baldock and his men. Enough for him the satisfaction of having been as good as his boast and the fifty guineas Sir James had lost to him. It was an announcement that roused the thief-takers from their dejection and changed reluctant into eager obedience.

By a country lane that was no better than a cart track they came in the early afternoon to that cottage within a mile or so of Foyle, with the chaise trundling after them. Dismounting, the thief-takers followed their leader round to the back, through a little plot of neglected kitchen-garden. As they approached, the neigh of a horse welcomed them from a wooden lean-to that stood against the cottage wall.

Baldock checked at the sound, then stepped to the door and threw it open. His indrawn breath was audible, and the men, peering over his shoulder, beheld a tall, sleek roan mare with a white blaze. "That be the nag!" he cried. "That be the nag, sure enough!"

"And now for the man himself," said our gentleman, as he unlocked the cottage door.

It was a mere hovel, of two rooms below and a loft above, to which there was access by a ladder. But they did not go beyond the meanly furnished room upon which the door had been opened. In a corner they beheld a bundle, which the beau dragged across the uneven earthen floor into the light.

"There is your man."

Baldock stooped over a gentleman in black, trussed like a fowl, and breathing stertorously. His grizzled wig was awry on a cropped head, disclosing on the brow a lump as large as a pigeon's egg. "Ecod!" muttered the thief-taker. "What ails him? Is he drunk?"

The beau laughed. "After a fashion. When he recovered from the tap I gave him, he asked for a drink. It was only charity to let him have a cup of his own ale, but I added something to it, so as to keep him quiet. He'll give less trouble that way."

"Ay, ay," Baldock agreed. "Here, my lads. Out with him."

As they bore the inert body to the chaise, the officer rubbed his hands and grinned. "Faith, sir, as a catchpoll ye put me to shame, so ye do."

Our fine gentleman stiffened. "You may spare me your praise, sirrah. I don't aspire to the honour of belonging to your inept profession."

Crestfallen, Baldock mounted, and they set out for Compton Mallet, with the captive in the chaise. But, coming through Alton again an hour or so later, our gentleman drew rein before *The George*.

"Ride you on," he commanded. "Tell Sir James I follow."

Baldock hesitated, turning a thirsty eye upon the inn. "Ecod, sir, my lads, too, would be glad of a sup of ale."

The beau looked down his nose at him. "Have you no thought for your duty? Aren't you aware that you have a prisoner? Get on, man. Get on," was his merciless command. "And tell Sir James to have his guineas ready. Though I'll be there as soon as you are."

Cowed by that peremptoriness, Baldock did not stay to argue.

"Damn the sour pimp," he grumbled to his lads, as they jogged on. "Very high-and-mighty for a silly popinjay. All blown up with pride because he's taken a tobyman, 'od rot him."

They found some passing comfort in a wayside ale-house farther on. But in such subjection were they to the haughty Mr. Witherington that they dared not linger over their huckle-my-butt lest he should discover them there. Mr. Witherington, however, was evidently taking a well-earned ease at *The George* at Alton, for he had still not overtaken them when, as night was falling, they came to Compton Mallet. Admitted by the faded butler, Baldock trod heavily in self-assertiveness into the presence of Sir James, who sat at supper.

"We've got the Captain, Sir James," he announced exultantly.

The Sheriff thrust back his chair, and rose from the candle-lit table. "Got him, d'ye say?"

"All tied up and snug. My lads are carrying him in."

"That's brave. That's well done." Sir James was flushed with satisfaction. "And you

were ahead of that fool Witherington.”

Baldock lost some of his assertiveness. “I’d not say that, Sir James. Not quite. Ye see, Mr. Witherington helped us to take him.”

“Helped you?”

Perforce Baldock must explain, since soon Mr. Witherington would be there to give his own account. The joviality faded out of Sir James’s countenance. Black annoyance replaced it when Baldock added: “But the gentleman’s behaving generous. He’s leaving the reward to us.”

This had not been at all in the Sheriff’s reckoning. He was thinking not of the reward but of the wager which lost him fifty guineas, besides leaving the laugh with Mr. Witherington.

“And I suppose you think you deserve it.” The Sheriff’s tone was bitter. “Odslife! You boast yourself Bow Street’s best catchpoll, and you let yourself be outdone by the first popinjay that takes your work in hand. I hope you’re proud of yourself, Baldock.” Abruptly he added: “Where is this fellow?” And he strode out into the hall, leaving the shamefaced Baldock to follow.

The captive, still trussed and still under the drug, lay in a heap on the floor with Baldock’s men standing over him. The Sheriff stepped up to him, seized his shoulder, and shook him with angry impatience.

“Still asleep is he?” He stopped, and thrust aside the grizzled wig, which half covered the man’s face. Then he caught his breath and stooped still lower. He loosed first an oath and then a laugh, straightened himself and turned upon Baldock, who stood behind him.

“Is this Captain Evans, you dolt? Rat me! You’ve been finely cozened.”

“Co . . . cozened! cozened? By whom have I been tricked?”

“I’ll suppose it would be by Captain Evans. For whom else would be the gentleman who commanded your help?”

“Nay, nay, your honour. That’s not possible. For if that was Captain Evans, then who the plague is this?”

“This, you fool,” said the Sheriff, “is Mr. Witherington.”

LOADED DICE

HIS LORDSHIP WAS PEEVISH; that was his lordship's norm; but he was more than usually peevish this afternoon. His lordship's secretary and cousin was sardonic. That, too, was normal. Also, the more peevish his lordship the more sardonic his secretary; and the more sardonic the secretary the more peevish his lordship. Thus, each reacting on the other, their relations were approaching the intolerable.

They had dined reasonably well in this cosy, panelled room above-stairs in the *Red Fox Inn* at Farnborough, where they had broken their journey. Now, the cloth removed, a decanter of port stood on the round, polished mahogany table, glowing like a gigantic ruby in the light of a fire that burned clear and frostily. The decanter was flanked by graceful, long-stemmed glasses, a dish of walnuts, and a rather scattered pack of playing-cards. They had been gaming a little, for his lordship's amusement and the secretary's profit. Beyond the table, in a high-backed leather chair, lounged Mr. Gascoyne, the secretary, making an entry in a little leather-bound note-book. His lordship stood by the window, fretfully tapping one of the panes, his pale eyes staring out at the wide expanse of snow-enshrouded country.

The ticking of a little wooden clock on the overmantel, overhung with holly in honour of the Christmas season that was upon them, served to stress the silence.

At last the secretary spoke.

"That will be twenty-three guineas you owe me, Frank," he said, and closed his note-book.

"Will it?" His lordship spoke sourly, without turning. "Ye're a damned expensive opponent, Basil. You always win."

"Be thankful. For if it were otherwise I shouldn't play. A poor devil with but a few hundred pounds a year of his own, and the extravagant tastes of his kind, must perforce look for the crumbs that fall from your opulent table."

Candour and mockery were the blended wares in which Mr. Gascoyne habitually dealt—which was one reason why Lord Harpington liked him. He was a provider of moral salt to temper the insipidity of the fare by fate and nature predestined to his lordship. Yet now the candour and mockery were so sharp that his lordship swung round in surprise.

"Ye're deuced bitter, Basil."

"It's the truth that's bitter. I but enunciate it."

"And that's worse!" cried his lordship. "I vow to God you grow unendurable."

"Ah well," said Mr. Gascoyne, "you'll not have to endure me much longer." And he reached across to pour himself a glass of wine. He was a lean, active young man, with a sallow hatchet face under neatly-queued black hair that disdained powder. He was dressed with simple elegance in a riding-suit of dark green cloth, with long, black boots armed with tiny silver spurs, and there was a vague, easy grace in his movements.

His lordship, plump and fair, and slightly overdressed—in each and every detail an antithesis to his secretary—stared a moment in speechless amazement.

"What the devil d'ye mean by that?" he asked at length. "Ye're not thinking of leaving me?"

“What’s to surprise you? You’re getting married. Single, I have found you difficult. Married, I should probably find you impossible. Besides, what place—what endurable place—could there be for me in a connubial ménage? Your wife would probably disapprove of my ways and habits and general want of respect for your lordship.”

“Basil!” There was dismay as well as indignation in the cry. “I thought you were my friend!”

“So did I. So I am. But I find that you grow more peevish and difficult in a measure as you put on flesh. And you put on flesh alarmingly. A vile habit, which will probably be encouraged by marriage.”

“Oh, damn the marriage!” his lordship exploded. “It’s none so certain, after all.” He rolled to the fire, and planted himself squarely with his back to it. “It’s bad enough having to give up Rosie, without losing you as well—and for what, when all’s said? For a saucy baggage who rallies me, and . . . and slights me at every chance, and . . . and altogether is at pains to show that she . . . oh, curse it! . . . that she hasn’t the least taste for me.”

“Since you realize it, why marry?” quoth the secretary, his voice hardening.

“You know very well why,” was the irritable answer. “That spendthrift father of mine. Molly Westrup is no common heiress. And a fine, handsome filly, and . . . and of course I’m deuced fond of her—damn her! D’ye suppose I’d have cut with Rosie, and endured that horrible scene with her, if I hadn’t been sharp-set on Molly Westrup? D’ye suppose we’d be travelling to Priorlands to spend Christmas with that peddling, ill-bred moneybags of an uncle of hers if it had been otherwise?”

Mr. Gascoyne sipped his wine in silence.

“Pour me a glass,” said his lordship, curtly.

The secretary obeyed. His lordship gulped the wine. Then he looked at Mr. Gascoyne, and fetched a sigh.

“I’d give a deal to . . . to win her affection,” said he.

“You’re doing so,” Mr. Gascoyne reminded him. “You’re giving up Rosie and probably me.”

His lordship let the gibe pass. He sighed again. “I wish I had your way with the women, Basil!”

Mr. Gascoyne looked up almost startled. “Of what will you be accusing me next?”

“Oh, I know. You waste no thought on them. You’re a cursed puritan, a cold-blooded fish of a man. But you draw them to you in spite of yourself. I’ve seen it. I believe in my soul that if Miss Westrup were given the choice she would prefer you, with your few beggarly hundreds a year, as you say, to me, with my title and the rest.”

Mr. Gascoyne’s eyes were wide, and fixed in their stare; and the unobservant viscount never noted how white his secretary’s face had become. He smiled faintly, as if with difficulty.

“Why do you say that?”

“It’s the way she looks at you. But it’s the same with them all.” He was plaintive. “Why, that slut of a chamber-maid just now all but boxed my ears for no more than pinching her chin; yet if ever eyes invited liberties it was when they looked at you. What the devil the women should find to admire in your lean shanks and lantern jaws is a mystery to me. But there it is; you’ve a luck with them that’s denied me.”

“You can say that in spite of Rosie, drowned in tears of despair and demanding a thousand guineas with which to patch up the heart you’ve broken?”

"If you mention Rosie again, I shall quarrel with you," snapped his lordship, and he strode back to the window, fuming.

A spell of brooding silence followed. Mr. Gascoyne reached up to the overmantel for a fresh pipe, loaded it from a leaden jar and lighted it with a spill. He smoked reflectively whilst his lordship stood moodily tapping the pane as before. From outside came the sound of hooves and wheels, muffled by the thick carpet of snow, and presently the harsh voice of the post-boy, shouting:

"House! House!"

His lordship, who had craned forward idly to view the newcomers, drew back with a sharp exclamation.

"Gad! What'll be the meaning of this? Burn me if it isn't old Westrup and Molly? What the devil are they doing here, instead of waiting at Priorlands to receive us?"

"We are not expected there until evening," Gascoyne reminded him. He had risen, and stood now, tall and tense, by the table. "Shall I ring and send them word that you are here?"

"Pray do."

Yet before the waiting-maid had come in answer to the summons his lordship had changed, or at least modified, his intention. He desired his secretary to write a brief note to Mr. Westrup, and instructed the girl to give it to him when the lady was not looking.

Within five minutes, Mr. Westrup, portly and rubicund, rolled into the panelled room with hands outheld to greet his lordship. But care sat on his brow, and lurked in the very creases of the mechanical smile he donned. In passing, he had flung the secretary a curt nod.

"My lord! My lord!" he bleated. "This is most fortunate. It is what I hoped. 'Pon honour it is." He took snuff copiously and nervously. He was manifestly ill-at-ease.

"A glass of port, sir?" Mr. Gascoyne invited, decanter in hand.

"I thank you, sir . . . I thank you."

"You arrive most opportunely," was his lordship's welcome. "Nothing could be more timely. I have been thinking, and I'm not altogether happy." Thereafter he held forth at length, and what he said was much what he had said already to Mr. Gascoyne. He dwelt upon his affection for Miss Westrup, and his distress at the indifference to him which he suspected in her.

Mr. Westrup seemed surprised. "Faith, now, it's the very subject in which I desired a word with you myself. And I'm glad of this chance of a heart-to-heart talk with your lordship." Then he became emphatic, as a man will who desires to convince himself as well as others. "It's not indifference in the girl, my lord. Not indifference at all. It's . . . it's . . . the devil knows what it is. I've been wanting to talk to you about it. She's plaguey capricious. She takes after that trying woman my poor brother married."

His lordship breathed noisily, apprehensively. What he had sought was contradiction. This unexpected measure of agreement deepened his dismay. "At least, then, you confess that there is occasion for my concern." His fair, plump face was overcast.

"Confess it?" said Mr. Westrup. "Of course I confess it. I am glad you should have perceived for yourself how it is with the baggage. I have been so flurried and cluttered at the thought of your coming to spend Christmas with us while the minx is in her present mood that . . . that, ecod, I've been praying I might have this chance of a word with you beforehand."

The viscount's pale eyes vacantly considered Mr. Westrup, who stood now warming himself by the fire. Then his lordship poured himself another glass of wine and drank it.

"Vile port!" he criticized.

"It's your palate," said the secretary, bluntly. "You drink too much."

Mr. Westrup's face expressed surprise and disgust. Like most parvenus he went in awe of titles, and he never could understand how a nobleman came to tolerate these liberties in a secretary, a paid servant. He, too, had paid servants in his counting-house in the city, creatures who quailed under his glance and quivered at his nod, men who never dared to speak unless questioned, and this although Mr. Westrup was not a viscount. He concluded with regret that although a member of the peerage there must be a strain of weakness in Lord Harpington's character, a strain deplorable in one so highly placed.

"Ye see," he said, presently, "that niece of mine has stuffed her head with romantic nonsense."

"Egad," said Mr. Gascoyne, "ye'll not be so discourteous as to suggest that his lordship ain't romantic!"

The merchant was disconcerted.

"No offence, my lord—no offence," he protested.

Harpington dismissed the matter by a gesture. "Be plain," he entreated.

"It's best, I am sure," Mr. Westrup agreed. "You should know exactly where we stand. Ecod, it's time you did; necessary that you should. To be plain, as your lordship bids me, this misguided girl swears at present that she will not marry you. I've done what I can," he added, hurriedly. "Your lordship may be sure of that. I've vowed that she shall not have a penny of mine unless she becomes Lady Harpington. Her answer is . . . well, damme, it's not civil."

"I always deemed her a lady of spirit," said the incorrigible Mr. Gascoyne, preserving his flippancy in spite of the gloom of his companions.

"Spirit!" roared her uncle. "Damme, she has more spirit, as you call it, than is decent in a maid. My poor brother was too weak with her. He let her grow up a hard-riding hoyden. Too used to horses! Not good for a woman!" He took snuff again. "And now, ecod, when she has the chance of a noble marriage, it's heroics she wants, as if heroic husbands were ever good for a woman's peace of mind."

His lordship sank mutely into a chair.

"I have often said you are too fat," Mr. Gascoyne rallied him. "But you wouldn't heed me."

"Really, sir—really, Mr.—er—Gascoyne," spluttered the East India merchant. "I call that an impertinence. Ecod I do."

Blandly Mr. Gascoyne pulled at his pipe. "Most pertinent, I assure you. It is impossible to be fat and heroic at the same time."

"You call his lordship fat?" Mr. Westrup was scandalized.

"Too fat for a hero."

"You're mighty free of your opinions, sir; and to me they seem singularly superfluous."

"They appear to agree with your niece's, Mr. Westrup."

"Oh, don't heed him," broke in his lordship, fretfully. "He's like that. A crossgrained dog that must be snarling."

"I'd muzzle him if he were mine—with deference to your lordship," said Mr.

Westrup, and was made still more savage by the carelessness with which Mr. Gascoyne blew smoke in his face.

“What we have to consider,” said his downcast lordship, “is what’s to be done. Can I conceivably go on?”

“Of course you can.” Mr. Westrup was vehement. “Your lordship would never own yourself beaten by the passing whim of a . . . a bread-and-butter miss. All you need is to satisfy these sickly romantic longings. That’s what I had to tell you. If only you could do . . . something to fire her fancy, now. Eh? Give it thought, my lord. Give it thought.”

“Fire her fancy?” My lord was nonplussed.

“Turn highwayman, for instance,” mocked Mr. Gascoyne; “emulate the exploits of Sixteen-String Jack; or, better still—I have, it!—hire an actor to play the highwayman, to hold up and carry off the haughty maiden; then enter Viscount Harpington, on horseback very heroic, to give chase and overtake the scoundrel, and rescue beauty in distress. Perseus delivering Andromeda. Then we have Beauty swooning on the hero’s breast; haughtiness conquered by heroism—the whole served hot with a sauce of wedding-bells. Bear with me if I mix my metaphors.”

The viscount shrugged his shoulders in irritation. He accounted his secretary’s levity ill-timed. But, incredibly, it was left for Mr. Westrup to grow solemn.

“Ecod, sir!” he cried. “You may jest, but, as the saying goes, there’s many a true word spoke in jest. And never a truer than that. It is just such a comedy would do what’s wanted.”

It was Mr. Gascoyne’s turn to stare. “Fudge!” was his rude comment.

“You may say ‘fudge’, young man, and be as uncivil as you please; but you listen to me, my lord.” He became almost eloquent in an elaboration of the notion that Mr. Gascoyne had so mockingly propounded. He amplified it where necessary, until he had presented them with a plot complete in every detail. From the apathy in which his lordship listened at first, his feeble will gradually came under the spell of the merchant’s vehemence.

“ ’Pon honour,” he said, at last, “I believe it could be done.”

“Fudge!” said Gascoyne again. But neither of them heeded him.

“It can certainly be done,” the nabob insisted, entirely enamoured of a conception which he now believed to be his own. “The more I think on it, the better I like it. And there’s no time to lose. Why not contrive it this very afternoon? We have the means at hand, thanks be to this most fortunate meeting. And we shall yet spend a merry Christmas at Priorlands, and toast the future Lady Harpington.”

“Gad! Westrup . . .” His lordship came to his feet, a flush stirring in his cheeks, and clasped hands with his prospective uncle-in-law.

Over by the fireplace, Gascoyne, who did not appear to share the sudden enthusiasm of the other two, was pulling fiercely at his pipe.

“You have the means, you say. But have you? Isn’t there something you forgot? Who is to play the highwayman in this pretty comedy?”

“Why, you will, of course, Basil,” cried his lordship.

Mr. Gascoyne’s pipe fell with a clatter to the fender, and was shattered. “Not for a thousand pounds,” said he.

Westrup turned slowly to survey him.

“If I were to say two thousand?” he asked.

“I am not for sale, Mr. Westrup.” Deliberately Gascoyne turned his shoulder upon the merchant. “Frank,” he said, and for once his tone was serious, “this foolery goes no further. If you can’t win the lady by fair means, you owe it to yourself not to attempt foul ones.”

That put Mr. Westrup in a rage. His countenance became congested.

“I marvel your lordship tolerates him. I do so, ecod!”

His lordship, if annoyed, remained peevishly conciliatory.

“After all, Basil, it was yourself proposed the thing.”

“In jest, man. I was rallying you.”

“You permit yourself singular liberties, sir,” fumed Westrup.

“But no liberty to equal the proposal that I should take a hand in so unseemly a business,” said Mr. Gascoyne.

“Unseemly!” protested his lordship. He forced a laugh. “Sink me, Basil! Have you never heard that ‘all is fair in love and war’?”

“Even loaded dice?”

“Ay, or marked cards, if you will.”

Gascoyne looked at him narrowly for a moment. “You believe that, do you?” he asked at length.

“Believe it? Of course I believe it.”

“Why, then, since you believe it, I don’t see why I shouldn’t do as you require.”

“You mean you’ll play the highwayman?”

“That’s what I mean.”

After that they went, as it were, into committee, to settle details.

Thanks to Mr. Gascoyne’s wit and invention, fully deployed now that he had committed himself to a share in the adventure, this did not take long. A half-hour later Mr. Westrup was driving out of Farnborough with his niece, who remained in ignorance and unsuspecting of those with whom her uncle had been closeted at the *Red Fox*.

The sun’s orange disc was on the rim of the snow-bound expanse of Bagshot Heath, and the blue of the clear sky was fading to turquoise, when the great family coach toiled up the last gradient and reached the summit. It lumbered past the fir copse in which Mr. Gascoyne—who had set out ahead—sat his horse and waited. He allowed it to go by, and remained at his post, there on the heights of Chobham Ridge, until, in the valley below, a half-mile or so away, a horseman, whom he knew for his lordship, came into view, approaching by the same road from Farnborough.

Thereupon Mr. Gascoyne wheeled his horse, and set off in pursuit of the coach, which by now was a good quarter of a mile ahead. He rode at an amble, deep in thought, without lessening the distance between himself and the vehicle. He was considering the exact manner of accomplishing the thing ahead. It had been settled before he set out that he should swing the girl to the withers of his horse, and so ride off with her. Mr. Westrup had feared that this might prove difficult; but he agreed with Mr. Gascoyne that if it could be accomplished the effect would be infinitely more dramatic than a mere scuffle at the carriage door. Also, the girl’s terror being naturally increased if the supposed highwayman should succeed in thus rudely carrying her off, it followed that her gratitude to his lordship when he rescued her would be commensurately greater, and thus her surrender to him the more assured. His lordship being better mounted than Mr. Gascoyne, whose horse would, moreover, labour under a double burden, it follows that the latter must inevitably be

quickly overtaken.

It was this last point that was chiefly engaging Mr. Gascoyne's thoughts, as he now ambled forward through the crisp air of that December evening. And so engrossed was he that he never heeded a horseman in a brown coat with tarnished lace, and a round hat, who approached briskly from the south along a bridle-path that crossed the high road rectangularly at a four-armed sign-post some little way ahead.

Mr. Gascoyne and the horseman converging towards this sign-post reached it at the same moment. Mr. Gascoyne eyed the fellow keenly. Nothing could have been more untimely than this traveller's advent and the secretary could but hope that their way did not lie along the same road.

"The compliments of the season to you, sir," the horseman greeted him, and before Mr. Gascoyne could answer, swung his nag across the secretary's path. The rays of the setting sun glinted ominously on the long, polished barrel of a pistol, ostentatiously displayed.

"I'll be troubling your honour for a little Christmas gift," said the facetious rogue.

Mr. Gascoyne, taken aback, looked into a villainous pockmarked face, with a stubble of beard, and fierce, hard eyes. He laughed, finding it peculiarly humorous to be thus held up by a real highwayman whilst in the very act of playing the highwayman himself. On the instant he decided to keep to the part.

"Stab me!" said he. "Does dog eat dog on Bagshot Heath?"

The tobyman stared, clearly not understanding; but his pistol, at the cock, continued to cover Mr. Gascoyne.

"Whajer mean—dawg eat dawg?"

"I mean does one gentleman of the toby prey on another hereabouts? I am a stranger to the place as yet. Howslow is my usual hunting-ground. So I ask the question."

"You a cove of the toby?" The highwayman was incredulous and mistrustful.

In order to reassure him, Mr. Gascoyne, who was learned in many curious arts and sciences, addressed him in the same canting language, known to every professed rogue in England.

"Would you nip a boung from a gentry cove of the pad? Why then, ye're no better than a damned foist, and deserve to have your stumps in the harman. Bing a wast."

The highwayman's gasp was audible.

"Ye can cant," said he, and lowered at last his pistol. "But—skewer my vitals!—ye've little the look of a cove of the pad."

"Take a lesson from it, brother. Thus you may last longer. Come, my lad, bing a wast—out of my way. There's room for both of us, and game for both of us, on the Heath, as I can show you."

"Can you so?" quoth the ruffian, sneering.

"Ay, can I. Listen, man. There's a gentry cove following, well-mounted on a sturdy roan—a lord, no less, with well-lined purse. I took his measure at the *Red Fox* at Farnborough. I've been jogging easily to let him overtake me, which is why I let that coach go by. But as you seem more in need of a good nag, I'll leave him to you, and take the coach instead."

"Sink me, ye're mighty accommodating," said the suspicious ruffian. "Why shouldn't I go after the chaise?"

"Because that knacker's carrion you're riding could never overtake it. But it's as you

please.”

The highwayman considered him narrowly. “I’d be more likely to trust you if you weren’t so damned civil.”

“Perhaps I can persuade you,” said Mr. Gascoyne.

Equipped, as he came, to play the highwayman, this was not difficult. From his pocket he drew a square of black crêpe, and stuck the edge of it under his hat, so that it covered his face like a mask. Then, whilst the other’s attention was riveted, he unobtrusively whipped a pistol from its holster, and abruptly levelled it. It happened to be a long and very shiny pistol, specially procured for the occasion.

“Keep your hand down, my lad. How’s that, now? Do you know me for a brother of the pad?”

“What’s your will?” screeched the highwayman, too scared to dare to raise his own pistol again.

“Why, to share sport with you, as I said. Hark!” Faintly from the distance came a clopping of hooves. “That’ll be his lordship. Ride on to meet him, and may his purse prove as heavy as I suppose. Don’t stay to thank me. Be priggling!”

At a disadvantage, covered by that ominous pistol, the highwayman was prompt enough to obey the peremptory order to ride on.

“May you end on the chates if you’re cozening me,” he growled, as he moved past Mr. Gascoyne. Then he plied his spurs, and was off as fast as his nag would carry him in the direction of his lordship’s approach.

Mr. Gascoyne watched that brisk departure, then laughed as he put his own horse to the trot. That opportune highwayman had solved his little problem for him, and it amused him infinitely to consider Harpington’s consternation when confronted by a very different tobyman from the one he was reckoning to meet.

A half-hour later he overtook the coach, his face again covered by the square of black crêpe.

“Stand!” he bawled, and let fly a couple of shots as prearranged.

The postilion, in wholesome fear of a bullet, reined up obediently, whilst forth from the window came the ruddy countenance of Mr. Westrup demanding querulously what might be amiss.

“It’s just,” said Mr. Gascoyne, handling his long and shiny pistol, “that I want to know what treasures you carry in your coach.”

“Treasures, sir! If you want my purse you may have it,” and he flung it down into the snow. “And now perhaps you’ll let us on. I have no treasure save my niece.”

“A niece—a treasure of a niece!” crowed the pseudo-robber, on a note of laughter. “Why, it is such treasure that I love. Put up your hands, you dog.” He admonished the postilion. “If I have any tricks from you I’ll blow your master’s brains out.” He swung nimbly from the saddle, picked up the purse, and then, with the bridle over his arm, advanced and threw open the door of the carriage. “Let us be looking at this treasure, sir.”

The treasure sat huddled in a corner, very pale and breathless.

“Come out here where I can see you,” Mr. Gascoyne commanded gruffly, and reached forward to seize her wrist.

Mr. Westrup, to play the comedy convincingly, attempted to interpose, loud and angry in his protests; and Mr. Gascoyne, to be no less convincing, floored him neatly by thrusting a knee into his stomach with possibly a little more weight than was strictly

necessary.

The girl screamed and shrank resisting; but Mr. Gascoyne's grip of her wrist was as firm as his purpose, and for all her struggles she was dragged relentlessly from the coach. Then, as the pretended highwayman was steadying her upon her feet, she sank suddenly against him, with closed lids and a fluttering sigh.

"Oh 'slife! She's swooned," said Mr. Gascoyne.

"So much the better," muttered Mr. Westrup. "It will make things easier." He was panting as he picked himself up from the floor of the chaise. He pawed his stomach. "Ecod, sir, you used a deal of violence," he complained.

"Would you have had it look what it is?" wondered the other.

"No, no. . . . Away with you now. The Chertsey road, remember."

Mr. Gascoyne was at some trouble to hoist the swooning girl to the withers of his horse. Having at last contrived it and mounted, he held her firmly before him, her head against his breast, and rode off down the sloping road.

At the foot of the hill, when out of sight of the coach, which remained where he had left it, Miss Westrup opened her eyes, and removed her head from its resting-place.

"Well, sir," said she, "I hope I swooned as convincingly as your note commanded. Perhaps now you'll tell me what it means?"

Jogging along at an easier pace, Mr. Gascoyne rendered an account of what was planned in the *Red Fox Inn*.

As she listened her cheeks were flushed and pale by turns, and with these changes of colour there were changes of expression. When he had done, she looked at him soberly a moment. He had removed the black crêpe from his face by now.

"You seem to have been oddly lacking in good faith, sir," she reproved him. "You have hardly behaved well by your friend."

"That will be Harpington's point of view. It need not be yours. I was concerned to behave well to you: to save you from being their dupe. I refused to have any part in it until I saw that if I held to that, they would find someone else to play the highwayman. Then I sent you that note of forewarning, so that I might spare you anxiety, and also so that by swooning you should spare me trouble. If I have behaved ill to Frank, at least remember that I had to choose between that and behaving ill to you."

"You should not have hesitated in the choice. You knew no duty to me."

Mr. Gascoyne said nothing. In the fading daylight his face showed grim and pale. She stirred within the circle of his supporting arm. "Is it necessary that you should hold me quite so tightly?"

"You might fall if I did not."

"I think, sir, that if you will let me alight I could contrive to walk."

"In the snow? Impossible. Have mercy on your feet, so thinly clad."

They reached a sign-post, and Mr. Gascoyne drew rein.

"Why do you halt?" she asked him.

"Because we are at a cross-roads," said he, "and you must decide which way we go. You consider that I have behaved unconscionably. But the harm that I have done is not yet beyond repair."

"What do you mean?" she asked, and Mr. Gascoyne thought that her breathing quickened.

"Before you lies the road to Chertsey. If we follow it we shall no doubt be overtaken

presently by his lordship, who must by now have shaken off my friend, the highwayman. It is for you to choose whether you will allow yourself to be won at once by the heroics with which he will entertain you, or whether, still resisting now, you may return to Priorlands to be constrained into finally becoming Lady Harpington."

"I would yield to constraint, would I? You must think me singularly weak, sir."

"I think you everything that is dear and lovely and wonderful," he said with fervour, "else be sure you would not be where you are at this moment."

"We had better be pushing on, sir," said she, coolly.

"Towards Chertsey?" he asked.

"Why, whither else?"

"Did I not point out that we stand at a cross-roads? I have told you what lies along the road to Chertsey. There is, however, still the Guildford Road. Shall I tell you whither that will lead?"

"Just as you please," said she, still mighty cool.

He was thoughtfully silent for a moment. Then he sighed. "I am answered. I thank you for the mercy you have used. We ride to Chertsey, then." And he wheeled his horse about.

"A moment," she begged him. "After all, perhaps . . . perhaps I had better know about this other road."

He caught his breath before answering. "It leads to love and little else besides," said he.

She lowered her head, and spoke so softly that he barely caught her words. "If I had that perhaps I should want little else besides."

"It means for you the sacrifice of so much, and . . . Oh, Molly, could you go that way with me?"

"At last," said she, between a laugh and a sob, "you set me a question I can answer."

"And you answer . . . ?"

"That way or another with you, my dear." Her voice broke. "I thought you would never see."

"I scarcely dared to look," he cried, and drew her closer to him.

Above them, on the crest of the hill, the lights of a carriage flashed suddenly upon the deepening gloom. She clutched his shoulders.

"Quick," she bade him. "Quick! The Guildford Road." And thus was her choice made.

A letter survives which Mr. Gascoyne wrote to Lord Harpington from Guildford on that memorable Christmas Day.

Dear Frank,

Yourself propounded it that in love and war even loaded dice are fair. Complain not, therefore, that I have loaded the dice against you. Something must have delayed you upon the road, for you left me riding too long with Molly in my arms. This produced inevitable consequences, and she and I were married this morning. Remembering how reluctant you were to break with Rosie, I am sure that you will be glad to find consolation with her, and therefore see no cause for distress on your account. I even hope that, returning me good for evil, you will make our peace with your nabob. I hope that you and he are spending a merry Christmas together, although I dare not suppose that it is as happy as our own.

CASANOVA'S ALIBI

THERE CAN BE little doubt—although it is not explicitly so stated in his *Mémoires*—that it was the sight of the mast of the fruit-boat before the window of his prison that first dropped the seed of inspiration into the fertile soil of his rascally mind.

But let us begin at the beginning of this account of one of the early exploits of that Giacomo di Casanova, who has been aptly described as the Prince of Adventurers, and whom some have accounted the very Prince of Scoundrels.

He was at the time in his twentieth year, but with the appearance of at least another five or six. Extremely tall, well-made and personable, he had already acquired that noble air which later—and coupled with his amazing impudence and still more amazing wits—was to stand him in such excellent stead in the exploitation of his fellow-men. He was perhaps at the most critical age of his life. The career of the priesthood, for which he had been intended by his mother, and for which, surely, there never was born a man less suitable, had rejected him. The seminary at Padua, in which he had been qualifying for holy orders, outraged by the wildness of his almost pagan nature, had very properly expelled him. He had taken the expulsion shamelessly, in that spirit of philosophy for which he is so remarkable, accounting all happenings as for the best. Blithely he had exchanged the seminarist's frock for a laced coat, bought at second-hand, and the steel-hilted sword of the ruffler. Thus arrayed, he had returned in the summer of the year 1743 to Venice, the city of his birth, intent upon following his destiny—*sequere deum*, as he, himself, expresses it. There he eked out at the gaming-tables the slender allowance which his mother sent him out of her earnings on the trestles of a *forain* theatre at Warsaw; and we perceive already the beginnings of that extraordinary success of his at faro and other kindred games; a success so constant that, in spite of his emphatic and repeated assurances, it is impossible to escape a suspicion that he had discovered how to govern fortune by astuteness. But that is by the way.

The trouble with which we are now concerned came to him through one Razetta, a Venetian of some substance and importance, of whom he has many evil things to say, some of which are very possibly true. In what Razetta first provoked his hostility we are not permitted to perceive. But we do know that such was his hatred of the man that although Razetta must undoubtedly have been considered an excellent match for Casanova's sister—and there is no suggestion that his intentions by her were not honest—our young adventurer was determined not to have him for a brother-in-law.

Casanova's sister dwelt, as did Casanova himself in the early days of that sojourn of his in Venice, at the house of the Abbé Grimani, the kindly old tutor appointed to the pair by their absent mother. At this house Razetta became a constant visitor, and as soon as our shrewd-eyed ex-seminarist had perceived the real object of these visits, he determined to put an end to them.

He began with his sister. He addressed her one evening in that pseudo-philosophic strain which he affected—if his *Mémoires* are a faithful mirror of his utterances—a habit of speech acquired, we suppose, in the course of his preparations for a pulpit which, fortunately, he was never destined to disgrace. He reduced her, he says, to tears; which is

not in the least surprising to those acquainted with his rhetoric. Then he flung out in pursuit of her lover, who had just taken leave of Grimani. He overtook him on the Rialto, as he was crossing the bridge, preceded by a servant who carried a lantern. Casanova took him by the shoulder, announced that he desired two words in private with him, and ordered the servant to place himself out of earshot.

Razetta, an uncomely gentleman of five-and-twenty or so, too corpulent for his age, not suspecting what was coming, and deeming it well to use civility towards the brother—and such a brother—of the lady to whose favour he aspired, made no demur.

Casanova proved as prodigal of words with him as he was sparing of tact.

“It distresses me, Messer Razetta, that a gentleman of my condition should be reduced to discussing with an animal of yours so delicate a matter as his own sister. It is an indignity forced upon me by your lack of discretion. You have been wanting in that fine feeling which might have saved us both from the humiliations inseparable from this interview. That, after all, I suppose, was only to be expected from a person of your vulgarity.”

Razetta’s face had become congested. “Sir!” he gasped. “You insult me.”

“I felicitate you upon a susceptibility to insult which I should never have suspected in a man of your deplorable origin and neglected breeding. Since it is so, I am permitted to hope that we may yet understand each other without my being put to the trouble of proceeding to harsher measures.”

“Not another word, sir,” blazed Razetta. “You . . . you . . . I will not listen to another word.”

As he spoke, he swung upon his heel, and was making off when Casanova took him by the shoulder again. I have said that Casanova was of more than common height; it remains to add that he was of more than common strength. Razetta’s soft flesh was mangled in that iron grip.

Casanova swung him round, and smiled balefully into the empurpled face. “It is as I feared,” he said. “Indeed, until you spoke of insult, it had not occurred to me that mere words could be of the least avail with you. Nor, indeed, was I prepared to use with you any argument whatever. My sole intent was to command you never again to show your nasty face at the Abbé Grimani’s whilst my sister is a resident there, and to assure you that in the event of disobedience—a folly to which I implore you not to commit yourself—I shall be under the necessity of breaking every bone of your body, among which your neck will probably be included.”

Razetta shook with fear and rage. “By the Madonna,” he swore, “I go straight to the Signoria, to inform the Saggio of your threats, and to claim protection. You’ll be laid by the heels for it, you rascal. There is law and order in Venice, and——”

“Alas!” Casanova interrupted him. “You precipitate your fate.”

He swung his cane, and brought it down about the shoulders of his victim. Razetta struggled as best he might, struck out in self-defence, and bellowed for help. Over the kidney stones of the bridge his servant came clattering to his assistance. Casanova, resuming his grip of Razetta’s shoulder, pulled him down to the foot of the bridge, where the parapet ended, and incontinently flung him into the canal.

When the servant reached him, Casanova was straightening his cravat and smoothing his ruffles. With his cane he pointed superfluously to the water, where Razetta was floundering and gurgling, in danger of drowning.

“There’s your master. If you have any sense of your duty to mankind you will leave him where he is. But you may want to fish him out for the sake of the wages he will owe you. A pity.”

He turned on his heel and went home to supper, feeling that he had borne himself with infinite credit, but deploring that in the absence of gloves he had been under the necessity of soiling his hands by the contact of so vile a body.

The sequel was what you might expect. Razetta, rescued from drowning, smarting with pain and anger, and still dripping, went instantly to lay his plaint before the Chief Notary—the Saggio della Scrittura—who was responsible for order in the Republic.

Next morning Casanova awakened to find his bedchamber invaded by Messer Grande, as the functionary was styled who executed the orders of the Saggio. In Messer Grande’s large black gondola he was carried off to the Palace of the Signoria, and was presently brought before the magistrate and confronted with Razetta.

With wrathful volubility, punctuated by sneezings, the injured man poured out his bitter tale, and his servant confirmed on oath the truth of every word of it.

The Saggio was stern. “What have you to say?” he asked Casanova.

The swarthy, masterful face was a study in scorn; the full, red lips curled contemptuously. He was not to suffer truth to be an insurmountable obstacle to his defence.

“I have to say, Excellency, that this tale is all a lie. These villains abuse your credulity and make a mock of your justice. Let me throw light upon their motives. This rascal, this gutterling, permits himself the effrontery of paying his addresses to my sister. I have intimated my natural distaste to him, and informed him that it must cease. This, excellency, is his retort: basely to employ you to remove me, so that his ineffable purposes may be served. His lackey there is bribed and suborned to confirm the lies with which he insults you.”

This was merely the beginning of his oration. Volubility never failed him, and whatever the Church may have gained when he was cast out of the seminary, there can be little doubt that she lost a preacher likely to have become famous, another Bossuet. What he may have lacked in evidence he supplied by fervid verbiage. It was of the kind that carries conviction. Unfortunately on this occasion there was against him the testimony of Razetta’s back and shoulders, still contused from last night’s drubbing. The Saggio inquired sardonically whether it was suggested that Messer Razetta had had himself belaboured especially so that he might add weight to his accusation.

Casanova was scornful. “Evidence that he has been belaboured is not evidence that I belaboured him,” he said.

This was reasonable enough. What was not so reasonable was that he allowed the magistrate to perceive that his scorn was for His Excellency’s wits. The Saggio, after all, was only human, and so Messer Casanova was taken back to the black gondola. This was headed towards the Lido, and brought up a half-hour later at the steps of the Fortress of Sant’ Andrea, fronting the Adriatic, at the very spot where the bucentaur comes to a halt when the Doge goes on the Feast of the Annunciation to wed the sea. A year’s sojourn in this prison was the sentence passed upon Casanova for his offence against the peace of Venice.

The place was garrisoned by Albanian soldiers, from that part of Epirus which belonged to the Most Serene Republic. The governor was a Major Pelodoro, whom the

ingratiatory Casanova impressed so favourably that he was given the freedom of the fortress. The Major took a lenient view of his offence, and was persuaded by the singular charm of the prisoner's assurances that the sentence was, anyway, unjust. He gave him a fine room on the first floor, with two windows overlooking the water, and it was from these that Casanova first espied the mast of that fruit-boat, and conceived the notion of enlisting the fruit-seller's assistance so as to escape.

That, of course, was no more than the first crude germinal thought. Another in Casanova's place might have lacked the wit to go beyond it. But he perceived at once that a mere evasion could profit him but little in the end. It would mean remaining a fugitive from justice, probably hunted, certainly unable ever to show his face again in Venice, save at the risk of being dealt with in a fashion far more rigorous than the present. A door was certainly open to him; and he were a fool not to avail himself of it; yet he were doubly a fool unless he could avail himself of it to better purpose than had at first occurred to him.

He gave it thought, and this so fruitfully that when, soon after dawn on the morrow, the gentle splash of an oar sounded below, he slipped from his bed and gained the window. The single mast of the fruit-barge came level with it at that moment.

Casanova put his head between the sill and the iron bar of the window, and called softly to the boatmen.

"Holà, my friends! Have you any peaches?"

"Peaches, excellency? At once."

One of the two men steadied the boat against the wall of the fort whilst the other swarmed up the short, stout mast, with a basket on the crook of his arm. Casanova stretched out to reach it, emptied the peaches on to the floor of his room, and put a gold coin in the basket.

"That," he said, pointing to the glistening ducat, "is fruit of another sort; it grows on the Tree of Wisdom. If you choose you may fill your pannier with the like."

The boatman, stupefied by such munificence, invoked every saint in the calendar to come and protect this prince who gave gold for peaches worth a few pence.

"Show me but where the tree stands, excellency," he ended.

Casanova's answer was indirect. "What would you do for ten ducats?" In naming that sum he named practically all the money in his possession, yet a sum, as he knew, which to a man of the fruiterer's modest estate must appear a fortune.

"Anything short of murder."

Casanova smiled, and nodded. "Be here at ten to-night, then. Now go with God."

Casanova's first impulse was to send the peaches, with his compliments, to the governor's wife. But, considering that his possession of them might afterwards supply a trace, however slender, he decided instead to eat a couple, and drop the remainder, one by one, into the sea.

Later that day, whilst taking the air with the Major's aide-de-camp, he happened to leap down from a parapet of the bastion. As his foot touched the ground he cried out in pain, staggered, and fell in a heap, clapping his hand to his knee. Stefani, the aide, came in quick concern to his assistance.

"It is nothing," said Casanova, and made shift to rise unaided. Finding the task impossible, however, he availed himself of the kindly hand that was proffered. Thus he came to his feet, or, rather, to his left foot, for now that he was standing he found it quite impossible to put his right foot to the ground. It was clear, he declared, that he had

sprained his knee. He clenched his teeth as he spoke in a pain that Stefani perceived must be intense.

Leaning upon his cane on one side, and heavily upon Stefani's arm on the other, he hobbled painfully indoors and straight to his room, where presently he was attended by the surgeon of the fort. The knee was examined, and although no swelling was yet perceptible, it was undoubtedly extremely sensitive, for the patient winced and cried out whenever the surgeon pressed upon the cap.

"Evidently a sprain of the ligaments," the surgeon concluded. "Not very serious, but naturally painful. A very delicate joint, the knee. You have had a narrow escape, my dear sir. As it is, a few days of absolute rest and a bandage according to a fashion of which I possess the secret, and you will be yourself again. But absolute rest, let me assure you, is essential."

"I don't need the assurance." Casanova's lips twisted in painful humour. "I couldn't move if I would."

With the joint tightly bound in a bandage soaked in camphorated spirits of wine, and with the ailing helpless limb stretched across a chair, Casanova moped through the remainder of that day. The Major and some of the officers of the garrison, taking pity upon him, spent a portion of the evening at cards with him, and whatever the condition of his leg, it was clear that his wits had suffered no damage, for despite the small points for which they played he contrived to win a few ducats from them.

When, towards eight o'clock, they left him, to go to supper, he begged that his servant might be sent to him and permitted to spend the night in his room, considering his crippled state.

This temporary valet was a soldier of the garrison, whose services the prisoner had been permitted to hire for a few coppers daily. The fellow's chief recommendation lay in the fact that he had been a hairdresser before enlisting, and Casanova, vain of his thick, lustrous mane, demanded always the utmost attention for it. At this particular moment the sometime hairdresser possessed another quality that commended him to his temporary master. He was a notorious drunkard. Casanova, more than ordinarily indulgent now, supplied him with the means to gratify his vice. He gave him money and made him procure three bottles of a full-bodied Falernian from the canteen. Further, he insisted that the fellow should drink them all himself; that is to say, if such mild persuasion as it was necessary to employ can be described as insistence.

By half-past nine the bottles were empty, and the soldier-valet was snoring resonantly. By ten o'clock the entire fort was wrapped in slumber, for strict discipline prevailed and early hours were kept. Within a few minutes thereafter came the splash of an oar under Casanova's window, and but for the darkness a mast might have been seen.

Suddenly and miraculously cured of his lameness, Casanova slipped from the bed upon which he had been lying fully clothed. Nothing could have been more agile than the gait with which he sped to the window. The opening was crossed by a single rod of iron. But Casanova, whilst tall and strong, was still of a stripling slenderness at this time of his life, and there was just room for him to squeeze through the gap below the bar. He tied a sheet to it, twisted this into a rope, and a moment later he was standing amid the decaying vegetable matter in the barge.

There he found one man only, the fruiterer with whom he had that morning made his bargain. He pressed five ducats into the rogue's hand.

“The other five when the thing is done,” he promised. “Now push off.”

“Whither, excellency?”

“Why, to Venice. Land me at the Schiavoni.”

They had words on this. The boatman had conceived that the fugitive—as he naturally supposed Casanova—would desire him to make for the open sea beyond the Lido, and so head for the mainland. This going to Venice seemed to him fraught with danger, and he spoke of the risk of being sent to the galleys if he were caught assisting the evasion of a prisoner. Casanova reminded him that he was to receive ten ducats, that ten ducats was worth some risk, and that he could not have supposed that he was to receive so great a sum merely in order to take a gentleman for a pleasure jaunt in his foul-smelling barge. Still, if he had been under that delusion, it only remained for him to return the five ducats already received, and allow his passenger to climb back into his room in the fort. As he spoke, in his softest voice, Casanova picked up a stout oaken cudgel that lay opportunely under his hand in the bottom of the boat, as perhaps a gentle hint of what might happen if the boatman’s choice did not happen to be what was desired.

That ended the argument, and a half-hour later Casanova was landed at the Schiavoni. Bidding the boatman await him there, he went off at speed, making for the Piazza, and thence by narrow streets to the Rialto.

It was Razetta’s invariable habit, upon leaving the Abbé Grimani’s, to repair for a while to an obscure café beyond the bridge, taking his way home thence at about eleven o’clock. Casanova was counting upon this. Should the man unfortunately happen to depart to-night from his habit, Casanova must have recourse to sending him a message that would bring him forth.

Leaning upon the parapet of the bridge, he waited patiently, smiling grimly down into the black oily waters in pleasurable anticipation of the business ahead.

He was not disappointed. A few minutes after eleven had struck a man emerged from one of the little side streets on the right, again accompanied by another who carried a lantern. This light, borne by a servant, revealed Razetta.

Casanova quitted his position, and moved down to meet him. The place at that hour was quite deserted, and they had it to themselves.

They came face to face at the foot of the bridge, Casanova walking in the middle of the road. There he halted in such a way as to bar the other’s passage, whereupon the servant raised the lantern so that the light fell upon Casanova’s face. Stupefaction in Razetta was swiftly succeeded by fear. He conceived himself confronted by an assailant. Casanova chose to play the assailed.

“Do you put yourself in my way?” he cried. He whirled the cudgel, which he had thoughtfully brought with him from the fruit-berge, and the lantern flew into a thousand atoms.

“Seize him!” cried Razetta to his lackey. The servant, however, displayed no alacrity. He was nursing a hand that tingled from the blow that had swept away the lantern. Razetta stormed on. “Body of Satan! You’ve broken prison, have you? This will mean the galleys for you, you rascal. The galleys.”

“I don’t know whom you are supposing me,” said Casanova. “But you appear to be in a mistake.”

“Mistake? Do you think I don’t know you, rascal? You are Casanova. Seize him, zany!”

“Seize me, do you say? Madonna! If we are to have violence I must defend myself as best I can.”

On the occasion of their last unhappy meeting he had been armed with a slender cane capable of comparatively light punishment. To-night the stout oaken cudgel that he wielded went near to endangering Razetta’s life. The unfortunate lover screamed under its smashing blows, whilst his servant roared lustily for help. Casanova was too wise to linger. As before, he heaved Razetta into the canal, flung the cudgel after him and, in a voice of thunder, ordered the servant to be silent.

“Instead of squalling there, go and fish him out, so that I may have the pleasure of throwing him in again upon some other evening.”

Already steps were approaching at a run. Casanova vanished into the darkness of a by-street, and within ten minutes of flinging Razetta into the water he was back at the Schiavoni, and once more aboard the fruit-barge. There was a freshening breeze, so they hoisted sail, and made a good speed towards the Lido and the fort of Sant’ Andrea beyond it.

Before midnight had struck Casanova was climbing through the window of his prison. Another couple of minutes and he had peeled off his clothes and put himself to bed. His servant still slept in his chair, as Casanova had left him. One of the boots that Casanova flung at him struck him on the brow, whereupon he awoke with a choking start.

“What is it, sir? What is it?” he babbled, still half bemused from steep and wine.

“You drunken dog!” roared Casanova. “Were you sent here to sleep or to watch over me? I might die for aught you know or care. Go fetch me the surgeon. I am in agony. My knee’s on fire. I have a fever. See, I am all a-sweat. I cannot sleep. Go. Make haste.”

Before that fierce urgency the servant fled, to return in a few minutes with the surgeon, who, in nightcap and bedgown, came puffing and grumbling at this midnight disturbance. Even as he entered Casanova’s room the hour was booming from St. Mark’s through the stillness of the night.

Casanova lay moaning, with his eyes half-closed. Seeing him thus, the surgeon stifled his irritation. “What’s this? What now? Are you in pain?”

“In pain? In Hell, I think, and have been this hour past. A half-hour it took me to awaken that drunken sot. A half-hour of sheer agony. I burn. My knee throbs. I cannot sleep. For God’s sake do something to help me.”

Mechanically the surgeon took his pulse, and to his alarm discovered that it had almost ceased to beat. He was not to guess that in expectation of this Casanova had tied a ligature round his upper arm under his shirt. He departed in order to mix a drug, and on the way roused the governor, to inform him that Casanova was desperately ill. Major Pelodoro cursed Casanova and the doctor with equal fervour for disturbing his rest, unsympathetically turned over and went to sleep again.

Casanova swallowed the drug when it was brought, and the surgeon sat with him until he announced that he felt easier, and thought that he might perhaps now sleep.

In the morning he was so much better that he was able, supported by his servant, to hobble to breakfast in the governor’s dining-room—for the governor had made him free of his table. There he congratulated the surgeon in very graceful and flattering terms upon his skill and the efficacy of his drugs. His knee was much less painful, he announced. The surgeon recommended care and rest for a few days, when he was sure that all would be well.

But there was to be no rest for Casanova just yet. Breakfast was scarcely over when the barge of Messer Grande drew up at the Fort of Sant' Andrea. The functionary was received by Stefani, the aide-de-camp, to whom he announced his errand.

"I am sent by his Excellency the Saggio to seek an explanation from Major Pelodoro. His Excellency desires to know how it happens that he has not been informed of the evasion of your prisoner, Messer Giacomo di Casanova."

"Evasion?" echoed Stefani. "What evasion? There has been no evasion."

"Conduct me to the governor," said Messer Grande, peremptory and self-sufficient.

"I think it will be best," said Stefani, and led the way.

Messer Grande, a big man in black, carrying a cane, was ushered into the Major's office. He repeated the matter of his errand.

"His Excellency desires you to explain how it happens that the evasion of your prisoner, Casanova, should have been communicated to him by others than yourself."

The Major, who was by nature peppery, stared at him with bulging, angry eyes, offended by the policeman's tone. "What the devil is the meaning of this impertinence? Don't put on that air with me, my man. It's as silly as your message."

"Sir!" cried the officer in a big voice.

"Bah! Stefani, be good enough to ask Messer Casanova to give himself the trouble of coming here."

Messer Grande's eyes grew round. His mouth kept them some sort of company. "Do I understand that Messer Casanova is still in the fort?"

"Where the devil else should he be? What's this cock-and-bull tale of an evasion?"

"Cock-and-bull! I only know . . . ah . . . His Excellency is assured . . . He has evidence that Messer Casanova was in Venice last night."

"Has he? Well, I have evidence that he wasn't. Here it comes."

Casanova hobbled in, one arm round his servant's neck, the other round Stefani's, so that between them they seemed to carry him. He looked bland inquiry from the Major to Messer Grande, and waited for them to speak. As Messer Grande merely stared, and the Major merely sneered, it was he, himself, who at last broke the silence.

"May I hope, sir, that your presence here and Major Pelodoro's request for my presence means that the truth of the matter with which I am charged has at last been brought to light, and that you are come to set me at liberty? Since I am suffering, as you may see, the news would be very welcome. Though considering that yesterday morning I had the misfortune to twist my knee, and have since been unable to walk, I am less vexed by my imprisonment at the moment than I might be at another time."

"You spoke of evidence," said the Major, enjoying the high-and-mighty Messer Grande's confusion. "Is that evidence enough for you? Or do you still think I allow my prisoners to escape?"

"I . . . I am at a loss," the functionary confessed. "Here are the facts as I have them from his Excellency." His explanation followed. Razetta and his servant had been before the Saggio that very morning to lay a second plaint against Casanova, the details of which the officer now supplied.

Casanova's face was blank with astonishment.

"Can malice really go so far? This is quite incredible."

"Incredible?" cried the governor. "It's impossible. At what hour does this man say that the assault took place?"

“At a little before midnight.”

“That is easily disproved. But we won’t waste words. Messer Casanova had best go before his Excellency, and his servant and the surgeon, who were attending to him here at midnight, shall go with him.”

“I thank you, sir,” said Casanova. “I can only look upon this as a dispensation of Providence to establish the villainy of Razetta.”

His arrival at the Palace of the Signory surprised the Saggio as much as his appearance in the fort had surprised Messer Grande.

Casanova bowed as gracefully as his crippled condition would permit, a twinge of pain crossing his features in the act. He begged the Saggio, of his charity, to permit him to sit, and when this was considerably granted, he was lowered gently into the chair by the surgeon and his servant, his maimed leg stretched stiffly in front of him. He then delivered one of his famous addresses.

Somewhere in his voluminous *Mémoires* he protests that a gentleman should never have recourse to anything but the truth, save only when he has dealings with rogues, with whom the truth would be unavailing. It would seem to follow that he had a good many dealings with rogues in his time, and it looks in this case as if the Saggio were carelessly included in that category notwithstanding his unimpeachable integrity.

“I understand, Excellency,” he began, “that it is alleged by the man Razetta, and his servant, that last night, near the Bridge of the Rialto, at about midnight, I fell upon him with a cudgel, belaboured him, and then flung him into the canal, all, in fact, precisely as before.”

“That is so,” said the bewildered Saggio.

“When I was last before Your Excellency, I had the honour to inform you that your credulity was being abused and your high office mocked by those two villains, who conspired to procure my ruin. It is not for me to blame Your Excellency for having been their dupe. They were two, and I was but one, and the law—of which Your Excellency is so exalted and enlightened an administrator—runs that the testimony of two persons shall outweigh that of one. Happily there is another justice, which sees into the very hearts of men, a justice more discerning and far-reaching than that human justice of which Your Excellency is so noble and shining a dispenser. This justice has ordained that these rascals should overreach themselves in order to betray their own falsehood. If Your Excellency’s renowned perspicacity should ever plumb the full depth of this infamy, it will be discovered, I have no doubt, that the man Razetta, misled by some false rumour that I had broken prison, and actuated by his malice against me to spur you on to effect my recapture, has come to you with this fresh lie.”

“The falsehood of your having broken prison is, of course, plain,” said the Saggio. “Yet Messer Razetta’s condition this morning, and the testimony of several witnesses, besides his servant, proves beyond doubt that he was cruelly beaten and thrown into the canal.”

“All exactly as before, when I had the honour to point out to Your Excellency that evidence that the man had been beaten was not evidence that I had beaten him. It now appears to be established by the facts that I am not the only person in Venice who knows the execrable Razetta for a villain, and that those others signify their perception of the fact with a violence of which I ask Your Excellency to believe that I am incapable. Not only, as Your Excellency perceives, have I not broken prison, I could not have done so had the

opportunity been supplied, and had I wished to do so. As the surgeon here will tell you, I have been crippled these four-and-twenty hours, unable to walk without assistance. Both he and this servant of mine will swear that precisely at the hour at which I am accused of having committed this assault on the Rialto I was in bed at Sant' Andrea, in extreme pain, in an exhausted condition and quite incapable of walking unaided. At need Major Pelodoro will add his testimony that he was informed of my need of the doctor's assistance at that hour. I will leave it to them to add what may be necessary so as to enable Your Excellency's acute penetration to reach the truth of this affair."

The Saggio heard the other two in turn, questioned them closely, and if they were less prolix, they were so definite that no conclusion was possible other than that which Casanova had indicated.

"It is enough," said His Excellency at last. "Since it is established beyond doubt that Messer Razetta was mistaken in his assailant last night it is impossible to resist the conclusion that he would be no less mistaken on the former occasion."

"Mistaken?" said Casanova, with a wry smile. "Is it possible that Your Excellency does not yet perceive the malice of that wicked man?"

The Saggio took up a pen. "You will be restored at once to liberty, Messer Casanova," he announced. "No need in this instance to confront you with your accusers. The case is too clear. I will deal with them." He bent to write, but Casanova had not yet reached the end of his rascally purpose.

"I go in such dread of the rancour of this villain," he said, "that I implore Your Excellency to accord me the State's protection until I am restored to such vigour as will enable me to protect myself. I shall be eternally grateful for permission to return to Sant' Andrea until my knee is completely mended—a matter of a week or so, the surgeon informs me."

The Saggio considered. "Very well," he said, at last, "if you wish it."

But still Casanova had not done. "I thank Your Excellency, and it only remains for me most respectfully to submit that some amend is due for what I have suffered, morally and physically: the indignity extremely painful to a man of my sensitive honour, the duress in which I have been kept, and, finally, my present crippled state arising directly out of my imprisonment."

"The State, sir . . ." the Saggio was beginning coldly, when Casanova interrupted him.

"Ah, sir, your indulgence! It is not from the State that I suggest that any amend should come. It is not the fault of the State that these misfortunes have happened to me, but solely of this infamous liar Razetta. And I submit—most respectfully and humbly—that from Razetta should come the adequate compensation I solicit."

The Saggio proved sympathetic. Persuaded that Casanova had been ill-used, he confessed that the claim was not unreasonable, and he invited Casanova to state the sum which in his view would be an adequate solatium.

Casanova fetched a sigh. "It is not in ducats and sequins that a gentleman of my condition can appraise the hurts he has suffered in honour and in body. Not, then, to compensate me so much as to punish the abominable Razetta for falsely procuring my imprisonment do I suggest that he should be mulcted in my favour to the extent of—shall we say?—a hundred ducats."

The Saggio pursed his lips. The sum was heavy. "I should say," he opined, "that fifty ducats would be an abundant fine."

“Your Excellency is the best judge,” said Casanova, with angelic submission. “Fifty ducats be it, then, so as to teach him the way of truth and honesty for the future.”

Thus ended the matter in spite of all that Razetta had presently to say, which was a deal, and some of it so offensive and profane that it only served to confirm the Saggio in the conviction that he was dispensing strict justice to a worthless rascal.

With the fifty ducats Casanova set up a faro bank, and prospered so well that before long Venice became too hot for him, and he was compelled to seek fresh pastures for the nourishment of talents which, whilst undoubtedly outstanding, must, by the moralist, be accounted deplorable.

THE OPEN DOOR

“THE OPEN DOOR,” says the Castilian proverb, “will tempt a saint,” which is only the Spanish way of saying that opportunity makes the thief.

It is not pretended that Florimond Souverain de la Galette was a saint, or that only exceptional temptation would lead him to seize an opportunity of profit, whatever the moral considerations involved. Nor did the discerning suppose that he had any right to that too high-sounding name of his, or that it was anything more than one of the theatrical properties calculated to create the romantic background which he conceived proper to his profession. It was of a piece with his favourite description of himself:

“I live by the sword.”

This being translated into vulgar terms meant no more than that he was a fencing-master. The sword by which he lived was buttoned and padded at the point, otherwise he would not have lived by it long. For, in fact, he was an indifferent performer; and if he drove even a precarious trade in the exercise of his art, this was because a great vogue of swordsmanship had been created in the declining lustres of the eighteenth century by the *Art des Armes*, that revolutionary and widely-read treatise on fencing by the great Parisian master, Guillaume Danet.

Those were days in which the name of Guillaume Danet was on every lip. His methods were discussed wherever gentlemen assembled, and fantastic tales were told of his wizardry with the blade.

It was Florimond's pretence that he had studied under Danet. The truth was that he had learnt what swordsmanship he knew in a third-rate Paris fencing-school, where, in addition to sweeping up the floor and furbishing the foils, it had been his function to instruct beginners in the various guards. He had read Guillaume Danet's famous treatise assiduously, and, having scraped together a few louis, the little rascal had gone off to Rheims to set up as a master-at-arms. Over his door he hung a shield, bearing the conventional but in his case unauthorized and inaccurate legend, “*Maître en fait d'Armes des Académies de S.M. le Roi*”. And he appropriated some of the lustre of the great name of Danet by unblushingly proclaiming himself the favourite pupil of that celebrated master.

That magical name accomplished all that Florimond could have hoped, but only until the young gentlemen of the neighbourhood, who had flocked so eagerly to his academy, discovered the falsehood of his pretensions to teach an art of which he himself possessed little more than the rudiments. After that, his only pupils were a few aspiring younger members of the bourgeoisie, and Florimond fell upon esurient days.

His fortunes were touching their nadir when he became aware of that open door which is said to tempt the saint. He made the discovery, by purest chance, at the inn of the *Sucking Calf—Le Veau Qui Tête*—where it was his evening habit to sit over a game of écarté with Philibert the notary, Desjardins the wine merchant, and Fleury the apothecary.

Into that hostelry, on an evening of Spring, came a gaudy, overdressed young man in yellow and silver, with cheap lace at throat and wrist, and a ribbon wherever he could stick one, who had just descended from the Paris stage-coach.

He was the son of a mercer named Desfresnes, of the Rue St. Antoine, and he had lately inherited from his father a modest fortune with which he was setting out upon his travels, proposing upon a quite inadequate education to play in the world the careless, glittering rôle of a man of fashion. With his cheap finery he had put on the insolent airs which he had observed in men of the class of which he aspired to be accounted a member.

There may have been a dozen patrons in the common-room of the *Sucking Calf* when he swaggered in, calling, so as to be heard by all, for the best supper, the best wine, the best room, and the best of anything else the house could supply. In the hush produced by his loud commands, Florimond turned to look him over with an eye of increasing scorn. For Florimond, who, for a time at least, had rubbed shoulders with members of the lesser nobility, knew a gentleman when he saw one.

The day had been a lean one, the cards that evening were not going well for him, and the moment's inattention caused by the noisy advent of this pinchbeck gallant betrayed him into a disadvantageous discard. It was enough to sour his humour.

The newcomer, who had announced his name of Desfresnes in such a way as to make it sound like de Fresnes, conceived it in his rôle that no pretty woman should be overlooked; and little Pâquette of the *Sucking Calf*, with her merry eyes, red lips, plump bosom and tip-tilted nose, suddenly found the young gentleman's arm round her waist and his finger under her chin.

"My dear, I vow to Heaven that you're too dainty a pullet for a provincial inn. I profess to Heaven you'd adorn the Palais Royal. You'd find your fortune there at Février's." With princely condescension he added: "I vow to Heaven you shall wait on me, little one." And in the best manner, as he supposed, of the Palais Royal rake, he placed a kiss, which none could have described as chaste, upon her fresh young lips.

Whether his spuriousness deceived her or not, and whatever may have been her feelings, Pâquette knew her duties too well to make a fuss. With a laugh she slipped from his detaining arm, and moved off to prepare a table. Monsieur Desfresnes was following when Florimond's unkindly comment on a note of mimicry arrested him.

"I vow to Heaven we are to be edified by this canary. He talks of the Palais Royal, of Février's. I vow to Heaven he will have been a waiter there."

The words were bad enough, but carried to every corner of the room by Florimond's thin, piercing voice they aroused a general laugh.

Monsieur Desfresnes stood arrested by this brutal shattering of his proud persuasion that he was dazzling these provincials. He lost his head.

A dark flush on his lumpy countenance, he turned back to the card-players' table. He wore a sword, and, leaning his hand upon the hilt, he thrust it up behind him like the angry tail of a roaring captain. And his tone matched the attitude in truculence. He ransacked his wits for words that should sear and scorch. But, failing to discover them in the little time at his disposal, he contented himself with being haughtily direct.

"Did you talk at me, sir?"

Florimond put down his cards, and swung round on his chair. His glance took in this haughty challenger, from the curls of his cheap wig to the buckles (of gilded brass) on his shoes, and his thin mouth tightened with malice.

"Now that I behold you better I perceive how little that was worth while."

The intransigence of the phrase should have warned Desfresnes that here was a man who, for all his slight build and the rusty black of his garments, might be dangerous. But,

like the fool he was, he allowed himself to be swept forward by his gust of passion. He slapped Florimond's face.

"Let that teach you to mend your manners."

Consternation was followed by hubbub.

Florimond knocked over his chair in his haste to rise, and his three friends rose with him to restrain him. In what he did, however, he was as restrained as he was deadly.

"The lesson calls, I think, for payment. Monsieur Fleury, do me the honour to arrange a meeting for eight o'clock to-morrow morning in the Pré-aux-Chêvres. The length of my blade is twenty-five inches." He bowed with cold formality. "Not to embarrass you, monsieur, I will withdraw."

He marched out stiff with dignity, leaving consternation in the bosom of the Parisian who found himself so abruptly with a duel on his hands. Reminding himself, however, that he had to deal with a benighted provincial, for whom such elementary swordsmanship as he possessed should be more than enough, Desfresnes recovered his confidence, and sustained the ruffler's part.

"I vow to Heaven, sirs, that your friend is in a hurry to get himself killed."

Florimond's three associates regarded him with disconcerting pity. Then Fleury, the apothecary, answered him.

"If he doesn't kill you, sir, you will owe it either to his kindness of heart or to his fear of the consequences. The law is not lenient with a fencing-master, even when he has been provoked."

"A what?"

The three men sighed as one. Philibert shook his big head.

"Ah! You would not know, of course. A fatal ignorance, young sir. The gentleman you have so unpardonably struck is Monsieur Florimond Souverain de la Galette, master-at-arms of the King's Academies."

Desfresnes suddenly felt that the dinner eaten at Epernay had disagreed with him. He stared wide-eyed and pallid, the jauntiness gone out of him like air from a pricked balloon.

"A fencing-master! But—Sacred-name!—one does not fight a fencing-master!"

"It is not prudent," the lean wine-merchant agreed. "But then neither is it prudent to slap a fencing-master's face."

Fleury, however, showed himself brisk and practical. "I trust, sir, that you have a friend to make the necessary arrangements with me?"

"But . . . but . . ." Monsieur Desfresnes broke down, and finally demanded: "Where does he live, this Monsieur de la Galette?"

It was a boy from the inn who conducted him on foot to the shabby house behind the Cathedral where Florimond had his being and his academy.

Florimond's greeting was not encouraging. His scowl was forbidding.

"Monsieur, this is most irregular."

Desfresnes stammered in a nervous flurry. "Mu . . . Monsieur, in ordinary circumstances . . . But these circumstances are . . . quite extraordinary. I did not know that you were a fencing-master."

"Ah! Indeed! I am to wear a placard on my breast, for the warning of impertinent cockerels."

But no insult could inflame anew the young Parisian. "It is impossible that I should meet you."

“Of course, if you prefer that I cane you in the streets . . .”

“Monsieur, I have come to apologize.”

“Apologize?” Florimond laughed, and to Desfresnes it was the most dreadful sound that he had ever heard. “But where do you come from, then? From Egypt, or Persia, or perhaps China? For all that I know, it may be possible in some of these places to slap a gentleman’s face and avoid the consequences by an apology. But in France, monsieur, we arrange it differently, as you may have heard. For even in the Palais Royal, even at Février’s, these things are understood.”

The young man abased himself in intercessions. Florimond, with no other end in view but completely to humble the upstart, did not yet choose to be mollified.

“You fetched the blood to my cheek just now. I shall fetch yours to your shirt in the morning. Then we shall be quits, and honour will be satisfied.”

Desfresnes was in despair. He thought of flight. But his baggage was at the inn, which, moreover, was the post-house. Surreptitious departure would be impossible. His wandering, fearful eyes observed that the furniture of Florimond’s room was shabby, that Florimond, whilst spruce to the casual glance, was threadbare to a close inspection. And so he came by the inspiration that was, in the sequel, to make a rogue of Florimond.

“If I were to offer compensation for the injury, monsieur?”

“Compensation?” Florimond’s eye was terrible.

“You live by the sword. You give lessons for money. Why should you not satisfy your honour by . . . by . . .” He halted foolishly.

“By what, monsieur?”

Desfresnes took a flying leap at his goal. “By ten louis.”

“Leave my house, sir!” roared the incorruptible Florimond.

“Fifteen louis,” gasped Desfresnes, putting up his hands as a shield against the other’s wrath.

But the fierceness had gone out of the fencing-master’s eyes. His lips twitched.

“Fifteen louis! Bah! Name of a name, it costs more than that to smack my face, young sir.”

“Twenty, then,” cried Desfresnes more hopefully.

Florimond became suddenly thoughtful. He stroked his chin. Here was a queer, unexpected shaping of events. Twenty louis was as much as he now could earn in a year. For half the sum he would gladly allow himself to be slapped on both cheeks and any other part of his body that might tempt an assailant. He cleared his throat.

“You understand, of course, that in these matters there can be no question of compensation. Honour is not for sale. But a fine, now: that might be different. After all, I do not want your blood. By a fine of, say, twenty louis, I might consider that I had sufficiently mulcted your temerity. Yes, all things considered, I think I might.”

Desfresnes lost not an instant, lest Florimond should change his mind. He whipped out a fat purse, bled himself and departed.

And from that hour Florimond was a changed man.

An unsuspected source of easy profit had suddenly revealed itself. It was the open door that tempts even the saint. Florimond strangled a conscience that had never been robust, and crossed the threshold.

Twice, in the month that followed, he gave such provocation to travellers resting at the *Sucking Calf* that on each occasion a challenge resulted. True, the meetings provoked

never followed. If Florimond, hitherto so gentle and unobtrusive, had suddenly, to the dismay of his three card-playing friends, become truculent and aggressive, at least, to their consolation, he was always to be mollified by a visit from his intended opponent. Commonly the visit was suggested by Fleury. Of the nature of the mollification which Florimond exacted, his honest friends had no suspicion. From the fact that he now spent money more freely, they simply assumed that the affairs of his academy were improving. Nor did these good, dull men draw any inference from the circumstance that his clothes assumed a character of extreme bourgeois simplicity, and that he abandoned the wearing of a sword, which, in the past, had been an integral part of his apparel.

Their suspicions might have been aroused if Florimond's victims had walked less readily into his snares. Shrewd in his judgment of likely subjects, he spread his net only for the obviously self-sufficient numskull, and he never forced the pace, always leaving it for the victim to commit the extreme provocation.

Subjects such as these were, after all, by no means common. It is certain that at no time did the average run higher than one a fortnight, and with this, Florimond was at first abundantly content. Greed, however, increasing with prosperity, and fostered by the ease with which it could be satisfied, he grew less cautious.

Yet all went smoothly for him until one Autumn evening, when a moon-faced, quiet-mannered man in the plainest of tie-wigs, his sober brown suit almost suggesting a plain livery, descended from a post-chaise at the *Sucking Calf*, and mildly ordered himself supper, a bottle of wine and a bed for the night.

From his table in the usual corner Florimond observed him narrowly, and judged him a timid simpleton of the merchant class, yet a man of substance, since he travelled in a chaise and not by the stage. He was an ideal victim, save that his unobtrusiveness opened no avenue of approach.

Demure and self-effacing, he ate his supper, and Florimond began to fear that at any moment now he might call for his candle, and so escape. Some departure from ordinary tactics became necessary.

Florimond loaded a pipe, rose and crossed the room to the fire, in quest of a light.

The stranger, having supped, had slewed his chair round and was sitting at his ease, a little unbuttoned and somnolent, his legs stretched before him. Florimond trod upon the fellow's foot; after that he stood glaring into the moon-face that was raised in a plaintive stare. Thus for a long moment. Then:

"I am waiting, monsieur," said Florimond.

"Faith! So am I!" said Moon-face. "You trod on my foot, monsieur."

"Let it teach you not to sprawl as if the inn belonged to you."

The man sat up. "There was plenty of room to pass, monsieur," he protested, but so mildly plaintive as merely to advertise his timidity.

Florimond had recourse to stronger measures. "You are, it seems, not only a clumsy lout, but also a mannerless one. I might have pitched into the fire, yet you have not even the grace to offer your excuses."

"You . . . you are amazingly uncivil," the other remonstrated. The round face grew pink, and a wrinkle appeared at the base of the nose.

"If you don't like my tone, you have your remedy, monsieur," snapped Florimond.

Rounder grew the eyes in that bland countenance. "I wonder if you are deliberately seeking to provoke me."

Florimond laughed. "Should I waste my time? I know a poltroon when I see one."

"Now that really is going too far." The stranger was obviously and deeply perturbed. "Oh, yes. Much too far. I do not think I could be expected to suffer that." He rose from his chair at last, and called across to a group at a neighbouring table. "You there, messieurs! I take you to witness of the gross provocation I have received from this ill-mannered bully, and . . ."

Florimond's piercing voice interrupted him.

"Must I box your ears before you will cease your insults?"

"Oh no, monsieur. So much will not be necessary." He sighed mournfully, in a reluctance almost comical. "If you will send a friend to me we will settle the details."

It came so unexpectedly that, for a moment, Florimond was almost out of countenance. Then he brought his heels together, bowed stiffly from the waist, and stalked off to request of Fleury the usual service. After that, pursuing the tactics long since perfected for these occasions, he departed from the inn. As the unvarying routine of the matter had taught him to expect, it was not long before he was followed. Himself, as usual, he opened to the knock, and with his usual air of indignant surprise admitted the moon-faced gentleman. As usual the victim displayed all the signs of distress proper to these occasions. His nervousness made him falter and stammer.

"Mu . . . Monsieur, I realize that this is most irregular. Bu . . . but the fact is . . . I realize that I have been too hasty. It is necessary that I should explain that . . . that a meeting between us is, after all, quite . . . quite impossible."

He paused there, prematurely as it seemed, and as if fascinated by the wicked smile that was laying bare the swordsman's dog-tooth. Into that pause came the sarcastic answer that had done duty on every occasion since Desfresnes':

"Ah! I am to wear a placard on my breast, so as to warn the impertinent that I am a fencing-master."

But the phrase which hitherto had proved so disconcerting proved now the very opposite. The stranger's expression completely changed. It became so quickened by surprise and relief that it entirely lost its foolish vacuity.

"A fencing-master! You are a fencing-master? Oh, but that makes a great difference." The enlivened glance swept round the room, observed its bareness, the lines chalked on the floor, the trophies of foils, plastrons and masks adorning the walls. The man drew himself up. His figure seemed to acquire an access of virility. He actually smiled. "And this, of course, is your school. I see. I see. In that case everything arranges itself."

Heels together, he bowed with the proper stiffness. "Forgive the needless intrusion. We meet, then, at eight o'clock in the Pré-aux-Chêvres." He turned to depart.

For the first time in one of these affairs it was Florimond who was disconcerted. He set a detaining hand upon the other's shoulder.

"A moment, Monsieur le mystérieux. What the devil do you mean by 'everything arranges itself'?"

"Just that." The eyes in the moon-face twinkled with amusement. "For me, as for you, monsieur, a duel with an ordinary civilian would be a serious matter. If there should be an accident the consequences might be grave. You see, I am, myself, a fencing-master. But since you are of the fraternity there are no grounds whatever for my apprehensions."

A sensation of cold began to creep up Florimond's spine. As a swordsman he knew that whilst among asses he might be a lion, among lions he was certainly an ass. He

looked more closely at this stranger in whom he had been so mistaken; he looked beyond the round placidity of that pallid countenance, and observed that the man was moderately tall, well-knit, of a good length of arm and an exceptionally well-turned leg.

“You are, yourself, a fencing-master?” he echoed, and his stare was foolish.

“Even of some little celebrity,” was the answer in a tone of mild deprecation. “My name is Danet.”

“Danet?” Florimond’s voice cracked on the name. “Not . . . not Guillaume Danet?”

Again the stranger bowed, that stiff bow from the waist so suggestive of the swordsman. “The same. Very much at your service. I see that you have heard of me. You may even have read my little treatise. It has made some noise in the world. Until tomorrow, then, at eight o’clock, my dear confrère.”

“But . . . a moment, mon maître!”

“Yes?” The other paused, his eyebrows raised.

“I . . . I did not know . . .”

He heard his own phrase cast in his teeth.

“Am I to wear the name Guillaume Danet on a placard on my breast as a warning to impertinent little provincial fencing-masters?”

“But to meet you, mon maître . . . It is not possible. You cannot wish it. It would be my ruin.”

“That will not matter since you will probably not survive it.”

Wide-eyed, pallid, Florimond stared at this opponent, the very mildness of whose aspect had now become so terrible. Already he had the sensation of a foot or so of cold steel in his vitals. “I will apo . . . apologize, mon maître.”

“Apologize! What poltroonery! You provoke, wantonly you insult the man you suppose to be incapable of defending himself, and you imagine that an apology in private and in secret will adjust the matter. You are caught in your own trap, I think. You had better be making your soul, Monsieur de la Galette. Good-night!”

“Wait! Ah, wait! If now . . . if I were to compensate you . . .”

“Compensate me? I don’t understand.”

“If twenty-five louis . . .”

“You miserable cut-throat, do you dare to offer me money? Not for fifty louis would I forgo the satisfaction of dealing with you as you deserve. To bleed you of a hundred louis might perhaps be to punish you enough. But . . .”

“I will pay it! Master, I will pay it!” Frantically, Florimond made an offer that would beggar him of almost every louis wrung from the victims of his dishonest practices.

Round grew the eyes and the mouth in the round face that confronted him. “A hundred louis!” The great master’s tone reminded Florimond that every man has his price. Slowly Monsieur Danet seemed to resolve. Slowly, with a shrug of the shoulders, he spoke. “After all, why not? The object, when all is said, is to punish your temerity. Since you are penitent, to kill you, or even to maim you, might be too much. I am a man of heart, I hope. It is not in my nature to be inclement. I will take your hundred louis, and bestow them on the poor of Paris.”

It was of no consolation to Florimond to assure himself that the poor of Paris would never see a sou of the money. With a heart of lead he counted out his hoard, and found to his dismay that ninety-eight louis was his total fortune. But now the great Danet showed himself not only clement, but magnanimous. Far from exacting the last obol, he actually

left Florimond three louis for his immediate needs.

You conceive, however, that this generosity did not mitigate the fencing-master's bitter chagrin to see the fruits of months of crafty labour swept away. The only solace he found for his mortification was the reflection that what he had done once he could do again. There would be no lack of pigeons still to be plucked. In future, however, he must proceed with greater caution and not trust too readily to a mild and simple exterior.

So, putting a brave face on the matter, he resumed his habits, and each evening at the *Sucking Calf* he sat like a spider in its web, waiting for the unwary fly to blunder in.

They were on the threshold of winter, a season of diminished travelling, and for the best part of a fortnight Florimond's vigilance went unrewarded. Then one evening a traveller arrived, whose entrance was like a gust of wind, whose voice, summoning the landlord, was sharp with authority.

The vintner bustled forward, and Florimond could scarcely believe his ears.

"Landlord, I am seeking here in Rheims a rascally fencing-master, who is a disgrace to his calling, and who goes by the flamboyant name of Florimond Souverain de la Galette. Can you tell me at what address he may be found?"

It was Florimond, himself, who answered.

With the feeling that the gods were casting a timely gift into his very lap, he sprang from his chair. He seemed to spin round in the act of leaping, and landed, heels together, in a rectangle before the inquirer.

"He is here."

He was confronted by a tall, lithe gentleman elegantly dressed in black, who regarded him sternly out of an aquiline countenance. A cold stern voice rang upon the awed stillness of the room.

"You are that scoundrel, are you?"

At least a dozen pairs of eyes were turned in pity upon this rash stranger who came thus to skewer himself, as it were, upon the fencing-master's sword. A dozen pairs of ears listened attentively to his further words.

"Another in my place might account himself your debtor. For I have to thank you for four pupils who have sought me in the course of the past two months. Each of them had been craftily entangled by you in a quarrel, so identical in detail as to betray its calculated nature. Each of them, so as to keep a whole skin, paid you in blackmail either ten or fifteen louis. Before the last of them came to me for fencing lessons I had already begun to understand the rascal trade you are driving. I have since assured myself of it, and for the honour of the profession of arms, of which I am a jealous guardian, I account it my duty to put an end to it."

"Who are you?" demanded the now livid Florimond.

"You have the right to know. I am Guillaume Danet, master-at-arms of the King's Academies."

"You? You, Guillaume Danet?" Goggle-eyed, Florimond regarded him; and then his glance was drawn beyond this tall stranger to a man who entered at that moment, carrying a valise: a man in sober brown that looked like a plain livery; a man with a round, bland, pallid moon-face, hatefully well known to Florimond.

"Then who the devil may that be?"

The stranger looked over his shoulder.

"That? That is my valet. The man I sent here a couple of weeks ago, to verify my

conclusions about you.”

And then this poor, rascally Florimond committed his worst blunder. Like all rogues, judging the world to be peopled by rogues having kindred aims, he uttered a snarling laugh.

“He did more than that. He anticipated you. You are behind the fair, Monsieur Danet.”

“Behind the fair?”

“That scoundrel had a hundred louis from me. I have nothing left.”

“I see. He played your own game, did he? And you do me the honour to suppose me equally base?”

He laughed, not pleasantly. He raised his cane, and for months thereafter they told the tale in Rheims of the caning administered by the great Danet to Florimond Souverain de la Galette, a caning which made an end of his career as a master-at-arms, at least in that part of France.

THE LORD OF TIME

IT WAS CAGLIOSTRO'S queer arresting gesture before the crucifix in the great square that supplied the decisive spur to the wishes of the Cardinal-Prince Louis de Rohan.

From the moment of his entrance into Strasbourg, in his gilded rococo coach, drawn by six cream-coloured ponies, Count Cagliostro had been the focus of attention in the town, even before he had afforded evidence of his miraculous powers.

Without fee or guerdon he cured diseases which ordinary doctors had pronounced beyond human relief. As a result, and very soon, the house in which he lodged was besieged from early morning to late evening by the crowds that thronged to implore his aid or to gratify in some degree the extraordinary curiosity he excited. The fame of him ran, like a ripple over water, through Alsace. His power to expel disease was accounted superhuman and was almost the least of the superhuman attributes discovered in him. He was credited with possessing the secret of the fixation of mercury and the transmutation of metals; precious stones composed themselves under his hands from the commonest elements; he could restore youth to the aged, and he was actually master of an elixir of life itself; he possessed gifts of prophecy and clairvoyance, and he could read thoughts as easily as another might detect the signs of emotion on a countenance; to such extraordinary lengths did he carry the art with which Mesmer had lately astonished the world that he was said to have the power of controlling the very souls of men, and that he rendered manifest how far was Mesmer from understanding the application of those forces upon the wells of which he had more or less accidentally blundered. In short, this Count Cagliostro, coming no man knew whence, was being pronounced divine.

That great aristocrat, that noble Maecenas, the Cardinal-Prince de Rohan, who was more royal than the King, for in his veins ran the blood of every house that had ever given kings to France, heard of these marvels, and was moved to desire a nearer acquaintance with them. All his life a passionate student of alchemy, botany, astrology and the occult in general, the Cardinal brought to the study of the supernatural the open-mindedness of a credulous person. It seemed to him that if Cagliostro were indeed sincere, and not merely a charlatan, like so many in France just then, he might bring to real fruition pursuits which His Eminence had hitherto found vexatiously elusive in results. And then came the report of those queer words in the square to quicken this desire.

Count Cagliostro had gone forth one evening to take the air, followed at a respectful distance by his servant, the slight, dark, pallid fellow who bore the curious name of Abdon. The Count's appearance was that of a man in the prime of life, between thirty and forty. Of middle height, his frame was thick-set and vigorous, and he carried his big coarsely handsome head with an air of majesty on his powerful neck. He was dressed with an ostentation that in itself took the eye. His blue silk coat was laced in gold along the seams, with the sword worn through the pocket; his red-heeled shoes were fastened with buckles of precious stones; brilliants flashed in the billows of lace at his throat; rubies attached his solitaire and glowed in the buckle that held the white plumes in his hat *à la mousquetaire*. It has been testified by practically all who knew him, and who have left records, that few could support the direct gaze of his full, bold, dark, uncanny eyes.

As he walked, men turned to observe and to follow him, until an inquisitive crowd had formed at a respectful distance in his wake. This was customary. Just as it was customary for him, aloof and absorbed, to appear unconscious of the attention he was attracting.

And then at last he came to pause before the Crucifix in its open shrine. Leaning upon the jewelled head of his ebony cane, he stood for some moments in thoughtful, wistful contemplation.

“Strange, Abdon,” he said at last, over his shoulder, to his servant, “that one who can never have seen Him should so faithfully reproduce His lineaments.” There was an implication here that sent a thrill of awe through the attendant, but respectfully silent, crowd. Then, after a long pause, Cagliostro sighed and spoke again. “Do you remember that evening in Jerusalem when they crucified Him?”

The spectators caught their breath, then held it so as not to miss the answer. Abdon, bowing low with something of the Orient in his manner, replied quietly but distinctly: “You forget, Master, that I have been with you only fifteen hundred years.”

“Ah, true,” said the Count. “I was forgetting. But with so many centuries to remember . . .” He left the sentence there, shrugged, and sauntered on.

A report of this left the Cardinal-Prince wondering whether this man of marvels was indeed divine or merely the most impudent charlatan that had ever walked the earth. His Eminence, considering it incumbent upon him to resolve the question, sent a gentleman of his following, the Baron de Planta, to command Cagliostro to wait upon him at the Château de Saverne, where his Eminence had his seat.

Cagliostro’s reception of the command reflected his lofty disdain of the mighty of this world.

“If the Cardinal is ill let him come to me, and I will cure him. If he is well he has no need of me, nor I of him.”

That anyone should send such a message to the Cardinal-Prince implied to the Baron de Planta that the end of the world was at hand. And this was confirmed by the manner in which the matchlessly urbane and gracious Cardinal received it.

“Sublime reply, whatever the man may be,” was the liberal opinion he expressed.

Louis de Rohan was approaching fifty at the time, but his tall figure still preserved the grace of youth as did his countenance, which, reflecting his mind, was handsome in a rather infantile way; it was so smooth of contours, and so free from lines, that his ashen hair seemed prematurely faded.

Accustomed from earliest youth to sycophancy, the proud independence of Count Cagliostro drew this great prince, temporal and spiritual, to seek the man of marvels at his lodging in Strasbourg, like the humblest suitor. There, attended only by de Planta, he waited without resentment in the thronged antechamber to take his turn, as was imposed by one who made a parade of awarding no precedence to rank.

What reservations the Cardinal’s ingenuous mind still harboured on the subject of Count Cagliostro’s claims were dispelled almost as soon as he came to stand in the Count’s presence. Under the hypnotic gaze of the man’s singular eyes, dark and lustrous and of a penetration that seemed unearthly, His Eminence experienced such a sense of awe that his own glance fell abashed. But when he had accepted the proffered chair a mild resentment stirred in him that he, who had borne as an equal the gaze of kings, should have suffered himself so easily to be stared down. Determinedly he raised his eyes again, and compelled himself to meet and hold the other’s glance. Soon, however, whilst

Cagliostro, who remained standing before him, talked in a deep vibrant voice and in a language that was only just perceptibly French, the Cardinal became aware that it was not himself but the Count who was exercising this compulsion: that it was his own glance that was being held, and that he was powerless to withdraw it from those glittering orbs that seemed presently to wax and wane as he watched them in a helpless fascination. Rohan began to be pervaded by a sense of his own unreality; it was as if all power of will and of self-assertion had gone out of him. His senses were being further lulled into subjection by the rise and fall in rhythmical hypnotic cadences of the voice addressing him in that curious Italianate French.

“Now that I behold you I perceive the source of your persistence, monseigneur. We have met before.”

To this the bewildered Cardinal, after a faltering search in his memory, made answer: “I don’t remember.”

“How should you? Between this and that stand for you the walls of a dozen deaths, a dozen re-births. The soul-memory deep within you is choked and smothered by the ponderous strata of all the flesh it has since worn, with the lusts, the passions, the sins and aspirations that belong to each. It was sixteen centuries ago in Antioch. You were a Roman proconsul, and I was, *mutatis mutandis*, much as I am now, a wanderer upon the face of the earth, a traveller down the ages.”

Even in the befogged state of his senses this was more than His Eminence could be expected to digest. Indeed, indignation at the impudent affront to his intelligence aroused combativeness.

“You will have evidence of this?” he said, in quiet mockery.

“Evidence!” boomed the sonorous voice. “What is evidence? The thing seen. And what shall be seen of the eternal verities by poor human vision, as narrowly restricted to the immediate environment as is that of the blind earthworm to the soil in which it burrows? Can the earthworm see the stars? How, then, help him if he asks for evidence of their existence? And how help man if he asks for evidence of what lies beyond them?”

Despite himself the Cardinal must admit that there was theological authority for these implications.

“And yet,” the mystagogue continued, “since you ask for it, some evidence I shall hope to give you before all is said. So condescend to hear me out.

“You were drawn to me in those far-off days as you are drawn now, which is to say that you were inquisitive about me; inquisitive and mistrustful. Then your Roman arrogance, your Roman scepticism, obfuscated your understanding. You supposed me an impostor, a vain seducer, even as remains of arrogance and scepticism, heritage of those Roman days—a heritage which has cursed and warped your every incarnation—still afflict you now. It is so, Monsigneur. Do not interrupt me.

“In those days I was your friend. I realized the greatness latent in your soul, a soul so closely in tune with mine; and I sought to deliver it from its dull chrysalis of carnal pride, to set it free to soar in the empyrean, and from those calm altitudes to survey eternity. I would have made you lord of Life and Time, you who then, as now, were but the ephemeral lord of a fleshly envelope. I would have spread before you the Fruits of the Tree of Life and rendered you everlasting as myself. But stubborn and obstinate in your puny pride you mocked; and so I left you to your poor carnal limitations, and went my ways.”

And here the Cardinal, deathly pallid, and with eyes that still stared but were now dull and vacant, contrived at last to interrupt him.

It required a supreme effort to break through the web that was being spun about his wits, to conquer a difficulty of articulation such as will trammel a man in dreams. But he conceived that he had received illumination, and at all costs he must voice it.

“I know you now,” he cried. “You are the Wandering Jew, the accursed cobbler of Jerusalem who spat upon Our Lord, and is doomed to walk the earth until He comes again.”

A smile swept like a shadow across the Olympian calm of Cagliostro’s countenance. Sorrowfully the great, compelling eyes considered the prelate.

“How history repeats itself! So you said then, sixteen hundred years ago. When your wits were baffled by proof of my unaccountable longevity, they took refuge from the intolerable truth in the only explanation legend offered you. But you are wrong now as you were wrong then. I am not the Wandering Jew. I am older than Cartaphilus, older than Jerusalem, where I was with Solomon at the building of the Temple. And I shall survive them both. For I have eaten of the Tree of Life. My elixir vitae is distilled from its fruits. To me, existence is not as a string of beads; a succession of brief moments of consciousness in eternity; fleeting, uncomprehended glimpses of the world. To me, existence is a continuous stream, visible from its source to the limitless ocean of eternity into which it flows. For me, this illusion men call Time has no reality. For I am He Who Is.”

On those last five words his vibrant, metallic voice had swelled to a trumpet-note. Thence it fell again at once to its quieter level.

“Yet that you tell me again, as you told me sixteen centuries ago in Antioch, that I am Cartaphilus, proves that I have touched in you at least a chord of that soul-memory which survives deep down in each of us. What you have remembered is what you called me once before. Let me now help your poor human weakness. Look into this mirror and endeavour to see what once you were when last I was beside you.”

Leaning his elbow on the table beside the Cardinal, Cagliostro extended his left hand, which was gloved in black velvet. Cupped in the palm of it he displayed a crystal sphere something less in circumference than a tennis-ball.

So dominated by now that, in obeying, he experienced no sense of derogating, Rohan directed his gaze as he was bidden. For some moments he stared into the empty depths of the crystal. Suddenly he moved and caught his breath. He leaned forward, peering.

“I see. I see,” he murmured thickly. “I see men; a multitude; an arena; a pillared marble tribune.”

“Centre your gaze upon that tribune,” Cagliostro commanded. “What do you find there?”

“A man of medium height and powerful frame, boldly featured, with eyes that burn their way into one’s brain. He is in white; a snowy chlamys edged with gold. I know his face. Ah! It is yourself.”

“And the man in the chair? Look at him: the man who sits elbow on knee and chin on fist, with a proud sad face that is wreathed in weariness and disdain? Can you name him?”

The Cardinal bent closer still; he hesitated; he was breathing heavily. “Can it be myself?”

The gloved hand closed upon the crystal and was swiftly withdrawn. Cagliostro drew

himself erect, and his voice rang hard. "Yourself. Marcus Vinicius, as you then were named."

The abruptness of movement and tone seemed to shatter a spell. Rohan sat up, restored to a normal alertness. The colour crept back into his cheeks. He passed a hand, long and slim, and delicate as a woman's, across eyes and brow.

"You are master of strange secrets, sir," he said slowly and gravely. Then he added a complaint. "My senses are a little dazed, I think."

"That will pass." Cagliostro spoke harshly, and waved a hand contemptuously. "No man may look down the ages and hope to escape vertigo. It will pass. What I have discovered to you, however, remains. So that you have faith, you may now prevail where you failed before. To help you I am here; for your soul is now of a strength to bear the secrets I could impart to you, to employ the power which must never be bestowed unworthily. I am at your service, Prince Louis. And my coming is timely, if only so that I may restore your fortune so sadly sapped by the Prince de Guémenée."

The Cardinal was startled. "You know that?"

Again Cagliostro waved a hand. He was prodigal of gesture. "Does not all the world know it?" he asked, like a man scorning to make a mystery of the possession of knowledge reached by ordinary channels.

It was, indeed, common knowledge how much of his fortune Louis de Rohan had sacrificed to buttress the honour of his family which had been so sadly imperilled by the bankruptcy of his nephew the Prince de Guémenée. Vast though his wealth might be, it could scarcely bear the strain of some thirty millions which that bankruptcy was imposing upon it. With deeply rooted habits of prodigal expenditure in the maintenance of his more than princely establishment, without knowledge of economy, a knowledge which his munificent spirit scorned to acquire, the Cardinal-Prince was sweeping towards the edge of financial difficulties.

He was not, however, at present concerned with this. His thoughts were consumed in the endeavour to extricate the present startling experience from the fog, as of a dream, that seemed to enshroud it.

"It is all strange," he murmured. "So very strange! Incredible! And yet something within me seems to compel belief."

"Now God be thanked that you are at last given grace to conquer the obstinacy of material scepticism. You yield at last to the instinctive knowledge of reincarnation deep in each of us: the oldest and strongest of human beliefs, persistent in spite of temporary occlusions; a belief that is at war with no creed that ever was."

"Yes, yes, that is true," the Cardinal agreed, with the eagerness of one who persuades himself. "There is no heresy in that belief. It can be reconciled. No heresy that I can perceive."

"There is none," said Cagliostro, as one speaking with full authority. "We will return to that. Meanwhile, there are Your Eminence's pressing needs." His tone blended condescension with command.

"Ah, yes." The Cardinal's will—never, it must be admitted, of the strongest—continued in suspension, a thing that veered as Cagliostro blew upon it. He smiled wanly. "My nephew's affairs are absorbing millions."

Cagliostro, erect, dominant, his great head thrown back, made a wide gesture of effacement. "Dismiss your anxieties. I have been stigmatized a magician, and persecuted

as a warlock, by the ignorance of men. But, as you will come to perceive, I practise no magic that is not the natural magic of knowledge, the application of the hidden forces of nature, the fruits of study and of long centuries of experience. Among the secrets I have mastered, building upon what I learnt in ancient Egypt from the priests of Isis, who already had glimmerings of these sciences, three are pre-eminent: the elixir of life, the philosopher's stone with its power of transmuting metals, and the gift of healing all ills to which the flesh is subject. The last I hold at the disposal of suffering mankind; the second I place at the service of those whom I can trust not to abuse the power that gold bestows; the first I guard most jealously from all save the few—the very few—who, under the most rigorous tests, give proof that the indefinite prolongation of their lives will be for the benefit of humanity.

“When I shall have relieved your most urgent need, as I so easily can, and when, thereby, I shall have increased your faith in me, we may, if you so incline, turn our attention to matters of real and abiding weight.”

There was much more of the same kind before they parted on that fateful day. It followed from it that Count Cagliostro presently transferred himself from his Strasbourg lodging to be an honoured guest at the Cardinal-Prince's imposing Château de Saverne. There, by the orders of a bemused prelate at once attracted and repelled, who knew not what to believe, a laboratory was prepared for him. And there, one day, a month later, he set a crown to the empire he was obtaining over Louis de Rohan by demonstrating that his claim to transmute base metal into gold was no mountebank's boast. From the crucible set up in that laboratory he withdrew an ingot of pure gold of the value of five thousand livres, which under the Cardinal's eyes he had transmuted out of lead. He presented it to his noble host, as a mere earnest of all that was to come, with as light and casual a manner as if he were handing him a leaf plucked from a tree in passing.

For the manufacture of more, however, there were certain ingredients that Cagliostro lacked, and so as to come within reach of these he proposed to his noble patron that they should transfer themselves to Paris, to the Hôtel de Rohan.

Meanwhile, pending this removal, his apartments at the Château de Saverne were daily becoming more and more thronged by all that was noble, wealthy and fashionable in Alsace, attracted by his fame as a healer and a man of marvels, a fame which rippled thence in ever-widening circles over the face of France, and set Paris itself agog in expectation of his advent.

Arrogant, domineering, impatient even, he would move through the press of distinguished suitors, his great head thrown back, his terrible, uncanny eyes at once dazzling and awing those upon whom he fixed them. Waving his short, powerful, jewelled hands in fantastic gestures, he chattered constantly in that queer, inflated jargon of his that was compounded of Italian, Italianate French and scraps of Spanish, a sort of lingua franca that would have been more or less understood in any country where a Romance language was spoken. He was abrupt and harsh of speech and manner, observing few of the amenities that obtained in the polite world which now paid court to him. But as a healer his success was manifest; and not only with malingerers and hypochondriacs, but also with the genuinely afflicted. Sometimes he would display his powers of reading the secrets of a man's soul, and sometimes he would even foretell a future event.

Very soon the respect commanded for him by the ægis of the Cardinal-Prince was converted by the clear magnitude of his own arts into reverence and even worship. No

enemy troubled the serenity of his days until suddenly the Prince de Guémenée, the man whose dishonest extravagances had rendered Cagliostro's services so timely to the Cardinal, came gliding like a malevolent snake into this Eden.

Monsieur de Guémenée was a hard-bitten man of the world, regarding the Hereafter with a good deal of mistrust, and of the Present accepting no more than those material parts of whose reality his senses enabled him to test the evidences. The charlatanism and quackery which in that disjointed period of transition were rampant in France moved him to contempt. That his uncle, the uncle upon whom he was depending for his existence, should be falling a prey to one of these empirics—for that was Monsieur de Guémenée's view of Count Cagliostro—aroused in him the remorseless anger that is born of selfish fear.

He descended suddenly upon the Château de Saverne with intent to disillusion the Cardinal and send the warlock packing. Armed with something besides indignation and commonsense, he never doubted that he should accomplish his object.

He arrived in the dusk of a September day, and, being bidden to supper so soon as he had changed from his travelling-clothes, he must curb until afterwards his agnostic impatience.

It was not necessary that Cagliostro should be pointed out to him among the considerable company at the open table kept by the munificent Cardinal. The man's dominant air and magnetic personality made him sufficiently conspicuous. Although overdressed—his black satin coat was excessively gold-laced, and he wore with it a red waistcoat—and over-jewelled, and although his table manners left much to be desired, yet he escaped being ridiculous or even vulgar by the majestic assurance of his demeanour.

Observing the spell which the man appeared to cast upon those about him, meeting once or twice and finding himself unable to support the glance of those singularly uncanny eyes, Monsieur de Guémenée began to apprehend that the battle ahead might sternly test his strength.

Nevertheless he engaged it intrepidly with his uncle in the magnificent pillared library whither the Cardinal conducted him after supper.

His Eminence took a seat at his ormolu-encrusted writing-table, whilst his nephew faced him from a tall arm-chair upholstered in red velvet on which was embroidered an R surmounted by a coronet.

Monsieur de Guémenée was approaching thirty. Like his uncle he was tall and slender, and he bore also in his countenance a strong resemblance to the Cardinal, but lacked the Cardinal's gentle candid air. He sat back, crossed his legs, and plunged straight into the matter.

"I have come, monseigneur, to talk to you about this man who calls himself Count Cagliostro."

His Eminence, of imperturbable urbanity, looked mildly at his nephew.

"How should you prefer to call him, Charles?"

"An impudent impostor," was the downright answer. "A common swindler; a quack-salver whose proper place is on the Pont Neuf; a charlatan who makes a victim of Your Eminence. What his real name may be I have not yet ascertained."

The handsome Cardinal betrayed no annoyance. But there was some sorrow in his glance. "I could bear with a good grace to be such a victim as Count Cagliostro makes me. I can bear it thankfully even; and so, my dear Charles, should you, considering how much

we are likely to owe to him.”

“Ah! And how much is he likely to owe to you by the time he has invaded Paris, as I hear is the intention, under your exalted sponsorship; by the time you have presented him at Court and set him on the way to swindle all the people of our world?”

“You are vulgar and commonplace in your views, Charles. God commiserate me that I should discover it in a man of my own blood.”

Monsieur de Guémenée leaned forward. “Monseigneur I have been looking into this man’s history.”

“In that case, my dear Charles, perhaps I can add something to the information you already possess. Look at this ring.” He held out a fine white hand on the middle finger of which gleamed a magnificent brilliant carved with the Rohan arms. “That is a gift from Count Cagliostro. And not only a gift, an evidence of his powers. It is a creation of his own. In the laboratory above-stairs I, myself, saw it taken from the crucible in which it was fused by him.”

“Jugglery!” scoffed Monsieur de Guémenée. “Common jugglery. If he can do that, what need to live upon you?”

“He does not live upon me. Here it is he, not I, who is the benefactor. And what of the cures he daily makes upon all-comers, sometimes of maladies accounted mortal? Is that jugglery? And all is done freely, without recompense, for the love of humanity. Is that the way of an impostor, a quacksalver? And then the alms he distributes, the gold he makes. Jugglery? A stupidity of the malicious. For if he is indeed a juggler, he must be the richest juggler that ever lived. Whence does he derive his wealth, Charles?”

His Eminence set the question with the air of a man delivering checkmate. But Monsieur de Guémenée had an answer ready.

“I can enlighten Your Eminence upon that, for I have been at pains to inform myself. He derives it from the lodges of so-called Egyptian freemasonry which he has been founding in France and elsewhere; he derives it from the sensation-seeking gulls whom he initiates into these clap-trap mysteries and from whom the Grand-Copht, as he calls himself, demands rich fees for his impostures.”

The Cardinal stiffened and sat bolt upright, unable, despite his deep-seated amiability, to restrain resentment.

“If you come to me merely as a retailer of vulgar scandal, of almost blasphemous calumny, I will not listen to you further.”

“A moment’s patience, monseigneur. There is something else; something you may easily investigate for yourself, and not so easily dismiss. If you will condescend to hear me, I will——”

And then the double-doors were thrown open by a lackey, who entered, ranged himself aside and announced:

“His Excellency Count Cagliostro.”

Monsieur de Guémenée sank back into his chair with a movement of petulance as the man of marvels came into view. He made a deliberate entrance, grave and masterful, from the carriage of his head to the manner in which he set his feet, and his eyes, the while, were steadily upon the Prince de Guémenée. He had seen the hasty movement and observed now the sullenness which the young man was not concerned to conceal.

As the door closed, he halted, and, maintaining that steady regard under which Monsieur de Guémenée, to his profound annoyance, began to feel uncomfortable. He

spoke, subduing his resonant voice.

“If I seem to be inopportune, Monsieur de Guémenée, if I interrupt the criticisms you were about to offer, you have in this more matter for thankfulness than you may suspect.”

The Cardinal smiled his satisfaction at this immediate evidence of Cagliostro’s supernatural gifts of omniscience. But Monsieur de Guémenée did not choose to be impressed.

“An easy guess, sir. I trust, for the sake of the wits of those you delude, that you have more convincing tricks of clairvoyance.”

His Eminence flushed with pain at this coarse insult. He would have spoken, but the mystagogue raised a hand in a gesture that imperiously commanded that the answer be left to him. He had remained standing on wide-planted feet within a yard or so of Monsieur de Guémenée, and his uncanny eyes never left the young man’s face. He spoke quietly.

“There is no ground for resentment. Monsieur de Guémenée but makes himself the mouthpiece of the vulgar and of the base calumny in which the vulgar deal. Men will ever sneer at what they do not understand. That is why they remain fast in the slime of their brutish ignorance. Kindliness dictates that I deliver Your Eminence’s nephew from the fog that envelops him to his own hurt. If Your Eminence will give me leave alone with him for a few moments I shall hope to accomplish it.”

Rohan smiled. “That will be yet another miracle.” He rose at once. “By all means, since you are so generously disposed, enlighten this maladroit young man. I shall be at hand, in my closet.”

He moved, tall and stately, with a silken swish of his scarlet robes, to a little door that led to a small adjoining chamber which he frequently used for his studies. Monsieur de Guémenée sprang to his feet, at first purely out of deference to his uncle. But as the little door closed upon His Eminence he betrayed yet another reason for that sudden rising.

“Monsieur Cagliostro, I have no wish to hear you. I will not remain to be annoyed by your impertinences.”

The Count, who had deferentially been facing the door through which His Eminence had passed, turned slowly to confront him.

“Are you afraid, Monsieur de Guémenée?”

“Afraid?”

“Of being convinced against your preconceptions, of seeing your prejudices destroyed. Look at me. Look in my face, in my eyes, sir.”

The Prince looked up to meet that burning intent glance, then lowered his eyes again, his manner sullen. “Why should I do that?” he asked contemptuously.

“To conquer the difficulty that you experience in doing it.”

“Difficulty? You want to laugh, I think.” And in defiance, so as to prove how easily he could support those awful eyes, he stared boldly into them.

“Sit down, Monsieur de Guémenée,” the Count commanded, and with a shrug Monsieur de Guémenée sank again into the tall red chair.

“Why, here’s to humour you, then. But I warn you not to strain my patience.” He was conscious even as he spoke that he was using jactancy as a cloak for a vague discomfort, for an irritating sense that he was being dominated.

Count Cagliostro began to talk, in a low, crooning voice. “I remember once, nearly two thousand years ago, as I was walking one evening on the shore of Lake Tiberias, I met a man whose mind was as obstinately delimited as is your own to the things that may be

apprehended through the bodily senses.”

After that, partly because what the mystagogue said seemed gibberish, partly because of the jargon in which he delivered himself, the Prince could understand but little of what he was being told. But as he listened, consciousness vaguely grew that something was happening to him, something which inspired him with an increasing dread, yet from which he could no longer escape. The glare of the eyes into which he was staring had become intolerable, yet he found himself powerless to seek relief by averting his gaze. His own eyes were held as irresistibly, as inexplicably, as his very will to avert them was caught in some impalpable tentacle against which it seemed useless to struggle. The eyes into which he gazed grew in size to the dimensions of the eyes of an ox; they continued to dilate until they were great twin pools gradually merging into a single glowing pool in which he felt that presently he must plunge and drown himself. And all the while that droning voice growing more and more distant was pursuing with its unintelligible narrative, adding something to the utter subjugation of his senses. Gradually at first, then with increasing swiftness, his consciousness diminished until it was totally blotted out.

For what ensued we must follow Monsieur de Guémenée’s own account as set down by him in a letter some years thereafter. He was awakened from that singular slumber into which he had lapsed by the booming of a great bell, like that of Nôtre Dame, which resolved itself as consciousness cleared into the tinkling note of the Sèvres clock on the tall overmantel. It was striking the hour of ten.

From this he knew that his lapse could only have been momentary, and as he recovered he found that the queer spell to which he had been succumbing was shattered, and he was once more entirely himself. He was still seated in the tall red chair, but Cagliostro no longer stood before him. The man of mystery had moved over to the fireplace, and was planted there now beside the clock, his shoulders to the overmantel.

Monsieur de Guémenée’s first and dominant emotion was indignation, the more bitter because he could not understand the nature of the trick that had been played upon him. It was from anxiety to show that this trick, whatever it might be, had failed that he sprang to his feet and gave expression to his wrath in terms that took no account of Cagliostro’s feelings.

“Miserable buffoon, do you dream that you can constrain me to remain here to listen to your lying explanations? If you do, you are as mistaken as when you suppose that I could be deceived by them. I have nothing to say to you, nothing to hear from you. My affair is with your silly dupe, His Eminence, my uncle.”

Cagliostro remained impassive. “So be it, sir. I’ll not detain you. I merely ask that you remark the time. You will have noted that it has just struck ten.”

“Go to the devil,” said de Guémenée, and strode tempestuously across the room, to pass into the closet to which the Cardinal had withdrawn. He was conscious of being swept along by a tide of ungovernable anger, and this was swollen by the mildness with which the ever urbane Cardinal-Prince received him.

His Eminence stood reading by a bookcase on the far side of the little room. Between him and his nephew there was a writing-table, on which some documents were pinned down by a paper-weight in the shape of a miniature, but fairly solid, silver battle-axe. At his nephew’s gusty entrance he closed the book upon his forefinger and looked up.

“Well, Charles? Has His Excellency satisfied you?”

Recklessly out of his towering passion the young man answered: “Do you suppose me

as besotted as yourself that I could condescend to listen to that charlatan's impostures?"

"Charles!" His Eminence raised his brows, his eyes grew round in horror. "I think you are wanting in respect."

"What respect do you inspire, you, a Prince of the House of Rohan, lending yourself to the swindling plans of this scoundrel, this gaol-bird?"

His Eminence stiffened where he stood. His voice was cold and stern.

"Monsieur, you go too far. You will leave my house at once, and you will never enter it again until you have sued for and obtained pardon, both from me and from Monsieur de Cagliostro, for your insulting words."

"Sue pardon from this mountebank! I?"

"On your knees, monsieur."

"Why, you fool," stormed Monsieur de Guémenée, lost in his rage to reason and decency alike, "do you know what he is? Do you know, for example, that in England he was gaoled for swindling and for debt? I have proofs of it, and . . ."

"I care not what you have, monsieur. You will leave my house at once. I do not permit myself to be addressed in such terms as those which you have employed. You have gone too far. You have forgotten the respect due, not only to my person, but to my office. In all my life this has never happened to me before. You say that this man has been gaoled for debt. Whether it is true or not, that fate is one that is very likely to overtake you in the near future; for from this moment you cease to interest me; you may wrestle with your own difficulties, and yourself satisfy the creditors you have abused, as you have abused my patience and my good nature. Not another penny of mine shall stand between you and the fate you have invited."

"My God!" cried Monsieur de Guémenée. But even now there was more anger than dismay in his soul.

"With that knowledge take your departure, sir, and do not venture to return. You are an ingrate whom I never wish to see again."

Trembling with fury, Monsieur de Guémenée steadied himself with a hand upon the writing-table. He controlled himself to ask in a voice that was steady, dangerously steady, considering his condition: "Is that your last word, monseigneur?"

With a great dignity the Cardinal replied: "My last word, monsieur."

"Then your last word it shall be," said his frenzied nephew, and, snatching up the silver battle-axe, he hurled it straight and true at his uncle's august head. He saw it strike him full upon the brow before His Eminence could so much as put up a hand to avert the unexpected missile; he saw the blood gush forth; saw the tall scarlet figure sway an instant where it stood, the fine hands clawing the air as if seeking a support; then, with a sound as of a rush of wings, the Cardinal-Prince sank together, crumpled and fell, to lie inert.

Terror-stricken by his deed, his blind rage driven forth by panic, Monsieur de Guémenée leaned forward over the table, clawing its sides with nerveless hands. "Monseigneur! Monseigneur!" he cried, in a choking wail, then sprang past the table and went to kneel beside the fallen man. Horror came up like a great tide about him at sight of the gaping vertical wound in the brow, where the axe, hard-driven at close quarters, had split the skull. His Eminence was quite dead.

Then, as he knelt there, paralysed in body and in spirit, he heard the door open softly behind him. He looked up and round, to behold Cagliostro, stern and grim, upon the threshold.

“Wretched man, what have you done?” asked the vibrant voice.

The Prince leapt to his feet. There was blood on his hands and on the ruffles at his wrists. “It is your act,” he raved. “Yours. Behold the havoc you have wrought. It is you who are responsible for this.”

Cagliostro preserved a terrible calm. “Tell that to your judges if you think it will save you from being broken on the wheel, from being disembowelled alive for this hideous parricide. Ah, you quail! But that is the least of the punishment in store for you. You will have earned the execration of all upright men for this horrible murder of your uncle and benefactor. Your name will hereafter become a byword.”

“Cease! In God’s name, cease!” cried Monsieur de Guémenée. “Do you think I do not realize it?” And then his tone changed to a piteous whine. “Sir, sir, you are reported to possess more than human powers. Of your pity, help me in this my dreadful need.”

“Ah! You believe in me now. It is true that I possess more than ordinary human powers; but the power to raise the dead is not within them.”

“Is it not? Is it not?” Monsieur de Guémenée reverted abruptly to his earlier frenzy. He was leering now with wicked cunning. “So much the worse for you. Since yours is the blame, you shall bear the punishment. I will rouse the house, and declare that it was you who did this thing. What then, my friend? What then? Will your word weigh against mine, do you suppose?”

Cagliostro smiled. “Ingenious. Unfortunately there is a witness. Look behind you, Monsieur.”

Startled, Monsieur de Guémenée looked round. Dimly in the shadows of a farther doorway, a doorway of whose existence he had been in ignorance, he discerned the figure of a man. Looking more closely his straining eyes recognized the Baron de Planta. “How long have you been there, Monsieur?” he asked.

Cold and stern the Baron answered him: “From the moment that you threw the axe.”

The courage went out of Monsieur de Guémenée, taking all fury with it. He raised his blood-stained hands in a gesture of impotence. “What shall I do? Mon Dieu, what shall I do?”

“What are you prepared to do if I can save you?” asked Cagliostro.

Monsieur de Guémenée faced him; advanced towards him.

“Save me, do you say? Do you mock my distress? What help can you, what help can any, give? You have said that you cannot raise the dead.”

“True. But I can undo what is done. Even that is possible to such as I, for I am He Who Is. Listen, my prince, and seek to understand. This deed of yours is something done in time. Time, sir, is not a reality, not one of the fundamental verities. It is an illusion, a human convention for the measuring of actions concerned with our little moment of existence, this heart-beat in eternity which we call life. To such as I who stand untrammelled by the bonds of time, the past and the future are as they are in eternity; that is to say they are not at all; for in eternity there is always and only the present. If I were to turn time back for you, Monsieur de Guémenée; if I were to turn it back to the moment at which you rose to go in quest of your uncle, so that all that now lies in the past would lie once more in the future and would be inevitable. If I were to do this what would you do for me?”

“For you?” Monsieur de Guémenée could only stare and stare. Nevertheless, he answered the fantastic question, passionately sobbing, “God knows there is nothing that I

would not do.”

Cagliostro approached him, smiling gently. “I ask a little thing of you in return for so much. You have procured from England evidence that I was in prison there. You have been at great pains to do this simply so that you might destroy my credit with your uncle, and raise a barrier to my accompanying him to Paris. I am not the first great prophet who has suffered imprisonment. Some have even been put to death by the vicious ignorance of men. For myself I fear nothing from that revelation. But others whom I am concerned to help and serve must suffer if, yielding to prejudice, they should turn from me.

“What I offer you now is this: if you will swear to me on your honour as a gentleman to destroy this evidence which you have wasted such pains in obtaining and never to mention this matter to a living soul, I on my side will so put back the clock for you, that what has been will be still to come and may therefore be avoided. Do you swear, monsieur?”

There was such firm authority in the voice that even the Sadducaic mind of Monsieur de Guémenée was more than half conquered by it. Feebly the other half still battled with reason.

“What you are proposing is impossible.”

“Will you make the experiment? Will you swear as I require? It is your only hope.”

Desperately came the answer: “I swear! I swear!” and in pursuit of it the oath was circumstantially given in the terms Cagliostro dictated.

As Monsieur de Guémenée uttered the last formidable word of it, his senses swam. He had a moment of faintness, which even as it overtook him he attributed to the strain of what he had endured. Then his senses cleared, and as sight, momentarily occluded, was restored to him, he found himself in the library, seated once more in the tall red chair, his legs composedly crossed.

For a moment he could not understand how he had come there, or, indeed, anything. His wits were in chaos. Then, out of it, emerged a sharp pellucid perception of the thing he had done and of the horrible situation in which he found himself. Wild-eyed he looked round, and saw Cagliostro standing as before by the overmantel in such a position that his shoulders eclipsed the face of the Sèvres clock. He stood with wide-planted feet, his countenance as enigmatically calm as that of Amhitaba upon his nenuphar.

“Well, sir? Well?” The sight of him thus stirred Monsieur de Guémenée to distraction. “You know what is to do.”

The booming voice answered him. “It is done.”

“Done? It is done?”

Cagliostro shrugged in weariness. “The stupidity of human nature can be unfathomable. Did you expect to witness some visible, material operation? What is done is an effort to the spirit, of the will, sir. Look at your hands?”

The Prince obeyed. He turned his hands about as he stared at them. They were white and clean; there was no faintest trace of blood upon them or upon his ruffles. Vacantly, foolishly, he looked again at Cagliostro, and Cagliostro answered the agonized question in those wide eyes.

“I have accomplished no less than I promised, Monsieur de Guémenée. We have stepped back in time.” He moved aside, disclosing the face of the blue and gold Sèvres clock, and as he moved it began to strike the hour of ten, just as it had struck in the moment before de Guémenée had risen to go to his uncle.

A sense of awe encompassed him, of a quite different order from the last. His heart was beating in his throat; he had a sensation of stifling. He was in the presence of forces that he could not understand. Then, with reviving scepticism, another dread arose. He was the dupe of some imposture. Hands could be wiped; clocks could be turned back; but the dead could not be restored to life. In that room beyond the little door his uncle lay with a split skull.

As if answering his thought, Count Cagliostro crossed the room to the closet door, opened it, and spoke.

“I think Your Eminence will now find Monsieur de Guémenée persuaded of the error with which he did me injustice.”

From within the closet he was answered by a movement made manifest by the rustle of silken robes, and, as Monsieur de Guémenée sat forward, wild-eyed, clutching the arms of his chair, the tall handsome figure of the Cardinal came into view and paused under the lintel. His Eminence, smooth of brow and calm of eye, composed and urbane as ever, was quietly smiling his satisfaction.

“I knew he would find it easy to convince you, Charles, and I rejoice in it. Men of the same blood must hold together in all important things.” His elegant hand was placed affectionately upon Cagliostro’s shoulder. “You will find His Excellency, Charles, the arch-enemy of all fraud and error. Trust him as I do, and you cannot fail to profit by it.”

“I think he holds the proof of that,” said Cagliostro quietly.

Monsieur de Guémenée, breathing with difficulty, answered nothing. He asked himself had he merely dreamt, was he still dreaming, or had some unfathomable miracle been wrought. Then, as his uncle advanced into the room, he remembered the deference due to that august personage, and staggered like a drunkard to his feet.

Many years later, in his prison in the fortress of San Leo, when his thaumaturgy had brought him into the clutches of the Holy Office, Cagliostro told this story to a young Dominican who had been charged to show him the error of his ways.

“When we reflect,” he ended, “that all this that the Prince de Guémenée had seen and heard and felt and done had no existence save in my mind and will, may we not ask ourselves what, after all, is objective truth?”

THE DEATH-MASK

ARMAND DE BAZANCOURT POSSESSED, as we shall see, vision and a gift of inference. These, in spite of shortcomings which we shall also see, might, under any ministry but that of Thiroux de Crosne, have carried him far. A young man of good shape, elegant appointments, and engaging manner, he moved freely in the world of fashion, everywhere regarded as an amiable trifler, and nowhere suspected of association with the King's Lieutenant-General of Police.

It was, however, a part of the tragedy towards which the French Monarchy was sweeping that the office of Lieutenant-General was filled by the incompetent de Crosne. A self-sufficient numskull, whom Court influence alone had hoisted to his position, he concerned himself almost exclusively with petty oppressions of a people which, schooled in consciousness of its rights, was becoming impatient of every form of tyranny. He had no ear for the distant mutterings of the storm, no eye for the signs that alarmed Bazancourt, no patience with Bazancourt's attempts to claim his attention for these portents.

Above all, Bazancourt mistrusted the idealists who were loosed upon the world of Louis XVI. He knew the danger of these pseudo-intellectuals, these theorists who in crazy conceit would destroy the existing order without discerning how to replace it. He was aware of the dangerous forces of illuminism that toiled underground in Germany, his attention caught by the edict of the Elector of Bavaria against secret societies. He had studied the malign activities of Weishaupt, and he suspected the mysterious Count Alexandra de Cagliostro, who had descended upon Paris under the exalted sponsorship of the Cardinal-Prince Louis de Rohan, but who came no man knew whence, and who worked miracles that staggered humanity, of being a missionary of the German adept. Therefore, in order to investigate at close quarters, he had procured initiation to the Coptic Freemasonry over which Cagliostro presided.

He bore the fruits of his observations in the Lodge of Supreme Wisdom to de Crosne, and was mocked for his pains.

"I wonder what mare's nest you will be discovering next. An organization working in secret, you say, for the destruction of the existing order. To what end, then? To what end?"

"So that they may rebuild it—by their lights—on a nobler plan."

"I am to believe, then, that men of birth, such as the Cardinal-Prince de Rohan, the Prince de Soubise, the Duc de Chartres, Monsieur de Vergennes, and many more of their kind, are conspiring for their own overthrow. That is what you invite me to believe. My dear Bazancourt, it does not make sense. I shall end by asking myself whether so bright an intelligence as yours is not wasted in my dull department."

It was precisely what Bazancourt was beginning to ask himself. But he practised patience under the ironic glance of the Lieutenant-General's eyes, so reminiscent of a frog's.

"Does Your Excellency know how many degrees there are in this Coptic Freemasonry?"

“I care not if there be a thousand.”

“There are not quite so many. But there are many more than the three with which the noblemen you name are allowed to become acquainted. These three degrees, with their Egyptian ritual and their fantastic mummeries, supply a convenient façade, behind which, in the higher degrees, the sinister real work of the revolutionaries is secretly performed.”

For a moment de Crosne was serious. “You will have proof of this? You have been initiated to these higher degrees?”

“Not yet. But I am seeking initiation, so that I may confirm these suspicions.”

The Minister took him up on the word. “Suspicious! Death of my life! Shall I bring a storm about my ears from the nobility of France, whom this charlatan amuses, upon no better grounds than those of your suspicions? You are out of your senses, I think. You’ll bring me something better than that before I incommode Monsieur de Cagliostro.”

Bazancourt departed in wrathful determination to confront the Lieutenant-General with evidence of his abounding fatuity. In quest of it you behold him some weeks later mingling in the fashionable crowd that paid court to Cagliostro in his startlingly appointed house in the Rue St. Claude.

The mystagogue was holding a reception in the spacious sybaritic salon that provided so subtle and suggestive a setting for his peculiar genius, blending the crafts of East and West in French marqueterie and rugs from Smyrna and Ispahan, and symbolizing the wisdom of antiquity by, here, a statue of Isis, and, yonder, a bust of Hippocrates upon a Louis Quinze console. He was receiving his noble following for the particular purpose of doing honour to Houdon, and admiring the imposing bust of himself which that famous sculptor had just completed.

Of middle height and stocky build, with the shoulders of an Atlas, the mystagogue bore in his person the coarseness of a Calabrian peasant with the majesty of an emperor. His dress was an aesthetic outrage. Over a scarlet waistcoat and scarlet breeches, he wore a grey velvet coat that was heavy with gold. Valuable Spanish lace foamed at his wrists and throat; diamonds sparkled on his breast, on his fingers and on the buckles of his shoes in a profusion that served to remind the world that he possessed the secret of their manufacture. Without fineness of feature, yet his countenance was of a bold, commanding power that compelled the veneration he enjoyed. And this not merely from frivolous, sensation-loving women, such as Mesdames de Polignac, de Choiseul, D’Avrincourt, and the like, who hung spellbound upon his utterances, but from men of great positions in the world, the Cardinal-Prince de Rohan, the Prince de Soubise and a dozen other scarcely less eminent.

As suited the occasion, it was of art that the Master discoursed, in his queer Italianate French that at times was difficult to follow. He talked of Leonardo, of Michelangelo, and even of Praxiteles, as if he had personally known them in former avatars. He repeated sayings which he attributed to one or another of them; he disclosed secrets hitherto unpublished which he seemed to imply that he had observed in their working methods. Thus he entranced his audience by these fresh revelations of a knowledge so vast that it seemed to encompass all Creation.

In Houdon he declared, with a hand affectionately poised upon the embarrassed sculptor’s shoulder, that the spirit of Donatello lived again. In fact, he seemed to hint that the Florentine had been reincarnated in the Frenchman. Like Donatello, Houdon possessed, he pronounced, the uncanny art of endowing inert bronze or marble with the

very quality of life. He reminded his gaping listeners that when Pope Clement had seen Houdon's St. Bruno, he had exclaimed: "He would speak if it were not that the rules of his order impose silence."

"And you may say the same of this," he told them pointing dramatically to the bust of himself.

This, at least, was true, thought Bazancourt. For Houdon had produced a head so vital that, had it been tinted, it might have passed for living flesh and bone.

With amazing insight and clarity, Cagliostro went on to expound the difference between art, such as Houdon's, and mere craftsmanship, such as that of some others whom he mentioned; and then, the better to illustrate his meaning, he exhibited some grotesque masks in wax that Houdon had modelled for the amusement of the Master. Among them was a death-mask of Rousseau that sent a shiver through those who beheld it, and drew from Monsieur de Soubise the comment: "So horribly natural that it scarcely seems a mask. Rather is it as if the actual dead face had been sliced off."

Then Cagliostro was garrulously expounding art in Greece and art in Rome, and came by way of this to other Roman matters, all in that manner of reminiscence which enthralled his disciples and irritated the sceptic Bazancourt.

The Lieutenant-General's agent, however, found a salve for this irritation in the propinquity of the Countess of Cagliostro. For a month now he had been paying her a flagrant court. Few scruples ever troubled Monsieur de Bazancourt; none where a woman was concerned. It was among his failings that he suffered from a temperament so ardent as never to be happy unless offering himself as a willing victim upon the altar of Aphrodite. And whilst he may have deluded himself that it was sound strategy to approach the Grand Coph't's secrets obliquely through the lovely Countess, it is just as possible that Serafina de Cagliostro's beauty, acting upon his susceptibility, had inspired him with this rather ignoble line of attack. Imperceptibly, however, he had reached a stage where his audacious love-making was in danger of becoming an end in itself. And his conduct was being noticed more than he suspected. No longer did he join the fashionable parade along the Cours la Reine in the elegant phaeton which it had been his habit to drive. Instead he displayed himself there on horseback, obviously so that he might enjoy the closer company of the lovely Serafina de Cagliostro, whose mornings were so frequently devoted to riding *en amazone*. And his relations with her, in a measure as they increased in intimacy, drew him further away from the object he had started out to serve. When he remembered it, he persuaded himself that he merely awaited opportunity; that he must not scare the game by too brusque an approach. As it happened, opportunity too clear to be neglected presented itself now as he leaned upon the lady's chair.

Cagliostro's discourse on ancient Rome and Romans had led the Master to talk of Pontius Pilate.

"The fact is," boomed the sonorous voice, "that he was not the man for Judea. His Roman tolerance was marred by Roman pride. He was too limited in the extent to which he could suffer the Jews to pursue ideals different from those in which he had, himself, been reared." The theurgist's uncanny eyes, so bright and terrible in their magnetic power, were dimmed as if by retrospection. "On that fateful day I warned him that if he washed his hands he would bestow upon his name a detestable immortality. I see him now, a comely, portly man, the very incarnation of calm authority, in his purple-bordered toga, bending in full view of that howling, unclean multitude over the silver basin that was

proffered by a kneeling slave. Alas! Alas! Had he but heeded me—had the Great Architect of the Universe so willed it—how different an edifice would history have built.”

He ended on a sigh, and like an echo of it a shivering rustle ran through the awed listeners. Then, as he ceased, and the spell was lifted, a growing hum of conversation followed. Under cover of it, Bazancourt, who had perceived his cue, spoke softly into the ear of the Countess.

“Surely it cannot lie in the Divine Will that mankind shall continue to groan in chains that are of Man’s forging. Surely the end must be near.” There was a passionate earnestness in his voice which she had never heard before. “Surely redemption must be at hand for the people who sweat and writhe under the heel of oppression. To help it forward would be a man’s work in the world.”

She was looking up at him out of her lovely, delicate, almost child-like, face, and the candid blue eyes, over the colour of which duels had been fought, were wide and round with wonder.

“You take me by surprise, sir. These feelings, this perception of the sufferings of humanity.”

She was nibbling at the bait, he thought. He put on a countenance of wistfulness. “I am perhaps not as shallow as I seem, nor so concerned with selfish interests that I can behold without anger so much cruelty, injustice and tyranny. Ah, but forgive the transgression into which my emotions have betrayed me.”

“They are emotions that do you honour,” she murmured, still regarding him. “They deepen my esteem for you.”

Thus encouraged he proceeded. Who that had a heart could remain indifferent to these wrongs? It was time, high time, that men of sensibility should organize themselves to regenerate society.

Her wonder seemed to increase. “You perceive that, too? But perhaps you are not alone in perceiving it.” She lowered her voice to a confidential note, “Do you know that this organization does not exist already?”

He assumed the question to be something more than rhetorical. “What do you tell me?” he cried, like a man in whom a great hope is suddenly aroused.

The outburst brought her to her feet. Slim and straight at his side, she set a delicate curbing hand upon his satin sleeve. “Sh! No more now. It is not the moment. And the Master is watching us.” She sighed. “Jealousy is the one human weakness that lingers in that great soul. But I shall ride to-morrow morning. If we should meet we can talk of this again.”

Bazancourt departed that day from the Rue St. Claude in the conviction that the first step was taken towards the lifting of the veil. If he rightly gauged Cagliostro’s methods, the Countess would now inform her husband that in Bazancourt he possessed a likely proselyte, and his initiation to those suspect higher degrees of Coptic Freemasonry would be considered. To gather the fruits of his scheming he rode forth on the morrow’s fair Spring morning, very brave in his best coat of a becoming royal blue.

He had gone the length of the Cours la Reine and was approaching the Bois before he espied the Countess. She rode, as usual, her mettlesome white Arab, and was followed at a respectful distance by the Sicilian groom, Pasquale, whose devotion to his mistress had been fortified of late by Bazancourt’s bribes. The grace of her supple figure, and the mastery with which she sat her horse, proved so inflaming a sight to him that when he had

overtaken her, and they were moving gently side by side, his discourse was of anything but the Rights of Man. The susceptible Bazancourt's ultimate object was again obscured by the immediate joys her presence gave him. So far did he push audacity that at last she reproved him.

"Was it for this foolishness that we were to meet to-day, monsieur?"

"Foolishness? Cruel! Is my love a foolishness?"

"You are not to talk to me of love, sir. You do not know the dangers you incur."

"Say that I do not heed them . . ."

"But you must. You must remember that I am the wife of Count Cagliostro. Gentle, benign, divinely kindly as he is, he is yet the master of terrible powers, which it would be madness to provoke."

Monsieur de Bazancourt became suitably lyrical. "If he were master of the lightnings, with power to blight me, yet the torment in my soul must find expression. Serafina! Deep calls to deep. A passion such as mine cannot leave you untouched."

"It must, my friend. It must!" And she added, sadly grave, "For both our sakes."

"Ah! But that is almost an admission."

"Never! It is not." The protest was on such a wailing note that it confessed the very opposite. Then, suddenly mastering herself, "Come, my friend," she bade him. "Help me to be strong. We were to be serious to-day. We were to think not of ourselves, but of the millions groaning in the chains of servitude."

"Ah, yes," he said, and sighed, aghast almost at the reluctance which he discovered in himself to cross the threshold which yesterday he had been so jubilant to have reached.

Perhaps it was just because of this mood of his, this amorous obscuring of his real aims, that the interview proved barren. Taken in the toils he had so artfully spread, his enthusiasm as a policeman was dimmed by his enthusiasm as a lover. He probed with clumsy abruptness. "You were to tell me of the organization that is to mend these ills."

She turned her graceful head to face him. "I was to tell you that?" Amazement stressed her question. "You have dreamt, my friend. Could I tell you what I do not know?"

"Did you not say that the organization exists?"

"No, no. I asked you did you know that it does not. For well it may. The Count holds in his great wisdom that every action brings its own reaction. When an evil becomes overwhelming it creates its own remedy."

"And that is all?" he asked. "Is it no part of the Master's benevolent mission to lead in this holy work, in which I would so gladly co-operate?"

"I will tell him what you say. He will, at least, admire your altruism."

It was not an answer. But, growing cautious, he would press no further. He had said enough. The next move must come from the other side.

What came, at dusk, on the evening of the morrow, was an urgent note from the Countess left at his lodging in the Chaussée d'Antin by Pasquale, the groom.

Dear Friend (she wrote in a straggling hand that was in itself an evidence of distress), *I am in great trouble and most urgent need. If the half is true of the feelings you profess for me, you will come at the earliest moment.*

Serafina.

That cry quickened his pulses. If hitherto he had sought Serafina sometimes as the

policeman, sometimes as the lover, it was as both that he sought her now.

He was admitted to the house in the Rue St. Claude, not by the gigantic turbaned negro, who was Cagliostro's usual doorkeeper, but by the confidential Pasquale, who bade him go up unannounced to the waiting Countess.

He beheld her on the dimly-lighted landing, coming to meet him, all in white. As he climbed the last step of the stairs, she flung herself forward and collapsed against him. He caught the slight, lissom body in his arms, and, intoxicated by that contact, hitherto so ardently but so vainly desired, he held her close and kissed her by sheer force of instinct. She was trembling violently as she yielded him her lips.

"You love me, Armand?" she murmured. It was the first time that she uttered his name. "Say it! Say it, for pity's sake!"

It was certainly not the policeman who answered hoarsely: "I worship you, my angel." "I am in such need of you," she moaned. "Tell me that I can depend upon you. Trust you."

"To the death," said Bazancourt in his intoxication, and would have kissed her again, but that now she stayed him.

She disengaged herself from his clasp. "Hush, my friend. Wait. Come with me."

She took him by the hand, and, with steps that faltered and stumbled, led him forward, whilst he, like a somnambulist, submissive to her will, went blindly.

She opened a door and drew him over the threshold of a room that was dimly lighted by only two candles in ormolu sconces on the brocaded wall. In the room's middle Bazancourt beheld a great bed under a silken rosy canopy. Towards this, Bazancourt, in amazement, with quickened pulses, suffered himself very willingly to be drawn by the fingers that encircled his wrist and the gently murmured, "Come, my dear."

Having reached the bed, she paused a moment, hesitating, her hand upon the curtain. Then, with abrupt violence, she tore it aside, and Bazancourt, suddenly disillusioned and sobered by horror, wrenched himself from her grasp, and leaned forward to stare in the dim light at the thing she had unveiled.

Supine upon the bed lay the sheeted bulk of Cagliostro. His face and hands alone were laid bare, but it needed no more than a glance to reveal not only that he was dead, but also how he had died. From between the slits of half-closed lids the eyes that in life had been so compelling stared now in vitreous, imbecile fixity from a countenance that was leaden-hued, and wore about the blue-lipped mouth the grin of rigor. His hands, like hands of yellow wax, emerging from be-ruffled sleeves, were folded upon the bulky chest, almost touching the gold hilt of the dagger that had been plunged into his breast. About it a reddish viscous stain had spread and gleamed now in the twilight of the guttering candles.

Mechanically the stricken Bazancourt leaned further forward, and touched one of those hands. Its cold clamminess sent a shudder through him. It told him that the Count must have been dead some hours. He would have carried investigation further, but the Countess, as if unable to bear more, pulled him away, and, thrusting herself between him and the bed, drew the curtains again so as to shut out that dreadful sight.

With her shoulders to that background of rosy silk she faced Bazancourt, her pallor scarcely less than that of the corpse. Her voice came hoarse and strangled at first, a vague moan that only gradually assumed coherence.

"You have seen, my friend. Dead! Dead! He boasted that neither steel nor poison could touch his immortality. Yet this poor weak hand sufficed to quench it."

“You!” Bazancourt’s tall, graceful figure seemed to shrink. Horror made him crouch a little. “You killed him? You!”

Her answer stunned what little sense remained in him. “Because of you, Armand. For your sake. For your honour, which he insulted. I could not bear it, my love. It made me mad. I struck without knowing what I did. Our rides had been reported to him. He suspected us. He accused us of betraying him. That I could have borne. But when his jealousy drove him the lengths of saying you were a creature of de Crosne’s, that I had taken a mouchard, a spy, for my lover, that affront to you was more than I could suffer. And so . . . And so . . .” She broke down, sobbing, and staggered helplessly towards him.

His arms received her, but not his heart. This had been turned to lead. She had killed Cagliostro because he had said that Bazancourt was a catchpoll. She had killed him because of her faith in Bazancourt. He was shamed by consciousness of how he had abused that faith, so that it was almost as if his own hand had driven that dagger into Cagliostro’s heart. The policeman in him, aroused by the first glimpse of that corpse, was thrust out now, and not by the lover, but by the accomplice, shamed and conscience-stricken.

He perceived how, by making love to the woman so that he might spy the better upon the husband, he had aroused in her an unsuspected passion that had brought her into mortal jeopardy.

“What is to be done?” he groaned, and beat his brow with his clenched fist. “Ah Dieu! What is to be done?”

“You will save me, Armand?” she moaned. “You must save me. You must.”

This was just what he was telling himself that he must do. “Why, yes. But how? How? There is this body.” He was suddenly inspired. “Could it be suicide? Let me look again.”

He made to put her from him. But she clung. “No, no! I cannot bear it! No pretence will serve. If I am questioned when they find him I shall break down and betray myself. I know I shall. I am weak. Terribly weak, Armand. He must disappear. I will give out that he has gone away; gone abroad on a sudden summons, on a sudden duty of his lofty mission. It has always been his way to appear and disappear mysteriously. That is known. People will not wonder unduly.”

“Yes, yes.” Bazancourt was almost impatient. “But how? How disappear? How are we to get rid of this?”

“That is where I need your help,” she whimpered. “You must take him away.”

“I!” He recoiled, aghast. “Take him away? Take him where?”

“Listen! Listen!” She wrung her hands. “Be calm, Armand. Be yourself, for pity’s sake. Listen. There is your phaeton. You could carry him away in that, away into the country, and there dispose of him. There is the river. And no one will ever know. Only Pasquale. He will help. I can trust him. There are no other servants in the house to-night. I have thought of all. You will do this, Armand, my love. You will do this for me, who killed him for you. Afterwards, my love, there is nothing . . . nothing I will refuse you.”

But Bazancourt was no longer to be moved by such a promise. Horror had withered all desire. The will to help her had basis for only the responsibility she thrust upon him for what had happened. And even this will to help her shrank before the terrible difficulties and dangers it involved. How could he hope, undetected, to convey a corpse out of Paris in a phaeton? How hope, undetected, to dispose of it afterwards? And if he were caught with such an evidence of crime, what did she conceive must happen to him? Frenziedly he

voiced these questions. She amazed and horrified him by the promptness of an answer which showed him how well and coldly she had considered all.

She pointed to a great chest curiously wrought of iron that stood against a wall, an Italian wedding-coffer. The body, she said, could be packed into it, and so conveyed to some convenient, lonely spot where road and river met, or from some bridge that at night would be untenanted. It could be dropped into the water never to be seen again.

In mounting anguish, Bazancourt argued, first recoiling from the task, and then, finally, with an abrupt, frantic yielding to her wild supplications, he ordered her to set about emptying the chest so that he might thrust the body into it.

“Leave that to me,” she answered him. “Let that be my part, with Pasquale to help me. It will save precious time, for we can do it while you are gone. Heaven bless you, my Armand, my love. I knew that you would not fail me.” She was thrusting him towards the door as she spoke. She was all impatience, now that he had consented, to have him fetch his carriage without the least delay. “Lose no time,” she admonished him. “Every moment that passes increases the danger of discovery. Go, my dear. Make haste, for pity’s sake.”

He took himself off at last upon that errand with wits as muddled as a drunkard’s. Here, he told himself, was a fine end to his adventure, to the investigations that were to unmask a vast conspiracy and shame the harsh complacency of Monsieur de Crosne. As a result of mixing love-making with police work, he had made himself an accessory to a murder. And because a woman with a face of child-like innocence, who was yet capable of driving a poniard into a man’s vitals, told him that the murder had been committed for his sake, here was he risking ruin and the hangman. Let him but win safely out of this, and he would order himself differently in future.

Thus Armand de Bazancourt what time he went from the Rue de St. Claude and returned to it within the hour in the gay phaeton that was to do duty as a hearse.

All was ready when he arrived. Pasquale, wooden-faced, was waiting in the vestibule with the Italian wedding-chest which had now become a sarcophagus. Between them they hoisted it to the floor of the carriage. The Countess did not appear, and for this, at least, Bazancourt was thankful. His most ardent wish was that he might never set eyes on her again, and nothing was further from his chilled mind than to claim from her fulfilment of the promise to reward this loathly service that he rendered her.

His whip cracked, and he rolled away through the night, down the Rue St. Denis, and along the Faubourg St. Honoré, to be halted at last by the closed gates of the Barrier of the Roule. His summons to the guard to open for him was loud and preemptory.

A sergeant emerged from the guard-house. Lanterns gleamed about the phaeton, and then came questions. Whither was monsieur going at this hour?

Bazancourt was hotly indignant. “What’s that to you, my man? What’s this impertinence? Unbar the gate at once, or I’ll make you smart for your officiousness.”

The sergeant was calmly remonstrative. “I do no more than my duty. Orders are to allow no one to pass the barriers to-night without giving an account of himself.”

“What are you telling me? What orders are these?”

“From His Majesty’s Lieutenant-General, himself, if you must know. They have just been issued.”

Bazancourt ground his teeth, but more in scorn than fear. Here was another of these petty enactments with which de Crosne irritated the world whilst ignoring the underground ferment that threatened to engulf them all.

He answered irritably. "Such orders do not apply to me. I am Armand de Bazancourt, of the Lieutenant-General's own department, and I am going to St. Cloud about my business. Now open the gate. I am late already."

But his peremptoriness made no visible impression upon the stolidity of the sergeant. A lantern was thrust within the phaeton. Its light gleamed upon the iron chest. "What have you there, monsieur?"

"A box, fool. Can't you see?"

"Oh, ah, I can see. And what do you carry in it, if you please?"

"What do I carry in it? My effects, of course."

"To be sure. But I'll have to see them. Pray give yourself the trouble of opening the box."

"Open . . . ?" Bazancourt was suddenly in a cold sweat. "Name of God, my lad, you exceed your authority. I've told you who I am. Enough of this! Unbar the gate."

"Patience, monsieur! Patience! There has been a robbery. And we're to let no one out of Paris without making sure that he's not the thief."

"Ah! You take me for a thief now! What's your name? By God, I'll have you broke for this."

The sergeant was stirred out of his phlegm. "That's enough! That's enough! You'll open that box, or I'll treat you same as if you were the thief; that is, take you straight to the Lieutenant-General. Those are my orders. So open the box if you want to get to St. Cloud to-night."

"That I shall certainly not. We'll report to His Excellency by all means, and you'll see what'll happen to you for delaying me."

His fears had been lifted from him. He had but to show himself to Monsieur de Crosne, and there would be an end to any question of investigating his luggage. The Lieutenant-General was not likely to take his assistant for a thief.

So, with a couple of guardsmen in the phaeton, seated on the accursed chest, Bazancourt drove back as far as the Rue St. Honoré where the minister dwelt.

The Swiss doorkeeper, to whom Bazancourt was well known, dispatched a lackey with his message to the Lieutenant-General, and, after the shortest of delays, Monsieur de Crosne came to him in the little office on the ground floor where he waited.

"But what is this, my dear Bazancourt?"

Bazancourt explained. The Minister raised his brows.

"Surely, my friend, it would have been easier to open the box than give yourself the trouble of being brought back here, so that I may speak for you."

"That perhaps. But, then, the indignity of it. To submit me, a member of Your Excellency's department, to be searched."

"You must be patient with the sergeant. He had only your word for it that you are one of my lieutenants. Of course I sympathize with your repugnance to have a common fellow fingering your effects. Quite. So natural, after all."

"Your Excellency is always so understanding. If you will say a word to these guards I will remove the inconvenience of my presence."

"Of course. Of course. But I think . . ." He paused, taking his lip between finger and thumb. "We had better see this box. You would not object to my looking through it? A mere formality."

"Yourself?" Bazancourt's mouth fell open and remained so.

De Crosne was apologetic. "The person robbed is a man of consequence," he explained. "And he is in great distress. He is here in my house now, awaiting the result of my measures. After all, I must respect the regulations I have made, must I not? So we'll have the box in and in five minutes, my dear Bazancourt, you will be able to resume your journey."

He waddled to the door to give his orders, whilst Bazancourt stood petrified. He came back, rubbing his hands. He was jocular. "It shall never be said of me that a law-maker is a law-breaker. I must see my own regulations upheld. But a mere formality, my dear fellow. A mere formality."

Bazancourt, still inarticulate, cursed him in his heart. It was characteristic of the pettifogging idiot to be so fatuously obedient to the letter of his imbecile enactments. With ruin grinning at him from the shadow of the gallows, Bazancourt mopped his wet brow as the two soldiers staggered in with the box.

De Crosne waved them out, and stood for a moment staring at the chest. "Do you know that it is uncommonly like the description of the coffer that has been stolen? No wonder the sergeant was so insistent. However, if you'll unlock it, we shall soon be done."

"Unlock it?" Bazancourt glared wildly from a face that was of the colour of chalk. "I . . . I have not the key." This was as truthful as it sounded foolish.

"You have not the key? Of your own box? But, my friend!" The minister stared at him. He was fingering his lip again. "Hum! Ha! I wonder, now." He went to the door again, uttered an order to the Swiss outside and stood waiting, whilst Bazancourt, sick and faint, leaned for support against the marble overmantel.

Brisk steps approached and paused beyond the threshold. When Monsieur de Crosne turned at last and half-closed the door, he carried a key in his hand. He went to the box again, and stooped over it.

"It fits!" he cried. "Now this is very strange." The lock clicked, and as the Lieutenant-General straightened himself, he flung back the lid.

Bazancourt sprang forward with a cry of terror that froze on his lips. Monsieur de Crosne had tossed a coverlet from the contents and he was taking out some of these: an épergne, a salver, a silver bowl, a pair of massive candlesticks, another salver and, beyond these, Bazancourt caught the gleam of more silver, partially swathed, so as to prevent it from rattling.

Bazancourt stared aghast, too amazed even to experience relief. By what miracle, he asked himself, had this come about? By what magic had the corpse of the murdered Cagliostro become transmogrified into a parcel of household silver?

De Crosne was calling. "Are you there. Monsieur le Comte? Come in, sir. Come in."

And now, as if there were not mystery enough already, the body of Cagliostro surged upon the threshold. But it was alive, this body which an hour ago his own eyes had seen dead, his own touch had verified to be cold. The portly figure in its grey velvet coat, with a blazing star of diamonds upon that breast which Bazancourt had seen transfixed by a dagger, advanced solemnly. He carried his plumed three-cornered hat tucked under his arm. His majestic head was thrown back, his bold, magnetic eyes were stern.

Passing from one terror to another, Bazancourt gulped and stared, and then told himself this was all an evil dream. Dimly he heard the voice of de Crosne.

"Will you be good enough to verify if this is your property, Monsieur le Comte. But of course it must be since your key fits the lock."

“Of course,” boomed the deep voice. “Per Bacco! That is proof enough, I think. And in Monsieur de Bazancourt’s possession, as I foretold. Your Excellency would not believe in my clairvoyance.”

De Crosne was measuring his lieutenant with an eye in which there was no affection, and only now did it dawn on Bazancourt that the earlier smoothness had been that of the cat that toys with the mouse it means to slay.

“Without doubt there will be some explanation,” said his frigid Excellency. “I hope so. I hope so, Monsieur de Bazancourt.”

Bazancourt had a difficulty with his strangled throat. “Why . . . Why, I am as astounded as Your Excellency,” he contrived at last. “There . . . there has been some mistake. The box . . .” Words failed him. His very voice was choked again.

“A mistake!” boomed Cagliostro. “Ah, Cospetto! A mistake, indeed.” He squared himself before the stricken man. He assumed the mantle of the thaumaturge. “In my understanding of the human heart and of human weakness I can forgive you that you made love to my wife. She is of a beauty to turn heads less empty than your own. Knowing the lengths to which temptation will urge a needy man, I can forgive you that you stole my silver. But that you should have made love to my wife merely as a means to win into my house and steal my silver, that is the abomination that I can never forgive.”

“It is not true!” screamed Bazancourt from the depths of his despair.

“Not true?” Cagliostro’s great eyes seemed to dilate. “Can you explain how else my silver comes to be in your possession? If so, here is Monsieur de Crosne to hear you. Tell him your tale.”

He could explain, of course. But only in part; for how Cagliostro, whom he had certainly seen dead, had come to life again went beyond the horizon to which his sight was limited, unless the mystagogue possessed, indeed, the gift he claimed of immortality. But who would credit so crack-brained a tale? And even if it should be made credible, dare he assert that he had been a willing accessory to a murder?

He perceived that Cagliostro mocked him, just as he perceived the motives from which the Man of Mystery had acted. Made somehow aware of Bazancourt’s connection with the Ministry of Police, and suspecting the aims of his espionage, the mystagogue, with the assistance of that traitress, Serafina, had gone about encompassing his ruin. So much was clear enough. What still remained to bewilder Bazancourt was Cagliostro’s resurrection. He was to brood over it in the unhappy days that followed, viewing again in imagination that leaden-hued countenance with its glazed eyes and rigor-grin, those waxen hands that had been so cold to his touch. And then the very image that his thought employed brought light. Waxen hands. Wax. Suddenly he remembered the wax masks of Houdon’s fashioning, and in particular the tinted death-mask of Rousseau which had sent a shiver through those who beheld it, and of which Soubise had said that it was as if the actual dead face had been sliced off. The mystery was solved.

Bazancourt, you see, had vision, as I began by asserting, and a gift of inference which might, had his temperament been less ardent, have made him one of the ornaments of the profession from which he was now cast out.

THE ALCHEMICAL EGG

COUNT CAGLIOSTRO EXHIBITED a wrath unworthy of a man in whom mastery of the secrets of nature, from microcosm to macrocosm, and consciousness of former avatars should induce a philosophic calm in all situations.

He delivered himself to his Countess, the delicately lovely Serafina. It was against the German physician, Friedrich Anton Mesmer, that he inveighed, and this torrentially in his native Italian.

“This scorpion! This slug! This larva! As insupportable as he is ridiculous with his vats and his magnetic fluids, and the rest of the empirical stock-in-trade with which he swindles credulous fools and hysterical women. Animal magnetism! Ah, Cospetto! It needs animal minds to absorb it. The Egyptian adepts, who probed the mysteries of nature to depths not even suspected by the so-called men of science of to-day, could have told this quacksalver . . .”

“Alessandro!” his Countess interrupted. “We are alone.”

He checked, and drawn up to the full of his powerful, stocky middle height, his heavy black brows came together above the uncannily piercing eyes, eyes described as terrible by so many of those who had experienced their mysterious power. Then abruptly he relaxed, shrugged and acknowledged her gentle irony by a smile.

“Ah, per Bacco! Why, indeed, burn myself up over that contemptible homunculus. Let him sneer all he pleases over my claim to possess the Philosopher’s Stone. The more publicly he sneers, the more publicly shall he be confounded, the more shall his crass ignorance be exposed when he is confronted with the triumph of my sublime art.”

“Be careful in what you do,” she ventured. Timidity was, after all, her norm, notwithstanding that she was Grand Mistress of the Lodge of Coptic Freemasonry, which he, as Grand Copht, had consecrated, so that the fair sex should contribute to the advancement of the high mission on which he walked the Earth. Ten years younger than her husband, she seemed scarcely more than a child, very slenderly fashioned and finely featured, with a skin that was like mother of pearl and eyes of a gentian blue, from which innocence and candour looked shyly upon the world. Her ethereal personality supplied an arresting complement to his overpowering vigour.

“Madame de Choiseul was telling me,” she warned him, “that this man possesses great knowledge and power. He is——”

Cagliostro broke in derisively. “Madame de Choiseul! That hen! Will you quote me her cacklings? Madonna! I’ll so deal with this Tudescan empiric, this dear Signor Mesmer, that he shall crawl to me for pardon. I’ll give him magnetism; a bellyful of it; enough to sicken and break him. And not of the animal variety.”

Yet behind the fierce boast a certain anxiety lurked in the stout heart of the thaumaturge. Monsieur de Vivonne, one of his most loyal disciples, had reported to him that Mesmer was proclaiming him a charlatan who was not even original; a charlatan modelled upon the famous Comte de Saint Germain, a clumsy plagiarist of the arts of that mysterious, gifted man who had been the intimate of the late King. Like Saint Germain, Cagliostro pretended to a sort of immortality, but whereas Saint Germain merely

conveyed the impression that he had been an eye-witness of the march of history, Cagliostro—in the actual words of Mesmer—explicitly and impudently asserted his fabulous longevity. Not content, as Saint Germain had been, to pretend to increase the size of diamonds, Cagliostro claimed to have manufactured those with which he plastered himself to excess, and where Saint Germain was content to profess that he could induce the oyster to grow pearls, Cagliostro boasted that he could fashion pearls of great price by an amalgamation of little, worthless ones. Like Saint Germain, he gave out that he had discovered the Philosopher's Stone, that he could transmute metals, and by means of an elixir prolong life indefinitely.

“In fact,” Monsieur de Vivonne reported Mesmer to have said, “this impudent Italian has appropriated the whole of Saint Germain's stock-in-trade, and vulgarized it.”

To Cagliostro this had been the cruellest cut of all. He rehearsed it now to his Countess. “What was that Latin tag this son of a dog spat out? Ah, yes: *Nihil tetigit quod non inquinavit*. I touch nothing but I soil it! *Cospetto!* We shall see who will be soiled by what I shall show him here to-night.”

“He is coming here?” Serafina displayed anxiety.

“His Eminence of Rohan has asked me if he might bring him, so that he may be humbled by witnessing the little transmutation I am to demonstrate.”

She stood up. “And you . . .”

He reared his majestic head. He seemed to swell and grow with pride. “I have told the Cardinal-Prince that Doctor Mesmer shall act as my fellow-spagyrist in the operation.”

“Oh!” It was a trembling gasp of dismay. “I hope you know what you are doing. Beware of over-confidence, Alessandro. This man Mesmer is no fool. I am afraid of him.”

Cagliostro answered her with the scornful laugh of him whose confidence in his own powers is to be shaken by nothing human.

The company that assembled in the Rue St. Claude that night was some thirty strong, and as distinguished as any that the Paris of Louis XVI could muster. There was the old Prince de Soubise, whom an elixir of Cagliostro's had cured when the doctors were despairing of his life; there was the handsome, stately Cardinal-Prince de Rohan, Grand Almoner of France, who had witnessed so many of Cagliostro's miracles that he accounted him the most sublime of men; Monsieur de Vergennes, the Minister, was present, and the Count d'Avrincourt with his elegant Countess; the gay Duchess of Polignac and the Duchess of Choiseul, too, were prominent members of that exalted gathering, all of them disciples of the great Cagliostro.

Lackeys, in the Count's livery of blue and silver, ushered the illustrious guests into the dimly-lighted laboratory, where he and his Countess stood to receive them, and where chairs were set in orderly rows for their accommodation.

At the far end of the long room, under a cowed chimney-piece, glowed the athanor, or furnace. Beside it there was a brass-bound tub of water. Before it stood a long table covered by a black cloth on which there was an array of glass jars, phials, porcelain bowls, a small clay crucible, and some further objects. Another table to the left of the furnace was encumbered with alchemical vessels in glass and copper, phials, retorts, alembics, mortars and the like, and above this, at something more than a man's height, a shelf that was similarly laden.

The Cardinal-Prince, who was among the last to arrive, brought with him a dour-faced, pallid man, who derived from his funereal garments and his black unpowdered hair

something of the air of a crow. He was presented as Friedrich Anton Mesmer, and the sturdy Cagliostro, resplendent as a bird of paradise in a gown of yellow arabesques upon a rose-coloured ground, beamed upon him in welcome, and delivered himself effusively in his queer jargon of compounded French and Italian.

“My poor laboratory is honoured. Your eminence must persuade Doctor Mesmer to lend me his assistance in my little experiment. The collaboration of so illustrious a confrère is something of which I shall boast myself hereafter.”

If Mesmer suspected irony, he remained outwardly unmoved. Having come there expressly so as to unmask Cagliostro, nothing could suit him better than this opportunity, so rashly afforded him, for the closest vigilance. It was a satisfaction shared by the spectators, but from opposite motives. These loyal disciples of the Grand Copht, the men all initiates of his Lodge of Supreme Wisdom, aware of how Mesmer had defamed him, rejoiced in the prospect of the crushing answer they knew the Master could not fail to deliver.

Cagliostro drove out the servants, locked the doors, covered the lower half of his splendours by an apron, and tossed another one to Mesmer so that he might similarly protect his garments.

“All is in readiness,” he announced. “Here is the mercury to be transmuted. Examine it, Doctor, and weigh it carefully. It should amount to exactly a pound.”

Tight-lipped, solemn, Mesmer weighed an empty glass jar, so as to ascertain its tare, and then poured into it the mercury, scanning it closely as it passed from one vessel to the other. Although the light was dim, he could not, from its behaviour, doubt the nature of the metal. He placed the loaded jar in one of the scales. “It weighs exactly a pound,” he agreed.

“Let us proceed.” The mystagogue took up a bottle of clear glass in the bottom of which could be seen a minute quantity of a grey-brown powder. He displayed it, turning the bottle about, his every movement ritualistic. “In this we have thirty grains of virgin earth.”

“Of what?” barked Mesmer, leaning forward.

“Virgin earth,” Cagliostro stolidly repeated. “Or, if you prefer it, Secondary Matter.” And contemptuously he explained: “It is procured by distilling rainwater to the point of siccity.” He proffered it to Mesmer. “You will oblige me, Doctor, by taking one of those empty jars, and weighing into it precisely the half of the mercury, which you will then transfer to this bottle.”

When it was done, Cagliostro held up a phial, containing three or four ounces of a colourless liquid. “Give me the vessel. Observe now that I add to the mixture of mercury and virgin earth exactly thirty drops of this extract of Saturn.”

The scorn fermenting in Mesmer’s soul found sudden and harsh expression. “Distilled from the planet, I suppose,” he croaked.

The Master stood arrested, the phial poised. He turned a blank stare upon his colleague. “But is it possible, Doctor, that your learning stops short of the knowledge that the alchemists call Saturn that which is vulgarly known as lead? Do not tell me, sir, that I must talk the language of the streets so as to be intelligible to a man of science.”

Less the rebuff, itself, than the ripple of amusement that stirred the company left Mesmer without an answer, confused and mortified, whilst Cagliostro, suavely resuming his task, counted aloud as with a steady hand he dispensed the thirty drops. Then, closing

the bottle with a stopper, he shook it vigorously before holding it out and turning it slowly about.

“And now, Doctor, take another of those empty bottles and pour into it the other half of the mercury. I thank you. Upon this too I pour thirty drops of the extract of Saturn. Similarly I shake it well. Now take both bottles, yourself, Doctor, and unite their contents in this third one.”

Mesmer, who, since his rebuff, had completely put aside his air of derision, obeyed in nervous silence.

“Cover it with that stopper, and shake the mass so that it will blend! Enough! You perceive that it has now lost its lustre and has become a dull grey.”

Cagliostro went aside to the shelf, reached up and took from it a clay vessel of the size of a coconut.

“Here is our crucible. Be good enough now to pour the mass into it. Now hold it out.”

From a breast pocket the Master drew a slender parchment envelope. He opened one end of it, and more than ever with the air of performing a ritual he shook from it, upon the matter in the crucible, a quantity of powder of a brilliant red. Next he dipped a bowl into the tub of water, withdrew it half-full, and placed it on the table. After that he went aside again to the shelf, and reached for a square wooden box. From this, with an ivory-handled trowel, he ladled some white plaster into the water, and leaving the trowel in the bowl he desired Mesmer to mix it so that he might seal the crucible with it. Whilst Mesmer was obeying, he went to replace the box upon its shelf.

Under the Master’s observing eye, the Doctor completed the mixture and began to plaster the mouth of the crucible as he was bidden. He had just succeeded in covering the aperture, when Cagliostro, with a sudden display of impatience, snatched the crucible from his hands. “In the name of Heaven, man, don’t you see that the mixture is too thin? Will you spoil all? It needs more plaster. Wait.”

With the crucible in his left hand, he turned yet again to the shelf and reached up for the box. He came back with it to the table. “Give me the trowel.” He was brisk and peremptory. He ladled more plaster into the water, mixed it briskly, and then slapped coat after coat of the thicker consistency upon the crucible until it was completely sealed.

“There. It is done. Behold the alchemical egg.” He held it aloft a moment, then thrust it once more into Mesmer’s hands. “Take it, my friend. Set it for an instant on the edge of the athanor to dry. Meanwhile with the bellows I quicken the fire with which we are to hatch it.”

Since this hatching operation would, he announced, take a half-hour, he placed a stool by the athanor for Mesmer so that he might sit on guard over the crucible, when presently, the plaster having set, he had thrust it, under Cagliostro’s direction, into the very heart of the glowing fire.

To beguile for his guests the time of waiting, the Master discoursed to them in his queer Italianate jargon of the labours of the alchemists to wrest from nature the secrets that should carry men nearer to the gods. By way of the Kabbalists and the Arab alchemists, he came at length, logically but with a malice, that was presently to appear, to speak of the great Theophrastus Bombast of Hohenheim, better known to the world as Paracelsus, who had formed himself upon them.

Mesmer’s accusation of plagiarism rankled with him. It represented a debt to be repaid in kind, and it was to this repayment that he now addressed himself.

“What a sublime man was that!” he sighed, in allusion to Paracelsus. “And to what hideous persecution was he not subjected by the envious spite of the medical faculty of his day. Of what stupid, cruel calumnies was he not the victim! They called him the Luther of Medicine. That was their way of branding him a dangerous heretic. I remember him so well, that unforgettable man. It will be two centuries and a half ago, in 1527 or 1528, that he occupied the chair of medicine at the University of Bâle. I recall the date because it was at about the time of the sack of Rome by the Constable de Bourbon, and all Europe was talking of little else.”

Whilst his noble audience, hushed and enthralled as ever when this Man of Mystery spoke out of the memories of his immeasurable past, gazed upon him in round-eyed awe, Mesmer, a little behind him, cross-legged upon his stool, twisted his thin lips into a smile of scorn.

Cagliostro went quietly on, moving slowly to and fro as he spoke.

“A little man he was, weakly of body, but with the strength of soul and mind that conquers worlds. I remember how he disdained the outward show of doctoral robe, gold chain and crimson cane. I saw him come to his first lecture in a homely suit of grey that was stained from his chemical experiments, a flat black cap to cover his premature baldness, and at his side a sword that never left him. This because once he had been a military surgeon in the armies of the King of Sweden. The students laughed to see him. But they did not laugh when the lecture was ended. Ah, Cospetto! No. They had not listened to the usual trite re-hash of Galen. They had heard revolutionary theories upon the treatment of disease, and an odd insistence upon the cultivation of an intuitive sense which opened a new world to them.

“The nights I spent at work with him in Bâle, and later at Colmar! And if much I was able to teach him, yet there was much that he taught me. For there was no branch of medical or alchemical lore which he had not investigated.

“I am reminded by the presence of Doctor Mesmer here that it was Paracelsus who first expounded the virtue of magnetism and prescribed the magnet as a healing agent, thus being the inventor of a science which men to-day, in their ignorance, are beginning to call Mesmerism.”

That stirred his listeners. But whilst de Rohan was smiling a benign approval of the Master, Mesmer was bounding, livid, from his stool, to roar a question. “What is that you dare to say?”

Thus rudely checked, Cagliostro half-turned. “You do not believe me?” he asked in plaintive surprise.

“Believe you? By God! The effrontery of you!” Mesmer choked in his wrath. “Not content with the imposture of your mummeries, you must have recourse to calumny, it seems.”

“Calumny! My friend!” Cagliostro’s tone was shocked. “You are overheated, Doctor. Read the *Herbarius Theophrasti* of Paracelsus. You will find there the fruit of his experiments in magnetism. And,” he added gently, “you will realize that, as Solomon said, there is nothing new under the sun.”

“Solomon said that in your hearing, I suppose,” was the other’s furious sneer. “Where is it to be found, this book? Does it exist at all, or is it but another of your inventions, to bolster up your slander?”

The Cardinal gently interposed. “Be sure that it exists, Monsieur Mesmer. Count

Cagliostro is the possessor of a copy. I have, myself, seen the passages to which he alludes.”

“As you shall see them, sir,” Cagliostro promised, “so that you may assure yourself that it is possible for two gifted minds independently to arrive at identical conclusions.” Thus, gracefully, without resentment of Mesmer’s insults, the Master opened a door by which the Doctor might escape. But it nowise soothed the Doctor. The mischief was done, and might be irrevocable. The very terms in which Cagliostro now went on to exonerate him only made the matter worse.

“After all, Doctor, it is not for you to be offended, but for me whom you could suppose capable of such a baseness as to defame a colleague by imputing plagiarism to him. It was never in my mind that you were re-cooking the scraps from Paracelsus’ table; for God knows I had no reason to suppose that his learned works were included in your studies.” Then, with an abrupt change of manner that brushed the whole question aside, he turned to the furnace. “But to our purpose. The egg should by now be hatched.”

He placed an iron dish upon the table, and with a pair of tongs seized the crucible and lifted it from the glowing embers. The clatter with which it dropped upon the dish was as a signal to the company. There was a scraping of chairs and a forward shuffle accompanied by a momentary hum of talk.

Cagliostro smote the crucible sharply with a hammer. It cracked across, and, as the two halves fell apart, in the heart of it was disclosed to the awed gaze of the spectators a gleaming ruddy-yellow ingot. The miracle of the transmutation was complete.

He took the ingot in the tongs, held it forward for a moment, so that all might behold it clearly, then plunged it into the water-tub. When presently it was cool, he set it down upon the table.

“Eminence, permit me to offer you this product of the Philosopher’s Stone, so that you may bestow its proceeds upon the poor of your diocese.”

“Ever as benevolent as you are munificent, Count,” murmured Rohan, whilst the company broke into exclamations of praise and wonder. And then, abruptly, dominating all, came the harsh voice of Mesmer.

“Impossible! I say it is impossible!”

“Sadducee!” The Prince de Soubise apostrophized him. And “For shame, sir!” cried the Duchess of Polignac, whilst others still more angrily rebuked him, until Cagliostro raised a restraining hand.

“My friends, there is no need for heat. Monsieur Mesmer but displays the proper scientific mind, which cautiously refuses to accept until the last proof has been supplied.” Smiling into the Doctor’s pallid furious face, he added: “My dear colleague, you shall yourself apply the tests. I will furnish the acids, and you . . .”

There Mesmer interrupted. “Tests? What do I care for tests? What need for tests? I may not be an alchemist; but I am chemist enough to know that this is an imposture; for, in the first place, it is impossible that there should be a liquefaction of metal at the paltry heat of that furnace.”

“How, then, comes the gold to be present, sir?” asked Monsieur de Vergennes.

“That is for Monsieur de Cagliostro to tell us,” was the answering sneer.

Dolefully the Man of Mystery shook his noble head; sadly his great eyes considered the magnetist. “Oh, my friend! My poor friend! How stout is the assurance that has its roots in ignorance! No liquefaction at that temperature, you say. But mercury, sir, is a

fluid metal. It is already liquid whilst cold, as every schoolboy knows.”

“Mercury, ay. But not gold. And before gold can set into a solid ingot as a result of transmutation it must be present in a liquid state.”

“Must, eh? Why must it? Does it not occur to you that therein lies the very secret of the transmutation of a fluid into a solid? How can you understand the release of latent forces contained in matter when you are not even aware of their existence?”

“He should know something now,” said Avrincourt, “since at least he has seen the results.”

Silenced by that alchemical jargon, stung by the ridicule of that illustrious company, Mesmer took his departure that night from the laboratory in the Rue St. Claude, baffled, mortified, but unalterably persuaded that he had witnessed an imposture.

The conclusions he reached after a sleepless night of brooding he communicated next day to Monsieur de Vivonne, when that unsuspected disciple of the mystagogue came to him on the pretext of magnetic treatment.

“I insist,” said the raging Doctor, “that the athanor, the crucible and the rest are no more than the appurtenances of fraud, the properties of the comedy he played. I know, if I know anything, that no transmutation could be accomplished without at least the degree of heat necessary to melt the metal. The lack of it betrays the ignorance of that charlatan. His explanation was a ready-witted impudence.”

“But the gold, you say, was in the crucible. How came it there?”

“A common conjuring trick. I must have detected it at once, but that his calculated offensiveness had disturbed my mind and distracted my perceptions. In the quiet of the night, going step by step over all that happened in that laboratory, I solved it. I remembered how he snatched the crucible from my hands on the pretext that the plaster—which he had prepared himself, remember—was too thin, and how he went to the shelf for the plaster box. For a moment then his back was turned, and his body, as he leaned forward against the side-table, acted as a screen. It concealed his left hand and the crucible it held. Under cover of it he changed that crucible for another, similarly half-plastered, that stood ready behind some of the appliances littering the table. Don’t you see how simple it is? That is how this vile impostor gulls his foolish following.”

Monsieur de Vivonne implied that he could scarcely believe in so much turpitude. Afterwards, with scrupulous fidelity, he reported all to Count Cagliostro, and together they laughed over a scepticism so obstinate and a perversity so spiteful as to produce so stupid an invention. But to Serafina, later, when Cagliostro reported in his turn, he did not laugh at all.

“That misbegotten German horse-leech will be spreading this pretty discovery of his all over Paris. The addle-headed hysterics who frequent his magnetic bath-tub will act as his Mercuries.”

“You would have done better,” opined the demure Serafina, “had you let me deal with him.”

“With him? With that frost-bitten dish-washer? That chilblain? There’s no blood in him to quicken, my dear.”

“And what now? Something you must do to check this mischief?”

“Something, yes, per Bacco! But, tell me, what? What?”

It was Mesmer himself who was to answer that despairing question a week later, through the lips of the Cardinal de Rohan.

His Eminence sought the mystagogue in the Rue St. Claude. "Monsieur Mesmer takes his defeat very badly."

"I know. I know. I've heard his tale. May his malice choke the dog."

"He must be persuaded of his error; persuaded of it beyond possibility of further doubt. It is the only way to silence him, and I am sure that you can do it."

Cagliostro's stocky figure seemed to assume height. He became majestic. "Am I concerned to silence every cur that yelps at me? Who will believe this miserable empiric, unless it be some of the poor wittings he magnetizes, who matter nothing."

But Rohan shook his noble, powdered head. "It's a scurrilous world, my friend. It delights in diminishing the great. Mesmer is providing a weapon for the hand of malice. It must be struck from his grasp. You must demonstrate for him again."

Cagliostro's eyes were hard. "That would not strangle his mendacity."

"Oh yes. It will compel him, unless he could take you *in flagrante*, to acknowledge his error, and to hold his peace. I know of no other way in which it can be done."

Cagliostro moved about the chamber angrily. He vowed he was indifferent to unbelief. He did not demonstrate for the amusement of ignorant doubters, or for charlatans who saw tricks in everything they could not understand. Mesmer had not only seen a gold ingot made, he had assisted in the making of it. If that did not convince him, it was because he did not desire to be convinced. Cagliostro could do no more. It would be beneath his dignity. Besides, he ended, it was not likely that Mesmer would consent to come. He would fear to be robbed of the last pretext for his calumnies.

"As for that," said Rohan, "I have enough influence to compel him. It must be done, dear Master." He was emphatic. "I wish it. You must not lie under this stigma, which all of us who believe in you must share. Depend upon me to arrange the matter."

He departed, leaving Cagliostro to gloom in a simmer of baffled rage upon the unresponsive images of Isis and Hippocrates that adorned his salon. But by the time that Serafina came seeking him, he had recovered his serenity. He startled her with the news of the Cardinal's visit and its purpose. Her gentian eyes reflected her panic.

"What will you do?"

"Do?" He raised his black brows; he was regal in his scorn. "That which is expected of me, of course."

"Are you not afraid?" She was breathless.

"Afraid!" For a moment his aspect was terrible. Then he laughed. "You do not yet know the man you've married, Serafina."

Before so magnificent a confidence she suppressed her fears. But they were fully alive in her again when they came, some two or three nights later, to that second demonstration.

It differed in little from the first. The same distinguished company was gathered in the dimly-lighted laboratory, saving that now Monsieur de Vergennes was absent, and a prince of the blood, the Duc de Chartres, a member of Cagliostro's Lodge, was present. The same properties were provided, the fire glowed in the furnace, and Monsieur Mesmer was there to assist, his countenance pale, his eyes glittering with suppressed excitement.

Behind locked doors the preparations followed the same course as on the last occasion, with, however, one slight, yet to Doctor Mesmer very notable, exception. When the elements had been mixed and deposited in the crucible, Cagliostro did not, as before, invite his assistant to plaster it, but undertook the task himself. Taking the vessel from Mesmer, with his left hand he picked up with his right the water-bowl, and went to place it

on the encumbered side-table. Then, still retaining the crucible, and with his back to the spectators, he reached up to the shelf above for the plaster-box, poured plaster from it into the bowl, and with a trowel set himself vigorously to mix.

It was all most natural, and every eye but Mesmer's had inevitably followed his right hand as it reached up. The Doctor, however, who knew what to look for, watched the mystagogue's body, noted how heavily and closely it leaned against the table under the shelf; his ears caught even a tinkle of one vessel against another, to betray a clumsiness in his juggling. With grim amusement he observed that Cagliostro splashed a trowelful of the swiftly-mixed plaster over the mouth of the crucible before he turned again to continue the operation in full view of all, like a man who has nothing to conceal.

"There," the Count announced at last, holding the crucible aloft, "is the alchemical egg complete. I deliver it into your care, Doctor, so that with your own hands you may place it upon the athanor."

Mesmer, whose pale lips wore the cruel smile into which they had curled as he watched Cagliostro at the shelf, received the crucible, and for a long moment held it between his two hands, making no movement. Then he spoke, and his voice was a hoarse rasp of sarcasm.

"Why trouble to place it in the furnace—the athanor, as you call it in the language of quackery?"

"How?" Cagliostro glared at him, and in those terrible eyes Mesmer beheld, as he expected, a reflection of fear.

"How else is the transmutation to be effected?" asked someone in indignant impatience.

Mesmer turned squarely to the gathering. "Transmutation! There is no transmutation. There is a swindle, a vulgar trick of legerdemain, and that is performed already."

Cagliostro reached forward in a sudden wild fury. "Give me that crucible!" he roared.

But the Doctor drew back, fiercely retaining it, gathering assurance.

"Ah, no. It has been entrusted to me, this precious alchemical egg." He laughed unpleasantly. "I do not relinquish it."

There was a general stir of annoyance, and the Duke of Chartres demanded what he meant.

"I mean, Highness, that this crucible is not the crucible that I prepared. It has been changed. That is why it is unnecessary to protract this nauseous comedy by subjecting it to the fire."

"Your spite makes you very rash, sir," cried Rohan, and after his came other indignant protests.

But Mesmer coldly faced a hostility over which he was assured of triumph. "God knows I am no gambler," he said, "but I will wager anyone a hundred louis that the transmutation has already taken place, that the gold ingot is already in this crucible."

"I'll take the wager," eagerly cried Madame de Polignac. "A hundred louis, Monsieur Mesmer."

Cagliostro uttered a groan of distress, and Serafina, watching him from amongst the spectators, felt her senses begin to swim. Then the mystagogue was bellowing like a calf.

"No, no! Domeniddio! This must go no further. I will not permit it. I will not suffer that my sublime arts should be subjected to this prostitution. Give me that crucible, Monsieur Mesmer. At once."

An icy breath of doubt in their Master momentarily chilled his disciples as they saw him reach forth in frenzy and heard the exulting laugh with which Mesmer again eluded him.

“Aha, you charlatan!” the Doctor mocked. “Exposure is upon you.”

He seized a flat trowel, dropped the crucible on to the table, and by a smashing blow with the sharp edge of the tool reduced it to fragments, crying triumphantly: “Behold!”

The spectators crowded forward fearfully to the table’s edge, and stood there in utter silence, gaping at the squelched grey mud-like mass that the fractured vessel yielded.

Thus for a long moment. Then a terrific explosion of laughter deafened the appalled and bewildered Mesmer.

Tumbled from the lofty pinnacle of his false confidence, and shattered in spirit by the fall, the German doctor stood shaking, limp and pallid, whilst Cagliostro fulminated with eye and tongue to complete his annihilation.

“Derider of mysteries you are too base to apprehend! Defiler of the altars of Hygeia! Buffoon! Impostor! Away to your swindling wash-tubs and the poor hysterics upon whom you prey! Out of my house, and never again dishonour it by your presence!” He strode across to the door, unlocked it, and flung it wide. “Out, sir, before I summon my lackeys to cast you from a threshold you have desecrated.”

Discomfited, hang-dog, wincing under the derision with which the company belaboured him, realizing the futility now of all protests, Mesmer was glad to be permitted to escape.

Later, when the last of their noble guests had departed rejoicing in a faith confirmed, Cagliostro faced Serafina with a grim smile.

“I do not think that we shall have any more annoyance from Monsieur Mesmer, if, indeed, he survives the ridicule that will haunt him.”

Serafina’s lovely, child-like face was blank. “I am still trembling,” she confessed, “at the risks you took. What if he had not broken the crucible? What if, obeying you, he had placed it in the furnace? What then would have been the end?”

He pinched her ear and gave her the tolerant smile of the god for the purblind mortal. “Little pullet, why these questions? It is the faculty of great minds, the very quintessence of their greatness, to perceive exactly how lesser minds will function in given circumstances. If I had not the intelligence to plumb the shallow puddle of Monsieur Mesmer’s wit, or exactly to foresee its workings, why then I should not be Cagliostro.”

THE GHOST OF TRONJOLLY

TRONJOLLY'S MEETING WITH M. de Saint André took place in the courtyard of the *Bouc Inn* at Strasbourg as they were both about to mount the diligence for Paris. It was marked by courtesies of which Saint André was the initiator. His air of the beau monde, the charm of manner with which he fell back in deference and waved the other to precede him to a seat on the vehicle stirred Tronjolly's bourgeois soul to a similar and quite unusual courtliness.

Not that Tronjolly was by any means a boor. He was a good-natured, amiable young man; of a rather clumsy habit of body, it is true, but of a good-humoured, frank and kindly countenance. If he was a little awkward in his manners and slow to those courtesies which are as natural as the breath of life in the world of fashion, it is because the world of fashion was not his world. He was the son of an exceedingly prosperous Strasbourg merchant, reared in a bourgeois atmosphere which neglected only those things that do not make for efficiency in the counting-house. To Tronjolly the elder, the counting-house was the world, the making of money was life. He knew little of any other existence, and that little he despised. In these religious convictions—for they amounted to nothing less—had he reared his eldest son. And if his eldest son was now being dispatched to Paris that there he might marry a lady whom he had never seen, you are not to suppose from this that any such unprofitable matter as romance was in question. The whole affair had been settled, terms discussed, charges adjusted by correspondence like any other ledger transaction; and our rather lumpish, amiable young friend was journeying to marry an heiress.

The ostler stood back from the horses, the postilion blew a flourish on his horn, cracked his whip, and, with cries of "Gare! Gare!" the diligence swept out of the yard and started upon its journey.

Tronjolly permitted himself to take admiring stock of the graceful and gracious travelling companion who occupied the outside seat beside him. He considered him carefully from top to toe, and mentally—from force of habit—estimated his outward worth. There was his laced hat, the furred roquelaure of bottle-green cloth in which our gentleman wrapped his long, shapely body against the crisp air of that bright autumnal day, the long black knee-boots of fine leather, the jewel glittering in the snowy ruffles of his neck, the costly lace that fell over his gloved hands, the small sword with its hilt of mother-o'-pearl and silver. Tronjolly was deeply impressed by the sum total of his calculations which even then did not include, as he remembered, the sleek valet who sat behind in charge of the gentleman's abundant luggage.

They made an odd contrast, these two—Tronjolly, who had been reared in the ways of making money, and Saint André, who was acquainted only with the ways of spending it; Tronjolly, to whom life was earnest and stern, and Saint André, to whom it was more or less of a jest, an adventure to be relished. Much of an age and much of a height, with a good deal even that was similar in cast of countenance, yet in build they compared as a greyhound with a mastiff. Saint André wore his own hair carefully dressed and tied into a cue with long ribbons of black, watered silk; Tronjolly affected a bag-wig of an antiquated type.

Turning his head presently, his eyes drawn by the other's scrutiny, Saint André

addressed his neighbour in pleasant, level tones: "Do you travel far, monsieur?"

For a moment Tronjolly was in confusion, so that he reddened and stammered. When he recovered he replied that he was on his way to Paris.

M. de Saint André's face lighted up, conveying the flattering intimation that he was pleased.

"In that case, monsieur, we shall be travelling companions all the way."

Tronjolly received the news in a silence which endured until it tardily occurred to him that it would be polite to profess himself enchanted. Having done so, he shyly asked a question. "Do you—do you know Paris, monsieur?"

"Know it?" Saint André's fine eyebrows were raised. He laughed. "Like my pocket. I was a student at the Sorbonne for three years, and what a Sorbonne student does not know of Paris, my friend . . ." He shrugged and laughed again, leaving his sentence there.

In this manner began an acquaintance which was steadily to improve during the six tedious days of that journey.

Tronjolly, finding himself out in the world for the first time, was a little bewildered, very lonely and very ill-at-ease. He was soon made conscious that he lacked the proper address towards all those—ostlers, chamberlains, postilions, drawers, landlords, and the rest—whose business it was to minister to travellers. He was in deadly fear of being swindled, and almost as fearful of being ridiculous.

Then, too, in answer to his anxious questions, Saint André told him things about Paris which went far to increase his natural timidity and to fill him with dread at the very thought of finding himself alone in such an ocean of guile and wickedness. He even began to fear Monsieur Coupri, the father of the heiress he was going to wed. Not a doubt but that Monsieur Coupri and the family would make him welcome. Yet it was not as if he knew them or they knew him, and any unknown quantity connected with Paris began to assume formidable and terrifying proportions for Tronjolly.

Now, it is not in the nature of a Tronjolly to carry such a burden when confession to an amiable and worldly-wise companion will partially relieve it. Hence followed confidences, at first faltering and hesitant, then—being encouraged—full and frank.

Tronjolly entertained M. de Saint André with an exact account of his relations with the Coupri family, of the marriage that had been arranged between himself and Mlle Coupri, and of the lady's very substantial dowry.

"Monsieur," said Saint André, "if the lady's beauty at all matches those endowments, you are a singularly fortunate fellow."

"As to that," said Tronjolly, pouting and raising a shoulder, "a man must take his chance. I am assured that she is sound and healthy, and not without attraction. But where the main thing is so extremely satisfactory one must not be too expectant as to details. As I have said, a man must take his chance."

"And you may take it with a good heart," laughed the man of the world. "All marriage is a lottery, as someone has said, and you are fortunate in your knowledge that the essentials are assured."

"You are not married yourself, by chance, monsieur?"

"I?" Saint André laughed. "My friend, I am a younger son with a patrimony too slender to suffice for my own abnormally developed habits of expenditure. And then, too, I am cursed with fastidiousness—a madness in a poor man. My family had proposed to marry me to a gargoyle of a woman—a heavily gilded gargoyle, it is true, with a title and

lands and rent-roll as long as a lawsuit. But—what would you?—I declined on the ground that, as I have not the means to build a cathedral, I should not know what to do with a gargoyle. My father, who has a poor sense of humour, considered the answer offensive. People are like that. At present I am more or less in disgrace, and I am going to Paris to forget it and to take a holiday from my father. He is not an adorable man at the best of times, but when offended he is unendurable.”

Confidence inviting confidence, Tronjolly told Saint André of his own father, and of his family generally, and thus the intimacy between them grew apace.

Paris was reached in the twilight of the sixth day of their journey. The diligence drew up at the *Golden Hand*, at the corner of the Rue de la Verrière, and if Tronjolly was a little bewildered by the bustle in the yard of that notable hostelry, he was profoundly impressed, awed almost, to hear Bercy—M. de Saint André’s valet—issuing orders for their accommodation in a tone so arrogant that very soon there was as much scurry and confusion at the *Golden Hand* as if a prince of the blood had alighted there.

A suite of fine apartments was placed at their disposal, and presently they dined in a blue-and-gold room above-stairs, of splendours such as Tronjolly beheld for the first time. They were waited upon by the sleekest of servants, under the instructions of the capable Bercy. The supper was to Tronjolly a succession of incredible sensations, a succession of discoveries in what could be achieved with ordinary fish and flesh; and it was washed down by a well-ripened, soft, velvety Bordeaux which burst into incredible perfumes upon the palate, and left Tronjolly persuaded that until this hour he had never tasted wine.

Coming from Strasbourg, as he did, he was well acquainted with that epicurean paste that is made from the livers of diseased geese. But it required Paris and the chef at the *Golden Hand* to show him to what unimagined uses it can be applied. By a fatality there was a dish of boned quails—unfathomable mystery—stuffed tight with that toothsome paste. Tronjolly, by nature a glutton, ate no fewer than six of those stuffed birds, with the consequence that he was taken ill in the night. After writhing awhile in pain on his magnificent, canopied bed, he screamed and rang for assistance.

A little later, M. de Saint André was awakened by the landlord and a grim-faced physician, who came to inform him that Tronjolly was gravely ill, and to ask if he was related to the sufferer.

“Not at all, monsieur,” said Saint André.

“You are his friend, at least?”

“You may call me that. We were travelling companions from Strasbourg.”

“He will have relations in Paris?” was the next question.

“From what he tells me of himself, he has none.”

The doctor clucked in vexation.

“Your friend, sir, is in very grave case. He is suffering from a very remorseless form of gastric inflammation. Had his relatives been at hand, I must have advised you to summon them.”

Horrified, Saint André sat up in bed. “Do you mean that his life is in danger?”

The physician spread his hands. “I will do what I can. But, to be frank, I doubt if he will be alive in the morning.”

The event was to confirm his prognosis. Tronjolly spent the night in delirium. Towards dawn, in a fleeting moment of lucidity, he found Saint André in a bedgown beside him, and realized something of his circumstances.

"I am very ill, am I not?" he asked.

"You are certainly ill, my friend."

Tronjolly considered.

"They are expecting me to-morrow—M. Coupri and Mademoiselle," he said. "Should I be unable to go, you will do me the favour to send word to them, will you not?"

"I will bear them word myself," Saint André promised.

The unfortunate youth died a few hours later, and M. de Saint André, profoundly troubled by the event, spent the greater part of the morning, out of the goodness of his nature, in making arrangements for the funeral. Having completed these, he remembered that the Coupri family would be awaiting the bridegroom, and determined to go at once upon his grim errand. He ordered a carriage, and went forth dressed as he was, in his travelling-suit and bottle-green roquelaure.

The carriage clattered over the Pont-au-Change, and on through a maze of narrow streets to the more spacious Rue du Foin. It rolled along beside the high wall of a garden, and came at last to rest before the fairly imposing house to which the garden belonged.

M. de Saint André alighted, and rapped sharply on the green door with the gold knob of his cane. It opened almost instantly and a female servant, with a comely smiling face and almost devouring eyes, confronted our fine gentleman expectantly.

"Monsieur Coupri lives here, I think," said Saint André.

"Yes, monsieur." She was almost breathless.

"May one see him? I have just arrived from Strasbourg, and——"

But he got no further. The mention of Strasbourg was evidently all that the girl awaited. With a ripple of laughter, she turned and sped away from him into the house, calling:

"Monsieur! Monsieur Coupri! He has arrived. He is here!"

"Pst! Pst! Hi! My good girl!" Saint André called after her in vexation.

But in her excitement she either did not hear or did not heed him. And then a door flew open, and a stout little man rolled out. He had a rosy, good-humoured face and twinkling little eyes. He exuded bonhomie at every pore.

Before Saint André could utter a word of protest, the little man had violently descended upon him, embraced him, kissed him upon both cheeks, and was dragging him across the threshold by main force, smothering him the while in volubility.

"But come in, then, come in. I was wagering it would be you when the carriage stopped. You see it was the hour, and I knew that the son of old Tronjolly would be as punctual as his father. Be welcome to my house, my child. The ladies are waiting to receive you, and Geneviève is dying of impatience to see you. Did you have a good journey? It is a plaguey long way to Strasbourg, and on such an errand the journey must have seemed long indeed. Youth's impatience!" The little man laughed with a will. "Youth's impatience!"

"Ah, but one moment, monsieur!" cried Saint André, disengaging himself from those massive, clinging arms. "I haven't——"

"To be sure—the carriage," said M. Coupri. "But Mariette will see to it. Pay him, Mariette," he bade the grinning domestic. "And give him a pourboire of six sous. Open-handedness is the order of such a day as this, eh? We do not get married every day, do we, Georges?"

"Monsieur," said Saint André gravely, "there is a very important matter——"

“To be sure there is!” cried Coupri, exploding in laughter. “The ladies are waiting for a sight of you. We must not keep them. It is not gallant.”

He flung open the door of the little salon on the right, and, to the eyes of a dozen people assembled there in expectation, he disclosed the elegant M. de Saint André.

There was a moment’s staring silence, produced by M. de Saint André’s personality, his handsome figure, his fine clothes and his air of the great world, all of which went to make upon the Coupri family an impression very different from that which the family had expected to receive.

Then an elderly but still attractive lady, whom Coupri presented as Aunt Jeanne, sailed forward, flung her arms round Saint André’s neck, hugged him to her bosom, and kissed him resoundingly. We conjecture that it was at this point that the spirit of mischief prompted Saint André to accept the part which destiny and the Coupri family were forcing upon him. Yielding, he abandoned himself recklessly to the adventure, without thought of anything beyond the immediate amusement which it offered. He suffered himself meekly to be embraced and kissed by every bourgeois present, and he discovered that one or two of the bourgeois made the ordeal well worth enduring. All called him Georges—which name he thought detestable—and all gave him effusive welcome, with one exception. This was a young man in the red coat of an officer of the Swiss Guards, who gave himself airs on the strength of his military rank in a notoriously plebeian corps, and who held himself scowlingly aloof from M. de Saint André.

The family commented with embarrassing bourgeois frankness on Saint André’s fine clothes, on his figure, on his manner; they described with frankness what they had expected him to be like, and with equal frankness confessed themselves to be pleasantly surprised by what they beheld.

Not until there was mention of a portrait did Saint André become uneasy.

“Do you know now,” said Coupri, “that I find you singularly unlike your picture. I had expected you to be stouter, and to have more colour. And then your hair. It was quite fair in the portrait.”

“I was stouter and I had more colour,” said Saint André. “Also, in effect, my hair has darkened. But then, you see, I have been ill. It has left me like this.”

“Ill?” It was a chorus of concern. They crowded closer round him, tender-eyed. “Ill?” they clamoured.

“Oh, but that is over now. Though, of course, the fatigue of the journey, and—and . . . the natural impatience consuming me . . .”

Peals of thrilling laughter acclaimed the faltering gallantry of these words. Then Aunt Jeanne’s voice was heard.

“But come here, Geneviève. Come, then, my little one, and greet your bridegroom. Do you not hear what he is saying?”

From a corner of the room, whither she had fled like some frightened bird, Aunt Jeanne dragged forth the bride, all trembling reluctance. Fresh from her convent, wrapped in her purity and innocence, white and lovely as a budding rose, she stood before our gentleman, long lashes veiling the fear in her blue eyes. Saint André stared in surprise a moment; then, recovering, he bowed with a courtier’s practised grace. Geneviève replied with a curtsy, then sidled to her aunt for cover and protection.

As conversation broke out again the young officer of Swiss, who had watched the meeting of the betrothed with lowering eyes, now begged Coupri to present him to the

bridegroom. Coupri did so, announcing the Swiss as a cousin, and left them together.

The officer looked the bridegroom over with an eye of cold dislike. "Your manners, sir," said he, "are precisely what one would expect from a Strasbourg shopkeeper!"

Startled, Saint André made an instant recovery. He smiled his sweetest. "Just as yours, sir, are what one would look for in a Swiss cowherd!"

It was the officer's turn to be startled. He had not expected a rejoinder so ready and so apt. He stiffened and clicked his heels.

"My name," he said, "is Stoffel. Lieutenant Stoffel."

"An unpleasant name," said Saint André, "but no doubt you deserve it."

The soldier's eyes narrowed. His thin lips smiled grimly.

"I see that we understand each other," he said, keeping his voice low. "And I am glad to see also that you wear a sword."

"I bought it cheap in a second-hand shop in Strasbourg," Saint André apologized, feeling that the entertainment promised to be more complete than he had expected. "I think it looks rather well. Don't you?"

"Can you use it?" growled the Swiss.

"You might show me how," ventured Saint André.

Stoffel leaned nearer, and spoke rapidly.

"In the garden, then, at five o'clock."

He would have moved away, but Saint André caught him by the sleeve of his red coat.

"A moment, mon lieutenant," he begged. "Would it be impertinent to inquire the nature of your quarrel with me?"

The fire-eater sneered. "You arrive inopportunistly. You are de trop. That is all. You were rash to leave Strasbourg."

Then Aunt Jeanne interrupted them, leading forward again the shy Geneviève, and followed by Coupri and Uncle Grégoire. An ill-bred, inquisitive silence fell upon the company, and Stoffel drew away.

"Let us leave the children to become better acquainted," said Uncle Grégoire, rubbing his fat hands.

"Leave them!" echoed Aunt Jeanne on a note of horror.

Her notions of propriety were above the level of those of her brother.

"Bah!" said Coupri, peremptorily brushing aside all objections. "We dine in a quarter of an hour, Georges. Geneviève will entertain you until then. Come, my friends."

They departed, Stoffel going last, his powdered head very much in the air.

Alone with her future husband, Geneviève sat down abruptly without daring to look at him. Saint André lost some of his ease. He had enough decency left to begin to regret the adventure. There was an awkward silence, courageously broken at last by mademoiselle.

"You had a good journey, monsieur?" she inquired mechanically.

"A—an impatient journey, mademoiselle," said he as mechanically.

She flushed, and tapped her foot. Apparently there was a spirit behind the air of convent-bred simplicity.

"You said that before, I think."

"A truthful man is bound to repeat himself," said Saint André. "Have patience with my lack of wit. Forgive it on the score of my sincerity."

"Sincerity!" she echoed. She flashed him a glance of annoyance. "You are sincere? It is sincere to imply that you were impatient to come and marry a girl you had never seen?"

For once in his impudent life Saint André was at a loss.

“There—there is such a thing as intuition, mademoiselle,” he explained lamely.

“Yes, monsieur. And, of course, in your case there was even more—there was definite knowledge. Of the amount of my dowry, I mean. That would account for your impatience. I had not thought of it.”

He understood that she was angry, and that she gathered from anger an unsuspected strength. A moment he hesitated, then instinct prompted him to go down on one knee beside her and seek to take her hand, what time he prepared a likely speech. But the hand was snatched away.

“I am not yet your wife,” she reminded him. “The transaction is not yet complete. Delivery of the goods does not take place until this evening.”

His amorous words perished unborn. Instead, “Mademoiselle, you are very cruel,” he protested.

“Neither cruel nor kind. I am nothing. Just a bale of merchandise that your father and mine have marketed between them.”

He rose awkwardly, brushing his knee. Decidedly the adventure did not run an amiable course.

“Is it—is it impossible that we should love each other?” he asked her.

And he confessed afterwards that in that moment he was almost sincere, for this dainty child with the unsuspected spirit perturbed him most unusually.

“Quite impossible!” said she, tightening her red lips.

He sighed.

“Impossible that you should love me—that I can understand.” His voice throbbed with melancholy feeling. “But that I should love you. Oh, mademoiselle, a little mercy, I implore you! I could serve you all the days of my life, with increasing joy and happiness in the service.”

Apparently the tender words were not without effect. The fire faded from her eyes. They became almost shy again. Seeing him standing there, his head bowed in dejection, it is possible that she observed, for the first time, what a very handsome head it was.

“Alas, monsieur, you come too late for love!” said she.

“Too late!” he echoed, and then he understood. “Stoffel!” he cried.

Her cheeks flamed.

“Stoffel,” she admitted. “We love each other. I tell you this because, after all, I think I like you. You are not as uncouth as I had expected.”

“I understand, mademoiselle,” he answered, with a tinge of bitterness, “that I cannot hold the lists against a Swiss mercenary.”

“I warn you, sir, that Stoffel has sworn to me that this marriage contract shall never be signed.”

Saint André discovered that this annoyed him extremely. But before he could explode, Coupri had come to summon them to dinner.

At table Saint André sat moody and silent for a while. Wounded in his vanity, deeply compromised, a duel on his hands with a Swiss fire-eater who had sworn to kill him, he had now abundant matter for reflection, and he began to wonder how the Tronjolly whom he was impersonating would acquit himself in such unexpected circumstances; whether, indeed, the Strasbourg merchant were not to be envied at rest in his coffin.

Presently, however, the wine doing its work, and his volatile nature reasserting itself,

he recovered his liveliness. The more he talked, and the brighter became the sparkle of his ready wit, the more sullen grew Stoffel, the more fiercely the Swiss scowled at him across the table. Geneviève watched and listened in amazement and a growing wonder. Saint André began to feel pleased with himself. The adventure was going none so badly after all. Then he reflected that, nevertheless, it was high time to end it. The hour of the contract was approaching.

Observing that the company began to grow torpid from excessive indulgence, Saint André proposed to take the air in the garden for some moments. Coupri was eager to accompany him, but Saint André protested that he desired to be alone to collect himself against the coming of the notary.

Half-way down the garden he became aware that he was followed. Over his shoulder he caught a glimpse of a red coat, and, cursing his pursuer, he quickened his steps towards the door in the wall which led to the street and safety. He reached it to find it locked and the key missing. With a stifled oath, he turned and faced the hurrying Stoffel.

“You are forgetting an appointment, I think,” said the Swiss, smiling terribly.

“On the contrary, I was remembering it,” said Saint André.

“So indeed I might have supposed, knowing your rabbit-hearted kind.”

Saint André was disposed to be a little angry.

“I thought that was the source of your valour,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“I’ll tell you. You are a man practised in arms, and you take advantage of that fact to browbeat and to impose your will upon an unoffending, rabbit-hearted bourgeois whom you suppose scarcely to know point from pummel.”

Stoffel, standing stiffly as a fencing-master, went red and white by turns.

“I do not force you to fight, monsieur,” he said. “You may withdraw if you please.”

“But I no longer please,” said Saint André, unsheathing his small sword. “You have deliberately detained me, and you must take the consequences. I assure you that they will not be pleasant. I await your convenience, monsieur!”

In a rage, the Swiss threw off wig and coat, whipped out his sword, and, with a bellowed, “On guard!” flung himself upon the supposed Strasbourg merchant. He was met by a guard that astonished him, and for some few moments nothing was heard but the click-click of their blades.

Saint André knew Stoffel’s kind, and had not expected much. He found even less than he had expected. He laughed as he fenced.

“Come come, sir!” he mocked. “Is this the best that you can do? And against a rabbit-hearted bourgeois? Then here’s to make an end.”

There was a slither of steel, a sharp blow of forte on foible, a sudden wrench, and the Swiss officer stood disarmed.

Smiling and calm, Saint André bowed to him.

“Another time, mon lieutenant,” he said, “make certain about the rabbit heart, or they may mourn you in the Cantons.”

He picked up the fallen weapon, sheathed his own, and, bowing again, was departing.

“You are taking my sword!” cried Stoffel suddenly, in a choking voice.

Saint André paused, and turned. He was very grave.

“If I return it to you, monsieur, we recommence; and if we recommence the ending may be different.”

The lieutenant clenched his hands, then, with an oath, he flung aside to pick up his coat and wig. It is disconcerting when you happen to be a fire-eater to meet a bourgeois who can play such tricks with you.

Saint André walked back towards the house. Midway he met Geneviève. She was pale and out of breath. At sight of him she became paler, and stood still.

“Where is Monsieur Stoffel?” she cried.

“Engaged at the moment in swallowing his mortification,” said the gentle Saint André. “Otherwise he has suffered no damage. I have brought you his sword. You may like to return it to him as a wedding gift, though, if you really love him, you may think twice about it, for I assure you that the weapon is a greater danger to himself than to anyone else.”

He bowed again, and left her gazing after him somewhat foolishly, Stoffel’s sword in her hands. On the threshold of the house he encountered Coupri, who hailed him with the news that the notary was expected at six o’clock with the marriage contract.

Saint André pulled out his watch.

“I am afraid I cannot wait, monsieur,” he said.

“Not wait?” quoth Coupri. “What do you mean?”

“You will have to excuse me, monsieur,” he said, faltering a little, in agony almost. “But I have a most important engagement to fulfil.”

Coupri’s face was blank with astonishment. “To-day?” he asked incredulously.

“At once, monsieur,” said Saint André.

“But—but——” Coupri stared. “In less than an hour the notary will be here. Your engagement must keep, my friend.”

“Unfortunately it is an engagement that cannot keep,” Saint André insisted.

“But—name of a name! I do not understand.”

In his despair, Saint André’s audacity returned, and he invented boldly.

“What I have to say will no doubt surprise you, monsieur; but, since you insist, you shall know. I arrived here last night at dusk, and I put up at the *Golden Hand*, in the Rue de la Verrière. At supper I ate so many stuffed quails that in the night I was seized with cramps. A doctor was sent for, who found me to be suffering from a grave internal disorder, of which I died at five o’clock this morning. My funeral takes place at six o’clock this evening, and that, monsieur, is the appointment that I must keep. You will understand its utter urgency.”

Wide-eyed, open-mouthed, Coupri stared at him for a long moment; then he began to laugh. But his laughter withered before the other’s solemnity. He became uneasy, and peered at his proposed son-in-law.

“You are not, by any chance . . .” He touched his forehead significantly.

“I feared that you might think so, monsieur. Let me assure you that I am not mad. I am just dead. Adieu, monsieur!”

“A moment, sir!” roared Coupri.

But Saint André did not wait. He slipped past Coupri, eluding his grasping hands, snatched up his hat and cane in the hall, and was gone from the house so quickly that by the time Coupri came panting to the door he was already out of sight.

Bewildered, fuming, Coupri went back to the company and roared out the incredible tale of Tronjolly’s behaviour.

“Perhaps . . .” began Aunt Jeanne, and stopped abruptly, a scared look in her eyes.

“Perhaps what?” demanded Coupri.

“Suppose you go to the *Golden Hand* and make inquiries?” Uncle Grégoire suggested.

Coupri bellowed for his hat and cane, and set out at once, accompanied by his brother and by Stoffel, who was in a simmer of vindictiveness.

At the *Golden Hand*, M. Coupri demanded the landlord.

“Did a Monsieur Tronjolly alight here last evening from the Strasbourg diligence?” he inquired.

The landlord’s face became extremely grave.

“Monsieur Tronjolly?” he replied. “Yes, that is so. It is true that he alighted here.”

Something in his tone and manner filled them with vague premonitions.

“And where is he now?” inquired Coupri.

“Alas! messieurs, the unfortunate gentleman was taken ill in the night, and although everything possible was done, he succumbed to a gastric inflammation some hours later. They are burying him at the Père-la-Chaise at six o’clock this evening.”

“My God!” said Coupri, and sat down in a state of collapse. “It was true, then, what he told me.”

Three pallid men returned to the pleasant house in the Rue du Foin with the dreadful story that a ghost had sat with them that day—a story which spread rapidly and made no little stir at the time. And it is not until now that the *mémoires* of that amusing M. de Saint André have been discovered that we are afforded the truth of the mysterious affair of the Ghost of Tronjolly.

Whether the lieutenant of Swiss was able to persuade Geneviève that no disgrace attached to his sword since his opponent was a supernatural one, and whether, once the Tronjolly wedding was definitely out of the question, he was able to persuade Coupri to allow him to become his son-in-law, are matters, unfortunately, not now discoverable.

THE LUCK OF CAPOULADE

CAPOULADE HAD NO illusions about his luck, just as he had no illusions about himself. He knew that his luck was bad, just as he knew himself to be a thief, a liar and a scoundrel. Necessity had fashioned him. He thieved and lied and the rest because these were the only arts by which he had found it possible to earn—ever since he could remember—a precarious livelihood. In this he found no reason to complain. But to be cursed with bad luck, that was another story. There was no vice that could more seriously trammel a man of his proclivities, as he had found. In the days of the old régime, when he had been as dirt beneath the feet of reputable folk, he had been, as a result of his ill luck, seldom out of the clutches of the police. Now that all this was so gloriously changed, and reputability laid low, the change still profited him nothing. He did not prosper.

For example: He was in the sack of the Tuileries. He had brought thence, as his share of the loot, a suit of yellow brocade laced with gold, a pair of silk stockings, a pair of lacquered shoes with paste buckles, a wig, a gold-hilted sword worth fifty louis, and a purse containing close upon another fifty. He had obtained these things from a gentleman who had no further use for them—having been amongst those who were shot in defending the main staircase from the mob. He had been at some pains to become possessed of them, but at least they were possessions to which none, in these enlightened days of liberty, equality and fraternity, would question his absolute right. He was premature in the assumption. His evil luck must inspire his vanity to trick himself out in these fripperies, in this livery of base servitude. As a result, he was beset that same night by a band of patriots, all breathing fire and dripping blood. They mistook him for an aristocrat, and already they had taken down a lantern to hoist him in its place, when, in his rage and despair, he revealed by his speech the error with which they had insulted him. For in the matter of objugatory obscenity, Capoulade was the wonder and the envy of the *Cour des Miracles*.

He escaped with his life, overwhelmed by the laughter of the revolutionary mob. But the lovely suit of brocade was reduced to tatters, and the beautiful sword with its precious gold hilt and the purse of fifty louis had vanished from his person! It was only to himself, he swore, that such things could happen.

Later his singular rhetoric won him a certain measure of recognition. He became a Jacobin, and accounted himself at last on the high road to fortune. But an ill-considered speech destroyed his chances, and brought him within an ace of leaving his head in the National Basket. Thereupon he fled from Paris.

Following his ill-starred destiny, he found himself in January of the year '93 penniless and shoeless in Thouars. It will be seen that he had not prospered on the journey. There was so little to steal in France in those days, and that little was guarded with a care that seemed to Capoulade an outrage upon the principles of Liberty by which he desired to order his life, like the good patriot that he was.

He was rescued from starvation and befriended by Guinard, the kind-hearted Mayor of Thouars, and in exchange for bed and board and raiment and a trifle of wages, was given employment in Guinard's modest Republican household.

So as the “official”—“official” being the euphemism of “servant” in the vocabulary of the Reign of Reason—Capoulade fetched water, hewed wood, groomed the horse, brushed the coat, and cleaned the boots of his brother-citizen, Guinard. It was intolerable, of course, that a man of his resources, a man whom the Republic had made the equal of any in the land, should waste in this fashion the precious gift of Liberty that was the birthright of every Frenchman.

He cursed his luck steadily and volubly, and he cursed his benefactor, Guinard, whom he hated, firstly because Guinard humiliated him—a free-born citizen of the French Republic, One and Indivisible—by setting him to menial offices; secondly, because Guinard was father to as winsome and buxom a daughter of France as had ever perturbed the senses of Capoulade. Presuming upon the new-found equality, leveller of all those hateful distinctions between men which had marked the extinct age of the despots, Capoulade, in the early days of his officialdom in the Guinard establishment, had offered himself as a suitor for the plump hand of the Citoyenne Mélanie. Guinard had received his proposals with threats of physical injury, expressed in terms which made it clear that he was by no means abreast of the times and appreciative of the glorious change that had been wrought in human relations. His words savoured of aristocracy, of incivisme, of treason to the Republic and to Man. Yet Guinard was the Republican Mayor of Thouars; he wore a tricolour scarf about his protuberant middle, a tricolour tuft of plumes, and a tricolour cockade adorned his cocked hat. To impeach him were a serious matter, too serious for Capoulade, who had already been on the point of sneezing into the National Basket through excess of Republican zeal.

So Capoulade nursed in secret his resentment, his hatred of Guinard and his longing for Guinard’s daughter—who contemptuously ignored him—and patiently awaited his hour. He grew servile, the better to mask his feelings and insinuate himself into the heart of his employer’s confidence; and being a master in the arts of hypocrisy he succeeded completely. The good Guinard was not astute. Soon Capoulade made the useful discovery that for all his tricolour scarf, plumes, cockade, and Republican office, Guinard was at heart a reactionary; that his republicanism was no more than a travesty assumed in order the better to serve his Royalist friends, the insurgents of Poitou and Brittany, the peasant-army of La Vendée.

All that Capoulade lacked was evidence. So he watched and waited. One of these fine days, he was sure, this traitorous Mayor of Thouars would carry indiscretion a step too far. Then would be Capoulade’s opportunity to become a hero in the eyes of the Nation. And there would be good pickings when that happened: pickings that must include this nose-in-the-air Citoyenne Mélanie, with her pink cheeks, moist mouth and provocative breasts.

Meanwhile he employed exemplary patience, and craftily increased Guinard’s esteem of him by sly assumptions of anti-Revolutionary sentiments.

His chance came at last, early in May, a few days after General Quétineau had come to occupy Thouars, making it his headquarters for operations against the insurgents of La Vendée.

It happened that Mayor Guinard was owed a considerable sum of money by a wine-merchant of Nantes, to whom he had lately sold some property. He determined to set out and collect it. Further, he determined to use the occasion to take the delectable Mélanie to Nantes, to the home of his sister who resided there. He had yet a third purpose to serve, which may have prompted this removal of his daughter. He applied to General Quétineau

for a safe-conduct that should enable him to travel unmolested by the troops with which the country was infested.

This safe-conduct he received together with the advice that so as to avoid the Vendéans he had best go by way of Martigne, and cross the Loire at Chalonnes. He set out in a little cart, accompanied by Mélanie and this rascal Capoulade, who by now had won his entire trust and confidence.

Capoulade was downcast, because of the coming separation from Mélanie, and still more because of an indifference to his existence so manifest that she had scarcely a word of farewell for him when they deposited her at her aunt's.

His spirits revived a little at the wine-merchant's in the newly-named Rue de la République (formerly the Rue Royale) when Guinard made trouble upon being tendered payment in assignats of the Republic.

"What's this?" quoth the Mayor of Thouars in a rage, as he fingered contemptuously the paper that represented the five thousand livres owing to him.

"The currency of the nation," answered the wine-merchant, truculently. "Every bill bears the sacred imprint of the Republic, One and Indivisible. Dare you refuse it?" And his little black eyes held a death-challenge.

Guinard thrust back his cocked hat, and scratched his head in perplexity.

"You see," he explained, "in that pestilent part of the country in which I have the misfortune to reside the light of Reason has not yet irradiated the hearts and minds of Frenchmen. It will come in time, my brother, for it is not in the power of Nature to withstand a change so glorious. But until it comes I am likely to starve if I am to depend upon what this paper will buy me."

"Paper!" roared the merchant. "What effrontery! Dare you call this paper?" And with his fist he pinned the wad of soiled notes to the counter.

"I mean—that to the—ah—unenlightened," stammered the unfortunate mayor, "it . . . looks like paper."

"Then enlighten them," said the merchant. "Bear the sacred torch of Reason among them, and he who refuses to be enlightened—to the guillotine with him! You will soon see with what alacrity this money will become current in Thouars."

For a patriot there is no denying that the wine-merchant of Nantes had a delicacy in veiling his threats. Guinard trembled: Capoulade at his elbow nudged him warningly. Nevertheless he made a last objection.

"You see, even here in Nantes, which, under the rule of the magnificent Citizen Carrère, is more Republican, they say, than Paris itself, it is impossible to obtain the full value for an assignat. Give me another thousand livres to meet the discount, and . . ."

"A moment," snapped the merchant. "Give me the name of any man who refuses an assignat at its full value. Give me his name, I say; or step round to the Préfecture with me, and name him there, and to-morrow you shall see him making faces through the little window of the guillotine."

Then he changed his tone, and made an appeal to Capoulade. "Eh, you, *l'ami*! You look an honest man." Capoulade recognized this for a stupendous lie and wondered what intended infamy might lurk behind it. "Tell me now, would you not count yourself richer by money sanctified by the Convention, bearing the emblem of the Republic, the image of the Goddess of Reason herself, the symbol of Universal Brotherhood, than by base coin defiled by the portrait of the late despot, disfigured by a head which in her wisdom the

Nation has shorn away, the head of a man guilty of the crime of incivisme? To proffer such coin is in itself a treason against the Rule of Liberty. Ah, sacred name of a name! You agree with me. You are a good patriot!"

Capoulade accepted modestly the honour thrust upon him, and gave every reason to the fierce wine-merchant.

It was enough. Guinard perceived that one more refusal on his part and this truculent fellow would do by him what he advised him to do by others in like case. He made the best of it; after all, money in this form had the advantage of being extremely portable; and, now that he came to think of it, he reflected that there would be a certain grim relish in hectoring patriots into accepting it as legal tender.

So he pocketed the bills, gave the wine-merchant his quittance, and, in company with the faithful Capoulade, who felt himself the richer by considerable information, he departed.

They took a meal together at an inn, whereafter Guinard disappeared for the best part of an hour into a room which he hired, and Capoulade had little doubt that he was spending the time in so bestowing the assignats as to defy the search of any brigands upon whom they might chance on their return journey. He emerged again to call for his cart, and he paid the reckoning with an assignat for fifty livres, by way of experiment. The taverner was so ill-advised as to look reluctant and disdainful. A refusal—or perhaps a suggestion of a discount—obviously trembled on his lips. But it was anticipated by Capoulade.

"You would scarcely believe, citizen-host," said he, his lean, wolfish face wearing a doleful look, "that there are men in France so dead to patriotism, so lost to all sense of duty to the Nation, that they demur at accepting the paper of the Republic. We had one such scoundrel guillotined last week in Thouars for refusing to accept an assignat for more than seventy-five per cent of its face value."

The vintner's eyes thoughtfully considered the speaker's patibulary countenance, and made haste to approve.

"He was well served." And he explained his apparent reluctance. "I hope you don't insult me by supposing me one of those. I examined the assignat to assure myself that it is genuine. There is so much forgery nowadays . . ." He shrugged to complete the sentence, and counted out the change in full, without a murmur, whilst Guinard was at pains to control his laughter. Later, as they rattled out of the city in the Mayor's little can, he patted Capoulade's shoulder affectionately.

"You did famously, my lad," he commended him. "My faith, there will be some secret maledictions uttered by the patriots of Thouars." And he laughed his jovial laugh, whilst Capoulade grinned cynically.

"Leave it to me, mon patron," said he, "and I'll show you how to tame these breechless sons of dogs."

It was on the morrow that their adventure befell them. In the afternoon they reached Bressuire—the stronghold of the Vendéans. From this it will be seen that, in returning home, Guinard had chosen the longest way round. Capoulade was entirely in his confidence as to the reason, and he laughed his close-lipped laugh when a surge of Royalist peasants, with the white cross in each round hat, surrounded the cart and declared them prisoners, being attracted by the Mayor's tricolour sash and plumes.

Guinard made a brief speech, in which he swore that, appearances notwithstanding, he

was as much for God and King as any of them. His peroration was a demand to be taken instantly before M. de Charette, the commander of the Royalist forces in the town.

Capoulade did not accompany his master into the presence of the insurgent leader. But he had a very good idea of what was taking place there; Guinard, the false Republican, was informing the Royalists of the strength and disposition of General Quétineau's forces about Thouars. Capoulade permitted himself to wonder what profit he could extract from his denunciation of Guinard on their return home, but he found his calculations hampered by the thought that, after all, there would be no more than his own word against Guinard's, and that—human nature being what it was—Guinard's was likely to be preferred.

Presently the Mayor reappeared, accompanied by M. de Charette in person. The Royalist leader shook hands with him in sight of all the assembled insurgents, and commended him to their care.

They left Bressuire in a sort of triumph, upon which Capoulade permitted himself the liberty of passing certain strictures.

"Hardly judicious, mon patron," said he. "There may be patriots in Bressuire, just as there are Royalists in Thouars. Now a word from them to General Quétineau, and it would go very ill with us."

But Guinard was not disturbed.

"Pish!" said he. "By to-morrow the Royalists themselves will be in Thouars, and Quétineau and his rabble in full flight. I tell you there is such a breeze springing up in La Vendée as will sweep France clear of this cloud of sansculottism. Before the summer is out the King will be back in Paris."

"The King is dead," said Capoulade.

"The King never dies," replied Guinard in a big voice.

"Not even when he is guillotined?" asked Capoulade.

Guinard turned to regard him gravely, sorrowfully. At times this Capoulade, so cunning at others, showed signs of impenetrable stupidity. They were driving at a gentle pace along a road that was cut through a forest, approaching a bridge over the river Thoué.

Guinard was moved to explain this mystery of the immortality of kingship, and he had already made an excellent beginning, when he was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a half-dozen men from among the trees; all looked fierce, all wore white crosses in their hats, and all six of them carried muskets. Quite unnecessarily one of them shouted, "Halte-là!"

Guinard had already halted. He sat benignly smiling upon these and upon others like them, who came surging from the woods on either side of the road. A young dandy, of some twenty years, in fine clothes and a charming pigtail, but sadly in need of a shave, stood truculently forward.

"Now then, canaille, render your accounts. What the devil are you doing here?"

His young eyes were very fierce; his whole manner was plainly saying, "I hope to have the pleasure of hanging you within five minutes."

Guinard made him no answer in words. He took off his hat, and removed from the lining a scrap of paper, which he presented to the officer.

Having examined it the young man fell back at once, and saluted with a flourish. "Return arms!" he barked over his shoulder, and a line of menacing muskets was instantly lowered.

A few words were exchanged, the ambuscaders disappeared into the woods again, the leaves rustled into silence, and Guinard was free to pursue his way.

Less than half an hour later, just beyond the bridge over the Thoué, they were met by a detachment of Republican cavalry. It was commanded by Captain Duchâtel—a distinguished officer—who, two years ago, had been a pastrycook in Marseilles. Guinard cursed softly under his breath. The officer drew rein, and exchanged courtesies with the Mayor of Thouars, who was well known to him.

Then, looking at him attentively, with frowning brows—“You return from Nantes by an odd way,” said he, on a note of suspicion.

“True,” said Guinard, easily. “I made a détour at some risk in the service of the Nation. I was pursued by some infantry some miles this side of Bressuire, and I was fortunate to get safely away!”

“You have been to Bressuire?” cried the officer in increasing surprise.

“Ah, but no,” said Guinard, with a wink that implied he was not such a fool as that. “I kept clear of Bressuire by a couple of leagues.”

“And, save for this infantry, the country is quiet? You saw nothing?”

“Nothing,” answered the Mayor.

“Good.” He turned to his men and waved his sabre. “Forward!” he commanded.

They thundered past, over the bridge and down the forest road, straight into the ambush and the death to which Guinard sent them, and to which he would gladly have sent all the Republican rabble of France. He did not wait for this, however. As soon as they had ridden off he whipped up his horse, and made for Thouars at the little beast’s best speed.

“That was an ill encounter,” he muttered, and a shiver ran through him. “*Peste!* I had not reckoned on it. Pray Heaven the Royalists will do their work well, and let no man come back to tell the tale of that ambush.”

But Heaven did not heed his prayer. Under the very walls of Thouars he was overtaken by Captain Duchâtel’s returning troop. Half a dozen saddles had been emptied, and at least a dozen men were wounded. Duchâtel’s left arm hung useless at his side. Nevertheless they came along now at a furious gallop.

“Arrest me that man!” roared Duchâtel.

“Me?” cried the Mayor, blenching at the thought of what might be in store for him. “Upon what grounds, if you please?”

“I’ll state my grounds to General Quétineau.”

“But, name of a name, what has happened?” the Mayor demanded, insistent in the part of injured innocence.

“Death has happened!” snarled the Republican, “and perhaps treachery. Bring them along.”

As they went, Guinard sought to reassure himself. After all, what proof could there be that he had knowledge of the ambuscaders? And who would believe it without proof? His excellent Republican reputation in Thouars must count for something. The notion of his being a traitor would be flouted by all men, from Quétineau, himself, downwards.

So it was with a comparatively confident heart that he suffered himself to be haled into the presence of the Republican General.

Quétineau, a big, florid man in a blue uniform coat, white nankeens, and Hessian boots, sat studying a map at a deal table, in a bleak, whitewashed room of truly

Republican austerity. The floor was bare, and the only decoration of the wall was a sheet bearing the orders of the day, with a splash of evening sunshine, like a splash of blood, upon the whitewash.

He rose as the wounded Duchâtel burst into the room, followed by his captives under guard. Whilst the captain poured out his fierce tale of disaster, the General considered the Mayor in incredulous amazement. He scowled and swore as he listened. But at the suggestion that Guinard might be in communication with the Royalists he shrugged impatiently.

“And what have you to say, Guinard?” he asked, never doubting that Guinard’s answer would be ready and conclusive.

It was; and Quétineau was on the point of dismissing the matter, when Capoulade discovered that he had something to say.

He had been considering his position, and for the first time in his life he experienced an overmastering impulse to speak the truth.

He spoke it. He stated succinctly and precisely that the Mayor had been into the town of Bressuire that morning, that he had been closeted there with M. de Charette, that the ambuscaders had challenged them, and then allowed them to pass when Guinard presented a safe-conduct from the Royalist commander.

Guinard, stricken and grey-faced, scarcely able to believe his ears, looked at Capoulade with eyes of horror and amazement. When the little rascal had done, a tempest of speech burst forth in that room of the mairie. Quétineau swore, Duchâtel swore, the very troopers swore—for in those glorious days of Equality Republican troopers were not to be restrained by the presence of mere officers.

“And why didn’t you tell us this before?” blazed Quétineau at last.

Capoulade spread his hands, his sharp, wolfish face thrust impudently forward. “I was coming to tell you when we were taken.”

“Coming to tell us?” thundered Duchâtel. “Then why, you rascal, did you not tell me of the trap that waited for us ahead? Why did you allow us to ride into it?”

“I dared not. This abandoned slave of despots had threatened to shoot me dead at the first word. He had his pistol ready.”

“That’s a lie!” said Guinard. But none heeded him.

“Yet a good sansculotte,” was Duchâtel’s hot answer, “would have done his duty and been shot.”

“True,” answered the plausible little rascal, his voice vibrating with noble conviction, noble intent. “I would have done my duty to the Nation and never grudged my life as the price of that privilege. But I perceived in time that I should have been shot at my first word, before I could perform that duty; and had I been shot, I ask you, Citizen-General, who would have been left to unmask this villain?”

“Ah! He has reason,” Quétineau agreed. “He is a good patriot.” He pointed to Guinard. “Search me that fellow.”

“You need look no further than the lining of his hat,” said Capoulade.

The search, thus directed, disclosed at once that utterly damning piece of evidence—the safe-conduct obtained from Charette.

“That will be quite enough,” said Quétineau. His eyes, hard as agates, played over the quaking Mayor. “Dog!” was all he had to say to him. Then he turned to Duchâtel. “A firing-party in the courtyard within ten minutes.” And curtly he waved them out.

When all had gone, Capoulade, who had deliberately lingered, licked his lips, and blinked. A shiver ran down his spine at the thought of the narrowness of the peril through which he had come. But like a ray of sunshine in a dark cell shone the golden reflection that here was his chance at last. His ill-luck was conquered. And the thing had come upon him unawares, as Fortune's favours ever come.

Quétineau looked up gloomily. "Why do you wait?" he barked. "You have done your duty, citizen. The Nation thanks you. You can go to the devil."

Capoulade thought the time had come to burst into tears.

"Why, what the devil's this?" stormed the General.

"Guinard was good to me," sobbed the rascal. "He was as a father to me, and I have sent him to his death."

"Had he actually been your father, your duty to the Nation demanded no less. You have nothing with which to reproach yourself."

"I know, my General. Yet it is a hard duty that the Nation has imposed upon me."

"You have discharged it nobly, citizen," the General comforted him. "Let that thought uplift you." He sighed, infected by Capoulade's emotion. "Alas! he was my friend, too. Yet you saw with what determination I pronounced against him. One must suffer if necessary for the greater honour and glory of our sacred Republic."

"I suppose so. I suppose so." Capoulade sniffed, and mopped his eyes with the sleeve of his dirty coat, thereby leaving his face dirtier than it had been before. "May I . . . May I beg a favour, my General?"

"What is it, my brave fellow?"

"His poor daughter—his only child, whom he left in Nantes—would like to know that he had been decently buried. If I might . . ."

Quétineau understood. He was on his feet in a moment, grasping the rascal's hand.

"Citizen," he said, "your feelings do you credit. I honour your emotions and your wishes. It shall be as you desire. I desire it so myself. After all, was he not my friend?"

He sat down again, and wrote the order. As he sanded it, the window shook with the vibration of a fusillade in the yard below. It was over.

Capoulade drove out of the courtyard in Guinard's trap, with Guinard's body lying in the bottom of it.

He bore it home to Guinard's empty house, and there ten minutes' diligent search discovered to him between the leathers of the Mayor's boots the five thousand livres in assignats, which were the reward that Heaven sent Capoulade for having so nobly discharged his duty to the Nation.

Equipped with a safe-conduct from Quétineau, to enable him to travel safely to Nantes and bear the sad news to Guinard's daughter, Capoulade—now a man of fortune—set out upon the morrow. He felt that the tide of his luck was but at the beginning of its flow. In Nantes was the delectable Mélanie. Capoulade thrilled with anticipatory delight. The girl had treated him in the past with airs and graces little suited to the wife of a patriot such as he was about to make her. Well, well! He would amend all that. He had a way with women, had Capoulade; not quite a lover's way, perhaps, but effective. If she should choose to prove loving, good; if not, why so much the worse for her, and it might be amusing to tame her.

So it was with blithe anticipations that our little rascal entered the city of Nantes once more.

It occurred to him that before waiting upon Mélanie he would do well to render himself more presentable. Women, he reflected, like a nice exterior, and he did not look his best in Guinard's cast-off rags.

He sought a tailor, and chose with care a suit, stockings, shoes and hat, all of the very plainest, as became a sober Republican.

Fifty-five livres the man demanded for the lot. Capoulade tendered him an assignat for a hundred. The tailor took it with a contemptuous sniff, and presented Capoulade with five livres change.

"What's this?" said he, fierce as a rat.

"Your change," said the tailor. "The assignat is not good for more than sixty livres."

There was something so supercilious, so savouring incivisme about this infernal dealer in clothes, that Capoulade's lofty sense of patriotism was deeply wounded. He would waste few words upon such a scoundrel. He thrust the bundle back.

"Return me my assignat," he demanded curtly.

"With pleasure," said the other, thus aggravating his offensiveness.

Capoulade took the bill in his left hand. In his right he took the tailor's beard. By this he pulled the fellow's face down until it was on a level with his own; then into it he fiercely spat his valediction.

"You want shaving, my friend. We'll see what the National Barber can do for you with his famous razor. Just wait until I return from the Préfecture."

On that he flung out of the shop in a white-heat of rage. The scared tailor ran to the door and called him back. But Capoulade was too angry to give heed. He took his way at speed to the Préfecture, arrived out of breath and panted a demand for instant audience of the Prefect. He was desired to lower his voice, informed that the overbearing manner had disappeared from France with the despots, all of which but went to increase his annoyance. Presently he was introduced into the august presence of the Prefect—a grimy fellow with a phrygian cap on a dishevelled head, who sat in a bare room that reminded him of the one in which he had been brought before Quéteineau.

Capoulade smacked his assignat down upon the table. "Be good enough, Citizen-Prefect, to tell me what that may be worth in Nantes."

The functionary in silence took up the bill, fingered it, considered Capoulade, looking him over from head to foot, pondering his raggedness. The little rogue felt that his effrontery was oozing away under the sluggish, bloodshot eyes of that formidable ruffian. At last the Nation's representative condescended to speak.

"Have you many more of these about you?" he growled.

"What do you mean?" quoth Capoulade.

The Prefect did not trouble to explain. A couple of sansculottes in red shirts lounged against the wall. He waved a dirty hand. "Search him," he commanded.

Fearing the worst, Capoulade lost his head, and made a dash for the door. He was intercepted, caught, searched, and his bundle of assignats brought to light and handed to the Prefect.

The ruffian looked through them. Then his dull eyes rested once more upon Capoulade.

"You are audacious," he said. "I am sorry for you, because I like audacious men." He sighed. "*Hélas!* The forging of assignats is a capital offence. They will probably guillotine you. Take him away."

“Wait!” screamed Capoulade. “Forged? Did you say they are forged?” he cried, his little eyes looking big for once.

“That is what I said,” replied the Prefect, who was now emotionless.

“But I didn’t forge them,” Capoulade protested. He was livid. He felt the weight of his ill-luck upon him in that moment as he had never felt it yet. It was only to him that such things could happen. “I can explain,” he bleated.

“But why didn’t you say so? Explain, then.”

He explained. There was nothing for it but the truth. And the truth, as we know, had never proved a friend of his.

When he had done the Prefect’s brow was black and ominous.

“But this is even worse!” he cried. “You have stolen the property of the Nation—for the possessions of a traitor are by law confiscate to the Republic. There is less hope for you than ever. You are certain to be guillotined.” He waved his hand, and a very limp Capoulade was assisted towards the door by the Prefect’s men.

But the cruellest cut was yet to come—prompted by the Prefect’s vanity.

“It is very odd,” said he, “but now that I come to look at these assignats more closely, I see that I was mistaken. They are genuine, after all.”

He laughed a soft, malicious laugh, which informed the almost swooning Capoulade of the trick which had been played upon him in order to discover how so disreputable-looking a fellow came to be so well supplied with money.

The bitterness welled up from his soul in the astonishing words he uttered as he was flung into a prison cell: “I wonder whether my ill-luck will play me such tricks as these in the next world.”

Nor was he comforted by the gaoler’s stern reminder that the Republic had abolished the Hereafter.

THE PASSPORT

OUT OF THE yellow chaise, whose reeking horses reeled to a standstill in the cobbled yard of the *Three Pigeons* (formerly the *Three Kings*) at Pontarlier, sprang a tall, active man, bawling "Horses!"

The post-boy slid from the saddle, and faced him with a wide-mouthed grin. "It's a miracle the poor beasts be standing up. Another furlong must have burst their guts."

The traveller, unheeding, continued peremptorily clamant. "Postmaster! Horses!"

The aproned landlord, who was also the postmaster of Pontarlier, emerged, thrusting aside a stable-boy. He came in a truculence that fell from him like a cloak at sight of the tricolour sash of office visible about the traveller's waist under the frieze greatcoat which had fallen open.

"Alas, Citizen-Representative, my stables are empty, and so is every other stable in Pontarlier. A requisition this morning took all our cattle."

"How? No horses!" The dismay of the Representative's countenance implied catastrophe. His vigour was blown out of him; his very stature seemed to diminish. "No horses! Oh, but . . . Name of God! I am in haste. In great haste. Business of the Nation."

The host was sympathetic. "What would you? For once the business of the Nation must wait until your own cattle are rested."

"Look at them!" cried the Representative in exasperation. It was as if he asked would they ever again be fit to travel. They stood with heaving flanks and sodden, darkened coats, from which a steam was rising on the chill air of that grey November afternoon.

"One sees well that they've not been spared," the landlord commented. "But a good rub down, a feed of corn and a twelve hours' rest, and you'll be on your way again. We'll make you comfortable for the night at the *Three Pigeons*, citizen."

The landlord fell to praising his house, his beds, his wine, his kitchen. The Citizen-Representative would find here none of the lenten fare imposed by the hard times upon so many hostelries in France.

Bemused, his keen, intellectual countenance dark with anxious thought, the traveller scarcely heeded the unctuous babble. "Twelve hours!" he was muttering in his dismay. "I ask myself by how many hours that may be too late."

"Too late?"

The traveller supplied no explanation. "Enfin! Idle to stand here in the cold." He shrugged, drew himself up and squared his shoulders, a man bracing himself to face the inevitable. "Boy, see the horses stabled. Landlord, lead the way."

He was brought to an inn-parlour that was cheerfully aglow from a fire of heaped logs; a homely place, provincially but cosily equipped, and dominated by a great dresser laden with utensils of brass and copper, whose polished surfaces reflected the leaping flames.

To excite the appetite of his distinguished guest, the landlord recited the contents of a well-stocked larder. But either the distinguished guest's tastes were not epicurean or else his vexation at the interruption of his journey had robbed him of appetite. He stood in gloomy preoccupation over the fire, his forearm along the overmantel, his head resting upon it.

“Yes, yes,” he muttered absently to that catalogue of pheasant, venison, capon and the rest. “Anything. At your choice.”

The host strove with his disgust. “The venison, then. It will be longer cooking; but since you’re not now in haste . . . You shall give me news of it when you’ve eaten. And with it perhaps a flask of red Anjou. A wine of quality. Oh, but of great quality.” He paused in vain for a reply. “Bien. It is understood, then.”

He shuffled out in suppressed dudgeon. A curmudgeon, this Representative, an animal. These damned Republicans were more haughty and intractable than the aristocrats of old, and of a peremptoriness that nothing must withstand. Here was a spoilt darling of the rabble made sour and surly because of a delay that probably mattered nothing. Contemptuously the landlord went to see to the preparation of a supper in which the guest’s lack of interest had extinguished his own.

The Representative stripped off his greatcoat, tossed it over the tall back of a wooden settle that was ranged beside the hearth, sat down, and lost himself in gloomy abstraction. He was ultimately roused from it by an approaching sound of wheels and hooves. He sprang up, listening, eyes wide and startled; then he crossed briskly to the window.

Thence he beheld a man and a woman alighting from a post-chaise that was drawn by a pair of horses manifestly still reasonably fresh. At the sight, something more than relief succeeded apprehension. It occurred to him that these travellers—and he blessed the chance that brought them—would make a longer sojourn at the *Three Pigeons* than they suspected; for if they would not relinquish these horses to him in response to a courteous request, why then he would exercise his powers as a member of the government, and requisition them.

He heard their approaching voices and the landlord’s, and the hollow ring of their steps on the stone flags of the passage. Then the parlour door was flung open, and they were across the threshold before they perceived the grimly waiting figure of its occupant. The sight of him—his quality advertised by his sash of office—halted them with an abruptness that was almost a recoil.

The woman was the first to recover. Tall, young and beautifully proportioned, the almost classical perfection of her face and its delicate tint announced a rank that refused to be dissembled by the simple bourgeois gown she wore with its muslin fichu crossed upon her generous breast. Besides, although she dressed the humble part, she could not act it. Humility was mocked by the proud poise of her head, whilst the disdainful glance with which she measured the Representative betrayed the arrogance of caste which not even at the peril of her life could she subdue.

The man, as tall as the Representative and as spare, offered in his plain brown frock the same Republican simplicity of apparel, and wore his lank black hair hanging loose, *en oreilles de chien*. He displayed a like simplicity in his demeanour, nor was it assumed, for Armand de Beauval, Vicomte de Fresnay, was by nature kindly, gentle and unaffected. He expressed it in a glad astonishment of recognition following upon that first startled check.

“Why, Vailly!” He sprang forward, proffering his hand.

The Representative met surprise with surprise. “If it is not Beauval!” he exclaimed, and came a step to meet him.

Whilst, smiling, they clasped hands, the landlord rubbed his own.

“Now that is good. No place like an inn for happy encounters. You will all sup pleasantly together.”

Of this, however, there was no promise in Madame's austere frigidity. So forbidding was her expression, so scornful her petulant mouth, that her countenance lost most of its attractiveness. Darker still grew her brows when her husband presented the Republican.

"Clotilde, my dear, this is an old friend. The Citizen-Representative Vailly. He is from Troyes, like ourselves. A compatriot." There was timidity in his smile, and appeal in his eyes. "We were at school together, Vailly and I, at Louis-le-Grand."

The courtly grace in the Representative's bow was observed by Madame with a cold stare that went to increase her husband's uneasiness. In a desperate attempt to thaw her, he added nervously: "You've often heard me speak of Vailly. He represented the Third Estate of Troyes in the States General, and has since become a man of great consequence in the Convention."

As an appeal to her caution, as a warning that here was one whom it would be dangerous to offend, it failed completely.

Vailly, who had been born a gentleman, and retained the manners of one, despite his fall from grace, affected not to perceive a hostility which he perfectly understood. He set a chair for her. "A seat, Madame. Here by the fire. The weather is raw. You will be cold." Without acknowledgment she swept past him, and went to seat herself, spreading slim, aristocratic hands to the blaze, what time her compressed lips and tapping foot betrayed her ill-suppressed resentment.

The landlord departed, and the Vicomte, so as to conciliate this man, a word from whom could ruin them, made excuses for her.

"My wife is tired, Vailly. We've had a trying journey in this cold. Tired and anxious. You know how anxiety wears down the spirit. Old friend, I know we are safe with you, in spite of politics. I may be frank without fear."

Perceiving at once that Beauval said this in order to reassure his wife, the Representative went generously to his assistance. "No need, my friend. You can tell me nothing that I do not know. You are proscribed, of course. And if I find you within five miles of Switzerland, it is because you are emigrating. What then?" With a shrug and a smile, he added: "I rejoice that you should have come so far in safety, and I hope that you will complete the journey as safely. It is certainly not I who will raise any obstacles to your crossing the frontier."

"I knew it. You hear this good Vailly, Clotilde?"

She looked round. "I am relieved," she admitted coldly. "Monsieur Vailly—ah, pardon!—the Citizen Vailly will understand that I was not to guess so much forbearance in one of his political faith."

"An old friendship, Madame," Vailly assured her, "should count for more than politics."

"Does anything count with sansculottes?"

He refused to be ruffled. Her vixenish demeanour served merely to engage his sympathies more deeply for the Vicomte. He marvelled that with so uncompromising and imprudent a wife the man should so long have kept his head.

"Political beliefs may wither and change, Madame. Not so the friendships that we form in our early years, before doctrines are embraced that place men in different camps."

"Doctrines!" Her sneer was unmistakable. "The doctrines you profess, sir, have done that to some purpose. They have drenched the land in blood."

In his dismay, Beauval moved swiftly to her side, to set a cautioning hand upon her

shoulder. She shrugged it off in petulance.

“What then? Am I never to speak my mind? Am I to cringe like a coward, and be mute? I speak as I think.”

It was Vailly who answered her out of his compassion for Beauval. “With safety almost in sight, Madame, discretion would be prudent,” he gently reproached her. “Having won so far, it were sheer folly to jeopardize escape by unnecessary and excessive frankness.”

“Indeed, indeed, Clotilde,” Beauval admonished her. “You hear?”

But she displayed the egotist’s utter intolerance of reproof. “I hear myself subjected to impertinences.”

Vailly chose to find this amusing. He laughed outright. “Not impertinences, Madame. Nothing could be more pertinent than what I have said. It is fortunate, perhaps, that the treason you so rashly utter represents opinions which I have come to share. But it was not the doctrines which I embraced, and for which I fought, that were unsound. Those I still believe to be lofty and noble. They were conceived by men of heart and brain, whose only purpose was to uplift the groaning unfortunates, and better the lot of all mankind. Unhappily the revolution that we made has fallen into the control of political adventurers, of self-seeking sanguinocrats, who have befouled our labours. For the vile tyranny of the palace which we abolished they have set up a tyranny of the gutter infinitely viler. I surprise you? Let me confess, then, that I have done with the Republic; that I, too, am leaving France.”

He may have thought by this frank disclosure to ease the tension. He was at once to learn that his admission merely served to increase not only her hostility but her hardihood in expressing it.

“You are leaving France? Done with it, you say? Having made of it a shambles by the anarchy of which you are an apostle, having wrecked it, spread misery and desolation over the face of it, you go. To us who are of the class against which you stirred up these horrors, all that you feel called upon to say is that you perceive your error.”

“But that is what I have not said.” His tone was gentle, the glance of his dark eyes indulgent. “There was no error in the conception. It is that execution has fallen into the hands of criminals who crowded in through the door we opened so that we might drive criminals out.”

“We were these criminals you would have driven out. That is what you mean.” She spoke in swelling indignation, and would have continued, but that her husband intervened.

“Peace! Peace!” he cried, with the vehemence of distress. “What purpose does it serve now to recriminate?”

“Particularly,” added the Representative, “since to-day we are in the same case, you and I: fugitives alike.”

“From the havoc such men as you have wrought,” she insisted.

“Have it so if you will, Madame.” He sighed, and turned to the Vicomte. “I could not wish, Beauval, at such a time to embitter this meeting by disputes.”

“Nor could I,” Beauval agreed, and then, as if in censure of his wife’s tongue, he added: “It is fortunate for us that the meeting is with you, Vailly, and not another.”

The Vicomtesse’s sneer of contempt for what she accounted a lack of pride was audible. Elbow on knee, and chin in her hand, she frowned into the fire, and her foot resumed its impatient tapping. Vailly, observing it, likened it in his mind to the tail-

lashings of an angry wild-cat. His weary eyes looked mournfully at Beauval. He sighed.

"If there were any means by which I could further your escape, believe me, I should be happy to employ them. But . . . no doubt you have well provided. You will be supplied with papers?"

The Vicomte shook his head. "We have none."

"None?" The Representative frowned. "Then how do you propose to cross the frontier?"

"By stealth. On foot. Avoiding roads, and keeping to the open country and the mountains. Fortunately I am familiar with the district. Many have crossed the Jura in safety, and so with a little luck shall we."

"It has its dangers."

"They are slight for one so well acquainted with the ground. Without passports we have no choice. Oh, but I assure you, I am not seriously perturbed."

"Even so, hardships remain. For a man they are perhaps no great matter. But for a lady . . ." He looked at the Vicomtesse.

"I do not ask your concern, Monsieur," she snapped.

"It is inevitable that I should feel it, Madame." In his tolerance he made every allowance for the unhappy position in which she found herself. Perhaps, too, being a man, her delicate beauty stimulated his desire to soften this hostility. "If I could offer help, instead of useless sympathy. If . . . And yet . . . Something I might do. My passport is personal only to myself—a Representative on mission to Switzerland. Unfortunately not even my office and the deference it commands would enable me to pass both of you over the frontier with me. But if a lady only were to accompany me, the frontier guards would hardly find this so strange that they would not be content to wink at it in the case of a Representative of the Nation."

His tone left no doubt that this was an offer. Beauval sprang forward eagerly, to clutch his arm.

"You would do that, Vailly! God reward you, my friend. It would take a load from my heart. Alone I should face the adventure without concern. If you take my wife with you . . ."

There she interrupted him. "Are you crazy?" Her voice was harsh, her glance baleful. "You must be, if you can conceive so mean a thought of me. After all, there is something that I owe myself, my dignity, my birth."

"My dear, my dear," he faltered, quailing before her wrath. "All my thought is for your safety, for . . ."

"Safety may be too dearly bought. Have you not lived long enough to realize it? Rather than support such a proposal I should have expected you to resent the insult of it."

"Oh, Madame!" Vailly remonstrated without heat. "Insult can exist only where there is the intention to offend."

"It exists in all presumption, Monsieur the Sansculotte."

Whilst the Vicomte turned pale with angry horror, the Representative calmly bowed. "I make you my excuses, Madame. In my stupidity I conceived your need so urgent that I hoped you might overlook the unworthiness of the means by which you served it. Forgive me." He turned more briskly to Beauval, who stood crushed by shame and misery. "Permit me to come to what are purely my own concerns. I am delayed here by lack of relays, and, to be frank, the delay is not without danger. Since you will be continuing your

journey on foot I will make so bold as to appropriate your horses. If you will give me leave I will have them harnessed to my chaise at once. As I shall not now remain to sup, Madame will be relieved of my . . . of my presence.”

“My dear Vailly, I . . . I . . .”

“Not another word.” The Representative was all kindly graciousness. “By your leave.”

As the door closed upon him, Beauval looked at his wife in pain and reproach. “My dear Clotilde! How could you? Oh, how could you?”

“Ah! And now I am to be scolded, I suppose; scolded for not being as pusillanimous as you are.”

“Scolded? No. But, my dear, to reject in such offensive terms an offer so generous.”

“You really thought I could accept favours from your revolutionary gutterlings?”

“But Vailly! An old friend.”

“It does you no credit to have friends among the rabble. Always you disappoint me, Armand, and I suppose you always will. Even to suggest that I should travel with this man—as what? A woman to be leered at by the corps-de-garde at the frontier. Is that your notion of the part to be played by your wife? Is that your idea of manliness?”

He choked down a rising indignation and abased himself lest worse reproaches should follow. Through five years of matrimony the scolding and sneers of this headstrong, ill-natured, lovely termagant had abused his patient nature. Always her merciless tongue had scourged him to obey a will, that often had been no more than a perversity. Yielding for the sake of peace, because dissensions were loathsome to his sensitive soul, he had come ever more inextricably under that petulant yoke. If he still ventured now to remonstrate, it was because of the chance of safety so wantonly and perversely lost, rather than because of the grossness of the terms in which it had been rejected. But it was not her way to listen when what he said opposed her. She was of those who demand the flattery of constant agreement.

“What then of dignity, of proper pride?” she stormily interrupted him. “To be sure you have none. Because of that you have had to suffer countless humiliations. But not on that account will I be humiliated.”

“When one is born a lady it is not necessary to be so conscious of it,” he protested wearily. “All my concern was for your safety.”

“My safety? Why are you not frank? Why not confess that your concern is for your own safety? A woman would hamper you in this trudge across the Jura. Do you think I don’t understand? You would travel more quickly and safely alone. That is it. That was all your selfish thought. Why do you scowl at me? Am I wrong, perhaps? Have I not always been the victim of your selfishness? Of that and your stupidity, and never more than now when a man of wit is needed.”

He flung out a hand in distraction. He knew that reasoning would be vain; that no argument would persuade her against what she had chosen to think. “Tell me, then, what a man of wit would do.”

“Are you quite a fool, Armand?” She stood up suddenly. Her eyes glittered with sudden inspiration. “This man, this rascal, this Citizen-Representative, possesses papers that will pass him anywhere. He is on mission, he said, to Switzerland. He also said that the frontier guards would not account it odd in a Citizen-Representative to travel with a lady of pleasure. That was the noble part you had in mind that your wife might play. Very well. I’ll play it if you will play the Citizen-Representative.”

He frowned bewildered. "Play the Citizen-Representative? What do you mean?"

"Oh, for a man of a little understanding! Possess yourself of his papers, you fool. We can travel in safety under the shelter of them. That is what I mean."

He was dumbfounded. "That is merely mad." He shrugged his ill-humoured scorn of the suggestion. "How could it be accomplished?"

"You carry pistols. Are they merely for adornment?"

"God of God! What are you suggesting? Am I to kill a man so that I may rob him? Is that whither I am to be led by this pride, this dignity, of which you boast?"

But she was no longer heeding him. Her glance had strayed to Vailly's greatcoat, where it lay tossed across the back of the wooden settle. Abruptly she crossed to it, flung it inside out, and disclosed a bulging inner pocket. From this she pulled a bulky leather wallet. With swift fingers that trembled in their eagerness, she ran through the contents, despite the muttered protests of Beauval, and drew forth at last a sheet headed by the emblems of the Republic, One and Indivisible.

"Here it is. His passport. 'Let no man hinder . . .'" she was reading, when he broke in, impatiently.

"Bah! The description, then?" He chose that line of objection as the likeliest to save argument.

Feverishly she read it out: " 'Hair, straight and black; eyes, dark; complexion, olive; nose, hooked . . .' You possess all these. 'Height, one metre seventy.' That is about your height. It all fits."

Defeated along that line, he fell back upon the real objection.

"You can really think of turning thief?" His voice was thick with horror. Her answer was a stare of amazed anger, whilst he ran on: "Is this the wit you promised? A fine return for the toleration he has shown us, for his offer of assistance. And the folly, the futile folly of it! When he discovers the theft . . ."

"Your pistols can prevent that. Or does your courage falter?"

"Courage? Courage to do murder?"

She was flung into raging disgust. "This is war, you fool! This man represents the enemy. It is his life or ours."

"That is not even true. Our plans are sound, and we will keep to them."

"When we have this?" She flourished the passport. "Can't you understand that it makes our escape easy and certain?"

There was loathing in his glance. "At the price of murder. I am to buy our safety by murdering an old friend, one who, despite all differences, is ready to help us now. That would be noble. Would it not?"

"Is it more noble to sacrifice your wife? You have to choose between me and this precious friend. Choose whether you'll see me dragged back to Paris and the guillotine, or raise your hand against this gutterling?"

"How you distort the facts!" he cried out in despair.

"Distort them? Don't you see that this is a chance sent us by Heaven? Will you neglect it in your weakness as you have neglected so many? Act the man for once."

"The assassin, you mean."

"Listen to me, Armand. If you refuse I shall not take another step with you." Stridently she raved on: "Understand me. I refuse—definitely refuse—to go tramping through the Jura mountains. I would rather go back to Paris at the risk of being guillotined. That, at

least, would put an end to a life of which your cruel disregard of me has made me weary. I swear it. Now take your choice.”

Often had he hated her for bending him to detested courses by her headstrong, egotistical perversity, which could be combated only by means repulsive to his gentle nature. But never had he hated her as now, for the cruel coercion she was exercising. His knowledge of her unyielding stubbornness did not permit him to doubt that she would execute her threat. To spite and punish him, did he deny her, he judged her capable of laying her head under the knife; and the courage, with the lack of which she taunted him, was the courage to let her do it.

Livid, agonized, he stood before her and beat his brow with his clenched hand. Then a thought arose, to supply an argument that she might understand. “Don’t you see that to pistol him would bring the place about our ears? Our doom would then be certain.”

The petulant mouth was curved in disdain. “How your weakness finds pretexts! There are other ways. Silent ways. You have your hands. You claim to be strong. Must I tell you this? Must I always think for both?”

He strove against her dominance. “It is impossible. Impossible! Clotilde, my dear.” He approached with intent to essay the persuasion of caress. Sensing it in his tone, she drew away. She remained sternly practical.

“You had better decide before it is too late.”

“What you ask is unthinkable,” he still protested.

“But it is not unthinkable to leave me in danger.”

“You exaggerate the danger, and I leave you in none that I do not share with you.”

“I am to comfort myself with that!” And then, abruptly, her tactics changed. She was in tears. “Always it has been the same,” she complained. “Always. From the hour I married you. Your folly and your weakness have spoilt my life. Always have you opposed me. Had you had a thought for me you would have emigrated months ago, when I first urged it, when all sensible men were doing so.”

“Clotilde! Were they all fools and weaklings, then, who remained to suffer?”

“I am not concerned with them. I did not marry them. I married you.”

“Alas!” he sighed.

That stayed her tears, and revived her fury. “So! And now you insult me. And in such an hour as this. Oh, it is brave, it is gallant, to mock a poor, weak woman. How detestable you are. But how right not to protect me. I am better dead.”

“Hush, Clotilde! Hush!” the distracted man implored her.

She was hushed, however, not by his prayer, but by the sound of Vailly’s returning steps. In panic her shaking hands thrust the passport into her bosom and returned the wallet to the pocket of the greatcoat. Her fumbling had scarcely completed the task when Vailly came in, announcing that his chaise was ready, and the landlord already waiting to speed him.

He had cast off the gloom that earlier had enveloped him, and seemed a man transfigured. His glance, moving from one to the other of them, noted their odd look of strain, noted that Madame was trembling. A moment he hesitated, smiling a little. Then, in a tone almost apologetic, “I wonder,” he said, “whether, upon second thoughts, Madame would avail herself of the offer I had the temerity to make. If so, I am entirely at her service, to carry her to Neuchâtel, where you, Beauval, would rejoin her.”

This time her refusal was in more courteous terms. “You are very good, Monsieur.”

Her voice had a queer, strangled sound. "But the Vicomte and I are resolved to go together."

He made a little gesture of regretful dismissal. "So be it. It remains, then, only to wish you a safe journey."

He moved past them, to take his greatcoat. They saw him check and stare, and following his glance their fearful eyes beheld the betraying signs of Madame's tampering. The garment lay reversed, as in her haste she had left it; the inner pocket was displayed, and from this a third of the wallet was protruding.

Their cringing furtiveness seemed to supply an answer to his sharp, questioning glance. With tightening lips he drew forth the wallet and set himself to inspect its contents.

Within the space of a single heart-beat, Beauval perceived the abomination to which he was committed by the rash abstraction of that passport which now rested in the bosom of his wife. As he saw the matter, and without time to weigh it, he conceived that he had now no choice. At however repugnant a cost he must prevent a discovery which could result only in ruin and death for her as for himself. Within the space of that same heart-beat, standing as he did by the dresser behind the Representative, his hand had closed upon a heavy brass candlestick, and, with all his strength, using the utensil as a bludgeon, he had brought it down upon Vailly's head.

The Representative's knees bent under him, and without a single cry he sagged down, senseless, at their feet.

For one breathless moment they stood gazing in awe upon the fallen man. Then the Vicomtesse spoke.

"Thank God that for once you have acted sensibly." But her quavering voice and ashen face belied the stout cynicism of her words.

Appalled by his instinctive act, Beauval went down on one knee beside the unconscious Representative. "At least, God be thanked, he lives," he announced in relief.

"Then we've the less time to waste. Come! Stir yourself. Let us go."

"Go? Ah, yes." He stood up. He glanced stupidly at the candlestick which he still held. He flung it from him in sudden horror. "I shall always hate myself for this," he cried. "Why did you put it upon me?"

"Will you rant now, when every second counts? Here!" She caught up Vailly's greatcoat, and thrust it upon him. Half-dazed under that dominance to which he yielded whilst detesting it and her who exercised it, he struggled into the garment. She raised the wide collar, so that it muffled him to the ears; she pressed down upon his brows the Republican's round, shadowing hat. "Come," she commanded. "Come! Don't you yet understand? The Representative's chaise is waiting at the door. You are now the Representative, and you have persuaded me to travel with you."

Still bewildered, anguished, he suffered her to lead him forth, leaving all initiative to those active, imperious, remorseless wits that forgot nothing.

There was a moment's pause whilst she locked the parlour door and withdrew the key. "That will delay anyone who comes, and prevent Vailly from following if he recovers too soon. By the time they discover him we shall be upon our way, and there are no horses with which to follow us."

They reached the doorway leading to the yard, where the landlord waited. Masterfully she thrust her muffled husband on towards the waiting yellow chaise, the post-boy already

in the saddle.

“I am accompanying the Citizen-Representative,” she announced. “My brother remains with you until to-morrow. He will pay you for your trouble.”

Beauval, dissembled in Vailly’s greatcoat and hat, had climbed into the vehicle. With her foot on the step, she gave her orders to the postilion. “You’ll take the road to St. Sulpice, and remember that the Citizen-Representative is pressed. So do not spare the horses.”

She sprang in, the landlord slammed the door, the postilion cracked his whip, and the yellow chaise rolled out of the yard and took the way through the town at rocking speed.

She fetched a deep sigh of relief as she sank back, her pulses throbbing. “It is done. Thank God I can think for both of us. You see how easy it all proved.”

“Easy, indeed.” He was bitter. “God forgive me. And you.”

“Of course you will still be repining. What a weakling you are! Where would you be without my wit and my courage? On your way to the guillotine by now. Yet without the grace to thank me, you must even grumble.” She fumbled at her breast and drew forth Vailly’s passport. “Take it.”

Mechanically he took it. “You do not give a thought to Vailly’s case,” he said. “Like ourselves, he was in flight. This theft will doom him.”

“Why should it? Let him tramp across the Jura as we were prepared to do. Although I dare say you would still prefer that your wife should suffer that hardship.”

“You forget that he does not know the mountains. Or perhaps you do not care.”

She did not account this worth an answer, and silence fell between them. His affection for her, which her termagant spirit had long since impaired, had now been utterly slain by the odious deed into which her conduct had surprised him. And so for a couple of miles or more they rode without another word. Already they were more than half-way to the frontier-post, when, to a growing thud of hooves behind them, was added a shout at which the chaise slowed down and drew to a standstill.

Madame thrust her head from the window. “What is it, oaf? Why are you stopping?”

The postilion turned in the saddle, to point back with his whip as a troop of dragoons swept up. An officer drew alongside the chaise and halted. His leer, of a Republican impudence, drove the Vicomtesse to sit back. His head came to the window. “Who are you?” he demanded, and added in the same breath: “Your papers, if you please.”

Beauval roused himself. He proffered the passport. “Vailly, Representative on mission to the Swiss Republic,” he announced shortly.

To this Madame must be adding: “The Representative is in haste.”

“So the landlord of the *Three Pigeons* told me.”

“You are not to delay us,” she warned him.

“Am I not, citoyenne?” There was a humorous insolence in his tone. At his elbow a sergeant was chuckling. He scanned the passport, then folded it, and thrust it into his pocket. “You’ve given us a long chase, Citizen Vailly. I began to fear we were too late to catch you. I have an order for your arrest on a charge of treason to the Republic. You’ll return with me to Paris. And, faith,” he added jocularly, “we may as well take the lady also, lest you should feel lonely.” He waved to the postilion. “Put about, my lad.”

As they were wheeling round, the Vicomtesse roused herself from her stupor. “Wait! My God! Wait! There’s a mistake.”

But the officer had gone; the dragoons were closing about the chaise. She clutched the

arm of the Vicomte, who sat singularly unmoved. She shook him frenziedly.

“Rouse yourself, fool, rouse yourself! Tell them there’s a mistake.”

To her increasing horror, he actually laughed. “Can you suppose that it would avail us? And, after all, why trouble? They’ll discover the mistake for themselves when we reach Paris. But comfort yourself, Madame. Your wit and your courage will not be wholly wasted. They will have served, at least, to save Vailly’s life.” And then the undertone of mockery that seemed to rumble in the voice of that long-suffering man gave itself full vent. “How Vailly will laugh when he discovers what has happened!”

THE RECOIL

FOUCHÉ, FOXY OF FACE, under an already thinning thatch of reddish hair, drooped his eyelids and bent his supple back before the whirlwind of the First Consul's wrath. His cadaverous countenance remained a mask, the thin, bloodless lips faintly curved in a smile that was inscrutable.

Bonaparte, a lean, active young figure, in the gold-embroidered old-rose consular coat of David's designing, restlessly paced the lofty room of the Tuileries, snarling and grunting in rage.

"I am, then, to be beaten to death like a dog in the streets, whilst your imbecile police is chasing phantoms," was the burden of his complaint.

It was a week after that attempt on his life by means of the infernal machine in the Rue St. Nicaise, with which it had been hoped to blow him to perdition. But the carriage of the First Consul, who was preserved for higher destinies, had driven past the danger-point a few minutes too soon. And whilst the explosion had made a shambles of the street, the intended victim had continued on his way to the Opéra, to attend the first performance of Haydn's *Creation*.

The escape had been near enough, however, to leave the First Consul shaken in spirit if sound in body, and Fouché, his Minister of Police, was brought to realize how hot could be the blast of a Corsican temper. But Fouché, fish-like in temperature and temperament, was not warmed by it.

"St. Regent and Carbon are not phantoms," he answered in his cold, precise voice. "I not only hold them, but I've wrung admissions for them that permit me to insist that this is a Bourbon plot."

Bonaparte snarled at him in Italian. "Coglione! You are of those who can always find what they seek. Not phantoms? No. Scapegoats. Scapegoats served up to deceive me. But you don't succeed." The splendid hazel eyes smouldered with scorn. "If you weren't at heart what you are, Fouché, you'd not try to persuade me that it's not the work of your cursed Jacobin friends. They want to bring back the Revolution. And you know it."

Fouché shrugged his narrow shoulders. "They might succeed, First Consul, if you obstinately refuse to see where your peril really lies. That is to say they might if they were indeed active. But they're a poor, negligible gang, too crippled to move. No. No. For your own sake accept my word for it that it's the monarchists we should watch, with particular attention for your friend Delavigne. He shall have a domiciliary visit, and we'll go through his papers. It should be interesting."

Bonaparte looked at him without affection. "How hard it is for you to forget that the days and ways of the Terror are over, and that laws are to be respected. Where is the evidence to justify you in such a step?"

Fouché grinned. "The domiciliary visit should produce it."

If this was a jest, Bonaparte was not amused. "You are futile. Are you ignorant of, or do you forget, the financial assistance Delavigne has rendered me? Does that look as if he were a monarchist plotter?"

"Certainly not ignorant, and so little forgetful that I remember some things that you,

First Consul, have never known about this man. For instance, you have never realized that if he supplied you in your need with funds, it was in the hope of being given the control of public affairs. That ambition of this financier, who from being a grocer's assistant has become a munitioneer and a multi-millionaire, you persist in frustrating. Now that he realizes that your government offers him no chance of rising to the spectacular and profitable eminence of his dreams, he turns his attention to one that may."

Bonaparte stared at him. "Pish! Surmise. Pure, simple surmise."

"Certainly pure. Certainly not simple. And of a logic—ah, of a logic not to be denied. A logic based on the premise that men do not do good for its own sake. Prudence strongly dictates this domiciliary investigation."

"I forbid it." Bonaparte was peremptory. "Do you understand? I forbid it."

Again Fouché shrugged. "First Consul, your eyes are filled with the dust of the half-million you owe him."

This merely exasperated Bonaparte. "You make phrases. But I am not fooled by phrases. Say what you will, I perceive in the debt a proof of his attachment to me. Am I to allow you to harass my friends so that you may cover up the tracks of your own? Until you can bring me some better evidence than your assumptions I refuse to permit Delavigne to be molested." Curtly, in dismissal, he added: "There is no more to say."

Fouché sighed. "Bien! But if you tie my hands, at least don't blame me when another bomb bursts under your feet."

"It won't if you look to your Jacobins. Make your investigations among that carrion. That's all."

The minister brought his heels together and bowed. "First Consul!"

In Fouché, however, deference and submission were never more than external. His was a heart that held no man in awe or reverence, and whilst content to seem a servant, it was in his nature to play the master, and to be guided by no judgment but his own.

Back in his office at the Ministry on the Quai Voltaire, he sent for Desmarets, who was probably the ablest of all his agents.

"What of Delavigne?" he asked. "Have you learnt anything more?"

"Little enough, Citizen Minister." Desmarets was a dark, stocky man of thirty, with the head of a Roman emperor. "But this I know: that he is in correspondence with someone across the Rhine; at Ettenheim, I understand. His couriers come and go regularly between here and Strasbourg."

Fouché sat back and brought his lean finger-tips together. His low-lidded eyes were veiled, as if he had withdrawn into himself. "Little enough, you say? Come, come, Desmarets. That's not very intelligent, or don't you know that the Duc d'Enghien lurks at Ettenheim?"

Desmarets made a startled movement. "What are you suggesting, Citizen Minister?"

"That one of these couriers had better meet with an accident. Then we shall know with whom this financier corresponds, and to what purpose."

"It could be contrived. But would it not be simpler and more profitable to pay him a visit, and go through his papers?"

"Undoubtedly. But the rascal enjoys the protection of the First Consul. Bonaparte will not allow us to act without evidence. I cannot move him."

Desmarets smiled. "A burglary is no more difficult to commit than a highway robbery."

At this sly hint Fouché's eyelids, so like the membrane of a bird, rolled slowly back from his pale eyes. "A happy thought, Desmarets. Contrive it. But cautiously. Remember the First Consul's prejudices." He seemed to sneer. "They must be respected."

Now it happened that Desmarets' was not the only inspiration to burgle the financier's mansion in the Faubourg St. Germain. An old associate of Delavigne's lean days, a rascal, it must be confessed, named Lessart, was being driven at about that time to the same course by the financier's brutal indifference to his necessities.

The Revolution, which had reduced so many wealthy families to penury, had supplied unparalleled opportunities of swift fortune to the scoundrels who had known how to profit by them. Of these was the sometime provincial grocer's assistant, who from that humble state had blossomed, none quite knew how, into an army contractor, and in a few short but militarily busy years had amassed a fortune computed at upwards of a hundred millions.

To Lessart it had occurred that a man so fantastically wealthy would never miss a gift that would make an old friend independent for life, and that for the sake of old times, when he and Delavigne had taken it in turns to sweep out the shop, he would never refuse it.

Lessart, you see, had his illusions about humanity, and it was to surprise him that Delavigne should by no means take the same simple and natural view. When, after great difficulty, he had penetrated to the august presence of that great man in his softly-carpeted, luxurious mansion in the Faubourg St. Germain, it was only to realize that Delavigne's chief anxiety was to be rid of him again.

There was no warmth in the financier's professions of pleasure to see this friend of his youth, or in the regrets to observe that he did not appear to have prospered too well. If there was anything Delavigne could do for him, Lessart must let him know; but he begged Lessart to be brief, for he was submerged in affairs and pressed for time.

Lessart, small, lean and shabby, shifted his feet in their broken boots, and with a leer on his crafty, pinched face, considered the opulent, portly, powerful figure, in which it was difficult to discover traces of the starveling he had known but a few years ago. He whined a confession that he was without resources; he reminded Delavigne of how they had loved each other in the past, and he prayed God that some of that love still lingered in the great man's bosom to move him to commiserate an old friend's distress.

Delavigne consented to be moved, but not to the extent of offering a half-million or so to mend the suppliant's indigence. What he offered him was an assignat for ten livres, and he offered it in the consciousness of being generous. It was a consciousness that Lessart could not share.

"This," he reflected gloomily, "will perhaps buy me a dinner."

What he really meant was that it would do no more. But there were moments when the astute Delavigne was dull.

"Eat it with a good appetite, my friend," he said, and condescended, with his fat white hand, to slap the ragamuffin's shoulder. "And now be off, for I am busy."

He tinkled a handbell, and Lessart, disillusioned and thoughtful, was shown out by a Swiss doorkeeper in a glittering livery.

Inevitably he came again, a week later, and Delavigne, on the point of having him flung into the street, checked on the thought of a need which Lessart might serve.

"Look you, my lad," he told him. "If you come for alms, I've nothing for you; but if you choose to earn a few louis, I can give you work."

It was not a proposal that Lessart found attractive. Work was the last thing he sought. He mistrusted his capacity for disposing of it. Being hungry, however, he thought that he had better learn more about it.

“It’s a simple, courier’s job. You will carry a letter for me to Strasbourg. Put up at the Stag Inn, and ask the landlord to send for Monsieur Fritz. Now pay attention. When Monsieur Fritz comes, you will tell him that the vines are bearing well this year, and he should answer you that the vintage will be a good one. By this you will identify him, and only then will you deliver my letter. After that you will remain at the Stag until he brings you the answer, with which you will return at once. Above all, you will regard your mission as confidential, and breathe no word of it to anyone. You’ll be paid five louis and, of course, your expenses. You understand that I employ you for old times’ sake and in order to help you. I shall expect you to be as diligent as any of my regular couriers.”

Lessart had his doubts of the pretended philanthropy. The whole affair, with its injunctions of secrecy, and its passwords about vines and vintages so suggestive of Delavigne’s own name, was curiously mysterious. It required no great astuteness to lead Lessart to the suspicion that he was being employed because it was less likely to connect him with Delavigne than any of the couriers known to be in the financier’s regular service. It was not, however, for the needy Lessart to refuse a chance to earn five louis at the cost of so little labour, with perhaps a little more to be made out of the expenses. Nor did it prove to be merely a matter of a single journey. A second followed immediately, and another after that, and Lessart realized that he had fallen upon what amounted to regular employment. Making on an average a weekly journey, he was kept constantly coming and going between Paris and Strasbourg.

He would not have been the man he was—and Delavigne should have thought of this—had he not sought to learn more of this business and of the rude-mannered, mysterious Monsieur Fritz, who obviously was, himself, no better than a messenger. So in the dusk of a December evening, when his employment had lasted a couple of months, he cautiously trailed Monsieur Fritz across the Rhine and all the way to an inn at Ettenheim.

Now, even Lessart was aware that Ettenheim was reported a hot-bed of Bourbon intrigue, and that one of the Bourbon princes, the Duke of Enghien, was known to be in residence there. It was natural that he should wonder whether Delavigne might not be dabbling in some of the Bourbon plots that were rumoured to be stirring. But just as natural that on second thoughts he should dismiss the notion, remembering how notoriously bound to the existing government was Delavigne by the financial assistance he had rendered it. Such, indeed, was the man’s devotion to Bonaparte that—as Lessart had seen—a copy of David’s heroic equestrian portrait of the First Consul crossing the Alps occupied the place of honour on the walls of the financier’s study. Nevertheless Lessart would be watchful, and his cunning little eyes were keenly observant of Delavigne on his return from that particular journey.

The eagerness in which the financier broke the seal of the letter was no more marked than usual. But Lessart saw, or thought he saw, the bloated face turn pale, and fancied that the man’s breath quickened as he read its contents. Certain it is that Delavigne was plunged into such absorption that, as if Lessart’s presence were forgotten, he suddenly left the writing-table, at which he had been standing, and purposefully crossed the room, towards the portrait of Bonaparte. Abruptly he checked, and looked over his shoulder at Lessart, as if suddenly aware of him. His voice came harsh and vibrant, shaken by some

excitement.

“Well? Why do you wait?”

“You had not dismissed me.”

“Ah! You can go. Come again at this time to-morrow.”

Lessart bowed himself out. But he went no farther than the other side of the door, and through the keyhole saw Delavigne standing before the David portrait, fingering the side of the frame. Then, on an unsuspected hinge, the picture swung like an opening door, revealing a second door in the wall behind it, into which Delavigne fitted a key.

Although Lessart had now discovered all that he could reasonably expect to discover from his present point of observation, he would still have lingered had he not been disturbed by a sound of approaching footsteps. He had no sooner straightened himself and turned than Frambois, Delavigne’s splendid Swiss doorkeeper, appeared on the threshold of the antechamber.

The Swiss eyed him sharply as he stood there, his air not altogether innocent. “You are leaving, Citizen Lessart?” he said.

“Just leaving. Yes.”

Sheepishly Lessart crossed the antechamber and departed. He went off to brood over the knowledge gained and how to turn it to account.

This had happened two days before the attempt to blow up the First Consul in the Rue St. Nicaise.

On the following morning, whilst Paris was agape and stricken, Lessart presented himself to Delavigne.

The financier’s pallor and preoccupation suggested that he fully shared the Parisian horror. He glared at Lessart out of blood-injected eyes. “I didn’t send for you. What do you want?” he growled.

“You have forgotten you told me yesterday to come again this morning,” Lessart reminded him, and then he drew a daring bow at a venture. “I thought you would be wanting me to carry news of the event to Ettenheim.” His tone was charged with sly implication.

Beyond a momentary parting of his thick lips, a momentary dilation of the eyes, Delavigne gave no sign that the shaft had gone home. But it was a long moment before he found his voice.

“What do you mean?” A frown of annoyed bewilderment was darkening now his brow. “What do you mean? Ettenheim? And to what event do you allude?”

“Why, to what happened last night in the Rue St. Nicaise. You know well enough that I mean that, Delavigne.”

Contempt, real or assumed, twisted the financier’s lips. “You’re drunk, I suppose. Go and put your head under a pump and cool your brains. Get out.”

“Not so high and mighty, my friend. Suppose now that I were to go as far as the Quai Voltaire and the Ministry of Police. You wouldn’t like that, would you?”

Delavigne heaved himself up in a towering rage, a great quaking mass of a man. “Are you threatening me with something? By God, you offal, is that your return for the charity you’ve had from me? Get out of my sight, and if ever you dare to come here again I’ll have you flung in the gutter for the filth you are.”

It was in Lessart’s mind to say a word about that secret cupboard behind the picture. But Delavigne gave him no chance. He advanced like a charging bull upon the wizened

little rascal. "Out! Do you hear me? Out, before I break the bones of your mangy body."

Lessart, who had a horror of physical violence, fled before this incontinent threat of it, pursued by the irate financier as far as the antechamber, where the Swiss was on duty. "Frambois," roared Delavigne, "fling me that scoundrel into the street!"

Outside on the pavement Lessart cursed himself for a fool. He had played the game clumsily. He should have held his tongue until required to carry another letter to Strasbourg. Then he would have been in possession of a trump card, and that damned munitioneer would have been forced to come to terms with him. His cursed precipitancy had lost him this lovely chance of growing rich at a stroke.

But the spite begotten of his frustration took him nevertheless to the Quai Voltaire. There he saw one of the agents of Fouché, who, after the manner of the professional spy in dealing with the amateur tale-bearer, sucked him dry and then kicked him out.

And that is how the knowledge of Delavigne's correspondence had come to Desmarets, and through Desmarets to Fouché.

Meanwhile, Lessart, the foiled outcast, virulently inveighed against his luck, against Delavigne and against the Minister of Police, who, among them, had defrauded him. When he had cursed his fill—which did not happen until a couple of days later—he reflected. After all, he possessed knowledge, and knowledge, he knew, was power. He had not told the police quite everything. The brutality of the agent had checked his disclosures before he had mentioned Delavigne's secret repository, and it was brooding upon this that suggested to him how the lost chance might be repaired.

His sense of an injury to be avenged and the prospect of wealth to be acquired supplied him with the necessary courage, and so, on a cold January night, he set about turning to good account his acquaintance with Delavigne's mansion.

He made his way soon after midnight through the streets of that residential quarter, empty and silent at that hour. Beyond a patrol on its rounds and a shivering wretch who approached him with a whine for alms he met no one in the Faubourg until he was within a hundred yards of his destination. Here, however, just as he had driven off the beggar with a snarl of curses, being heartily and shrilly cursed in return, he was passed by a big man, wrapped to the nose in a rough greatcoat, who greeted him by name. As chance would have it he had just come within the spread of light from a street lantern.

"Good-night, Citizen Lessart."

Startled, he stood arrested, peering after the bulky figure that marched unconcernedly on to merge into the gloom. It was Frambois, the doorkeeper, going home from his place of employment.

That recognition left Lessart standing for a long moment shaken and undecided. His first impulse was to postpone the enterprise to another night. Upon reflection, however, he perceived how little to be feared was discovery: for if he found at Delavigne's what he was confident of finding, the financier would be at his mercy. So he went on, and seeing Delavigne's mansion all in darkness, he slipped into the short garden and, after a last survey, cautiously approached the house.

The three windows of Delavigne's study were at no more than a man's height from the ground. By the middle one, with a silent, speedy skill that suggested some experience, Lessart effected his entry.

Behind the heavy plush curtains he stood a moment, listening and recovering the breath of which excitement rather than exertion had robbed him. Not a sound disturbed the

stillness of the house. Carefully he parted the curtains and stepped into a room made faintly visible by the glow from the lingering remnants of a fire. A fuller survey followed by the light from the dark lantern with which he came equipped. The room was in disorder, presenting signs of a hasty, reckless search. One of the drawers of the writing-table stood open. Papers protruded from another, and papers were strewn there about the floor, and again at the foot of a press which had been left ajar. These matters, suggestive of a hasty search, claimed, however, no more than passing attention from Lessart. He moved swiftly over the thick carpet that muffled his steps, going straight to the portrait.

It was some moments before his fingers, groping carefully along the frame, discovered the spring that released the catch. He swung the picture on its hinges, and faced the real difficulty. The door now disclosed was of iron, and, of course, it was locked. Prepared for this, Lessart had come armed with a cold chisel. He contrived to wedge the tool between the edge of the door and its iron frame, and bore upon it with all his strength. The frame yielded a little, so that he was able to thrust the chisel deeper. Then, suddenly, with a report like a pistol-shot, the lock yielded to the leverage.

Lessart sucked in his breath in terror at the noise, and stood frozen, listening, with the sweat in beads upon his brow. Only after moments in which no sound save the ticking of the buhl clock on the overmantel disturbed the house did his startled nerves cease quivering.

The door of the cupboard stood open. He flashed his light into its recesses. On the topmost shelf there were leather cases such as might contain jewels. The next, below, was divided into three compartments, each of which was packed with papers. Below this again there was an iron drawer. Lessart pulled it open, to be dazzled by the yellow gleam of gold. It was filled almost to the brim with louis—two or three hundred of them—more than Lessart had ever seen at any one time together.

He went to work like a practical man. Whatever passport to gold might be contained in the papers could wait until he possessed himself of the actual gold here ready to his hand. He placed his lantern upon the floor, pulled out the drawer, lowered this also, and went down on his knees to transfer the louis by handfuls to his pockets. They chinked as he handled them, and more than once a coin slipped from his trembling fingers, to ring as it fell back upon the mass of its fellows. But the sounds, however loud they might seem to the furtively working man, were not, he knew, such as to penetrate beyond the closed door.

At last it was done, and then, when with heavy pockets he stood up to give his attention to the real object of his search, the room was suddenly suffused with light.

With an audible gasp Lessart swung round and shrank to a crouch, his rat's eyes blinking at Delavigne, who, monstrous in bedgown, nightcap and slippers, filled the doorway, holding a candlebranch aloft.

Conceiving that his last hour might well be at hand, Lessart, crouching ever, edged instinctively away towards the hearth. Delavigne's heavy sluggish glance moved from him to sweep over the disorder of the room. It came at last to the forced repository and dwelt there for a moment. There was no expression on his great face. He took a step forward and paused softly to close the door by which he had so noiselessly entered. As deliberately he went to set down the candlebranch upon the writing-table, and only then did he speak. But whilst his tone was fierce and bitter, he contrived to keep it almost to a whisper.

“So it's you, you sewer-rat,” he said.

Lessart, his wits sharpened by danger, received illumination. He perceived the reason for the soft closing of the door, the muted voice. Consciousness of what the repository contained made Delavigne fearful of allowing even his household to become aware of it. Hence not only did he not dare to summon help, but his anxiety was to avoid noise that might arouse the house. Perception of this went far to restore some of Lessart's courage.

"You carrion!" Delavigne was growling. "You foul spy! This is the return for the good of which I was liberal to you."

"Liberal! You, liberal?" Lessart snarled back. "You made me earn your paltry pay at the risk of my neck, and you had me flung out of doors when I asked to be properly rewarded."

"When you tried to blackmail me, you energumen. And it's to find the means for it that you break into my house. Already you've found too much for the peace in which I like to sleep o' nights. There'll be the cheap funeral of a burglar in your quarter, you dog."

He advanced upon Lessart, his hands in the pockets of his bedgown. Lessart, watching him warily, saw his right hand come from his pocket bringing with it a short life-preserver, a thing of plaited leather to cover a flexible handle and the knob of lead attached to it. With all his ox-like strength Delavigne aimed at Lessart's head a blow that must have brained him had he not dodged it with lightning swiftness. Instinctively, in that evading movement, he stooped, and the suddenness of it brought him off his balance and down upon one knee. The hand he put out to save himself closed upon a heavy ornamented poker of steel and chiselled brass.

For what followed the rascal's reflexes were answerable. Whilst there was intelligence behind the action, there was no actual design. With a sudden upward swing he crashed the poker across Delavigne's face, and sent him reeling, to fall at full length and lie inert. There was, however, conscious will enough in the fury in which Lessart sprang upon the fallen man, the bestial fury that followed upon his release from terror's grip. Again and yet again he swung the heavy fire-iron, and brought it down on the financier's skull. In his blind rage he would have battered it to a pulp, but that as he raised his weapon for the third time, his arm was palsied and his blood frozen by a quiet voice speaking just behind him.

"This is an obscenity, my lad. Must you glut your rage? Be content to have killed him. Besides, the noise you are making! You will rouse the house."

On one knee beside the body, Lessart instinctively hunched his shoulders, as if to protect his head; then fearfully he looked round and up.

Behind him, almost over him, stood a stockily built man in a tightly buttoned black riding-coat and a sugar-loaf hat. The shaven, swarthy face was of a stern cast, powerful of jaw, with a high-bridged nose set between cold eyes. The lips were tightened in a faint, grim smile.

It was a moment before Lessart resolved the mystery of that apparition. Then he perceived it in the set of the heavy curtains to the northernmost of the room's three windows. From close-drawn that they had been, they hung now with a wide gap between them. Lessart perceived the explanation of the disorder in which he had found the room: the gaping drawers, the strewn papers. It must be the work of this intruder, this thief, whose search he had interrupted by his advent and who had taken cover behind those curtains.

"A nasty mess for you, my lad," was the man's soft comment.

Lessart's voice came shrill and husky from parched lips. "You . . . you saw how it happened. I struck in self-defence."

"Sh! You fool!" he was softly admonished. "Quiet! There has been noise enough."

Subdued, yet still vehement, Lessart repeated: "I struck in self-defence. You saw. You heard. He would have killed me."

"Nevertheless, it might bring you to the guillotine." Astonishingly the fellow added: "I shouldn't linger here if I were you."

Lessart stood erect, glaring in bewilderment, to ask at last: "Who are you?"

"Does that matter?"

"Faith! I needn't ask. You're a thief, a housebreaker."

"And that shocks you, of course; with the dead man's gold in your pocket. Ah, well, as you don't like my company there's nothing to detain you." Suddenly the soft voice became peremptory. "Away with you, you fool, whilst you may."

But undersized rat though he might be, Lessart did not lack for tenacity. He hesitated. It was in his mind to propose a compromise, to offer to go halves with this grim-faced housebreaker in the remaining contents of the repository. There might be a fortune in those jewel-cases. Then a glance at the body at his feet brought on a momentary nausea. A full sense of his peril came up like a tide to overwhelm all else. At any moment they might be discovered. There had been some noise. Servants might have been aroused. He said so, in a dozen broken words.

"Very true," he was coolly answered. "But take no thought for me. Be off."

Lessart required no further persuasion. Let this rash fool linger if he would, and be destroyed by his greed. He shrugged his narrow shoulders, and, moving swiftly on tiptoe, he crossed the room and dropped from the window.

He reached the gates, and the deserted, silent street, and there he paused, looking back. Between the parted curtains of Delavigne's study he could see the light and the moving shadow of the man who had so temerarily remained to plunder. Resentment stirred in his mean soul. The fellow might yet reap the richer harvest, a harvest exposed to him by Lessart's own activities, a harvest which consequently belonged to Lessart himself. The papers, it was true, were worthless now that the man who must have paid handsomely for their recovery was dead. But any one of those jewel-cases might easily contain more value than all the gold which Lessart had pocketed. He conceived himself swindled by that cool scoundrel who had reared the bogey of the guillotine so as to scare him away. It would serve the rascal right if he were caught with the body. From this it was but a step to the reflection of what might follow if he were not so caught. There would be a hue-and-cry for the murderer, and Lessart was suddenly cold with horror to think how it might lead straight to himself. He had remembered that inopportune meeting with Frambois. The Swiss would be sure to bear witness that he had seen Lessart in the neighbourhood at midnight and would add an account of how last he had been flung out of the financier's house. Perhaps this might not be enough to prove him guilty of the murder, but if that other burglar were discovered there with the body that fellow's head would certainly be the one to roll into the basket. And if that should happen, Lessart need shiver no longer as he was doing now with the dread of being brought to answer for the death of Delavigne. That burglar's capture would make him safe; safe to take his ease and spend without fear of questions the gold that was straining his pockets.

Whilst he lingered, considering how his profit might lie in that event, the gleam of a

lantern and the steady tramp of an approaching patrol stirred him to perceive how easily it might be contrived.

With a chuckle he went to meet the corporal and two National Guards.

"Hi!" he hailed them. "There's a robbery being committed, I think. I've just seen a man enter a house by a window." He led them back, and drew the corporal's attention to the line of light between the parted curtains. "That way he went."

"The house of the Citizen Delavigne!" said the corporal. "Sacred name!"

They entered the gates. "Tread softly," Lessart advised, and obeying him they reached the window in silence.

The gap in the curtains revealed the intruder standing before the secret cupboard. The corporal waved his men through the window and drew Lessart to follow with him. Only when he stood within the room did the corporal see the body on the floor, nor needed that Lessart should point to it, chattering, "Look! Look! There's been murder done."

At the repository the burglar, already in the grip of the guards, had slowly turned. He was holding some papers that he had taken from their hiding-place. His hard glance fastened upon Lessart.

"You've come back, then," was his cool, staggering comment, and he laughed. "That was scarcely wise."

The corporal, at last able to see the man's face, recoiled with a cry of surprise. "Citizen Desmarests!"

Lessart was already chilled by a perception that here all was by no means as he supposed it, when Fouché's agent spoke again. "You'd better take that rascal, corporal. You'll find his pockets stuffed with the dead man's gold."

In Fouché's room on the following morning Desmarests laid before the minister a sheaf of documents proving Delavigne's treasonable correspondence with the Bourbons and containing evidence enough to bring a dozen heads to the guillotine.

As he looked through letter after letter that confirmed his convictions of the real identity of the conspirators, there was a tight-lipped smile on the livid face of the Minister of Police. At the end he looked up, frowning.

"Touching this fellow Lessart: What I don't understand, Desmarests, is why you were allowing him to get away."

"In a sense I felt I owed him something. He had discovered for me that receptacle of Delavigne's treasures, so cunningly hidden that I might have pulled the house down before finding it. Then he and Delavigne were birds of a feather, scoundrels both, and Delavigne certainly meant to kill him; so that he may be said to have acted, as he claimed, in self-defence. My real reason, however, was that at that stage, being still without the evidence of Delavigne's Bourbon correspondence, I was anxious to be rid of the rascal before any disturbance might rouse the house, and so prevent me from obtaining it. For I knew that if I were caught there before I had got the evidence we should have trouble with the First Consul. Unfortunately for Lessart, I couldn't explain all this to him, and so the poor fool was caught by the recoil of his own rascality."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Turbulent Tales* by Rafael Sabatini]