

The Man of Destiny

Jeffery Farnol

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The Man of Destiny

By Jeffery Farnol

Sir Jonas set a deadly trap. It was to have eliminated his rivals and won him a bride. But it had a flaw

Sir Jonas Fosbroke, of a certain age yet an exquisite work of art from powdered wig to glittering shoe buckles, sighed and struck a languishing attitude:

"Alas!" he murmured, small white hand upon his heart (or that place where he supposed it to be). "I protest, my lady, life henceforth is for me a desolation, forgetfulness a blessing, and death a happy release."

My lady Ianthe, serene in her beauty and the power of it, glanced up into the speaker's small, eager face and flirted her fan with a gracious languor.

"La, Sir Jonas," smiled she, shaking lovely head, "I vow you grow daily more eloquent!"

"And you, Ianthe, the more beautiful!" he retorted. "And yet 'tis a beauty blooms for—another, it seems, and that other—one of two. Is't not so, child?"

"Oh, sir, here is riddle I'll leave you to resolve." And she made to rise.

"Nay, child," said he, staying her gently but with a firmness not to be denied, "do I presume? Then pray bethink you of our so long acquaintance and forgive. But, sure now, 'tis one o' these Dales you favor—one o' these fiery youths that being brothers and twins, egad, have yet ever borne each other a very constant animosity the which is like to flare to passionate hostility by reason o' thee, thou gentle sower of hate and discord, sweet Walking Mischief, thou lovely reason o' death and bloodshed—"

"No!" cried Ianthe, forgetting her modish affectations. "Ah, no—nay, hush thee! For indeed, Sir Jonas, good friend, 'tis fear of this doth grieve and trouble me. Mr. Anthony is so fiercely resentful 'gainst his brother, and Mr. Julian ... Julian is so proud, so grimly implacable.... Yet Julian would, I think, make up this ancient quarrel if—"

"Aha, and 'tis Julian you favor!" nodded Sir Jonas, his eyes narrowed and keen. "So ho, 'tis Julian is my rival then! Alas for miserable me—"

"May, Sir Jonas, cease your funning, do not rally me. For here is that lies very near my heart—to end this wicked quarrel 'twixt Anthony and Julian, to bring them in lasting accord and make them truly brothers. Could you but aid me in this—oh, then you were my friend indeed."

"To be thy friend, Ianthe, this were sweet and passing well, and yet ... upon a time, years ago, I thought of closer bond, I dreamed a sweeter relationship ... I hoped...."

"I was mere child then, Sir Jonas," interrupted Ianthe.

"And had never seen these Dales, these brethren malevolent, these so determined haters of each other! Thou wert child, 'tis true, sweet as flowers, and loved me in childish fashion with love that should have grown with every —"

Sir Jonas paused, for Ianthe's lovely face had changed, her eyes had softened, her rosy lips curved to smile ineffably tender, and, following her glance, Sir Jonas saw the tall form of Mr. Julian Dale coming toward them across the sunny garden, a young and stately figure yet somber-clad in black and silver and with grave, dark eyes that lit with joyous beam as they met Ianthe's welcoming glance.

"Ah, friend Julian," smiled Sir Jonas, while the newcomer made his bow, "you find me worshiping at Beauty's Shrine and, 'pon my soul, discussing—your worthy self and how

best to bring you into sweeter harmony with your irreconcilable brother."

"Sir Jonas, I thank you," answered Julian, a little stiffly and frowning, "but my brother and I conceive the matter of our personal well-being as our own peculiar business and—"

"Lud!" cried Ianthe, frowning also and closing her fan with sudden snap, "I vow the sun roasts one! Pray, Mr. Julian, your arm!" And she rose.

"Which," sighed Sir Jonas, rising also, "is as much as to say, child, 'two's company!' To the which fiat I bow stricken head and, woeful yet smiling, depart. And now, my lady, your obedient, humble servant to command! Mr. Julian—God rest you!" So saying, he smiled, bowed and left them together. Yet now as he went Sir Jonas plucked at pouting nether lip and scowled....

Sir Jonas lolled back in his great elbow chair beside the hearth where no fire burned, for the evening was sultry, and hummed gently to himself as he ever did when thinking out any difficult problem. At last he turned his head and frowned up into the saturnine face of his man Tom, a face indeed that might have been dead, save for the blinking eyes, so fixed, pale and expressionless was it.

"To be rid of 'em for good, Tom!" murmured Sir Jonas. "Both of 'em, tonight!"

"Death, sir?" inquired Tom in voice expressionless as his face.

"I said 'for good,' Tom."

"Murder, sir?"

"Egad, Thomas, there is a shocking directness about you at times! But no—not ... that. 'Twere method unlovely, infinitely clumsy, awkward and, worst of all, perfectly impracticable, and—there is, moreover, thyself, Tom, thy good, faithful, right trustworthy self. Thou'rt devoted to me and my interests I know and secret as—the tomb or say ... a hidden grave—ha? Thou'rt mine, Tom, wholly mine, snatched from gallows and gibbet, fast bound to me by Jack Ketch's rope and so must needs prove my very faithful, obedient servant—even unto death, ay, I know. 'Tis the wherefore of my so complete trust in thee. Ay faith, I've trusted and shall trust thee with much, but—not my neck, Tom, no—not my neck. So speak not o' murder."

"Well, sir? What then? Is it these Dales, still?"

"Faith, yes. These twin brothers! These twins that are so brotherly they detest each other most heartily, the which dislove I have been at some pains to foment of late ... until today, my Tom, they cannot meet but quarrel on sight."

"That, all the country knows, sir."

"So much the better. This promiseth, Tom, this augurs well, there needs still but to lead up to the final catastrophe shall end 'em, once and for all...."

"As how, sir?"

"All that know 'em, good Thomas, are agog and expectant of bloodshed betwixt 'em—on expectation's tiptoe, more especially my lady Ianthe, that soul-seducing coquette, she that, hesitating betwixt 'em, encourages the suits of both ... though today, watching her with young Julian, I thought—well, 'tis no matter, she shall wed neither; instead, my Tom, we will bestow upon her a better man, a man of riper judgment, of years mature, yet, such as he is, I venture to think personable, distinctly personable, my good Thomas." Here Sir Jonas turned to smile at himself in the Venetian mirror that hung upon the paneled wall adjacent to his chair.

"Well, sir," quoth Thomas in his toneless half-voice, stealing oblique and furtive glance at his smiling, dainty, small master, "'twould be mighty good match, sir, an my lady be willing ... for you!"

"Verily, my Tom, 'twould lift the mortgage from my acres broad—ha? Ay faith, 'twill be good match be she willing or no.... As to these Dales now, whiles they walk i' the sun their shadows irk us, they themselves hamper our activities, therefore tonight, Tom, each unknown to the other, they will pay us a visit here."

"Here, sir?"

"Here, my Tom, 'tis so my expectation. Now, perceive me, if by a little strategy we may induce 'em to ... cut each other's throats 'twould serve us admirable, indeed, as sings the Avon Swan, ' 'tis consummation devoutly to be wished.' So here tonight within this goodly, spacious chamber shall be direful wounds and slaughter and—mark this point, my Thomas—all for love of a lady! To the which sweet purpose hither also tonight shall come the lady herself, an my plan fail not."

"The ... lady Ianthe, sir?"

"Herself, Tom."

"And why, sir?"

"The picture as I think would be incomplete lacking her. So shall a curious world apprehend the tragical episode as thus: Hither have I, the kindly neighbor, the absolute peacemaker, convened these factious brethren, aiming by such meeting to induce amity and good-fellowship betwixt 'em. But they, wild youths, despite my so pious endeavors, quarrel, fight and slay each other forthwith and all, Tom, all for known hate of each other and love for a lady fair—who should arrive happily in time to swoon above their corpses, and myself smiling in the background, a very man o' destiny. How think ye of it, Thomas?"

"'Tis scheme, sir, worthy of yourself."

"Ay, and should succeed. One at least should give his brother short and sharp questions, perchance both ... otherwise, my Thomas, otherwise...."

"Sir?" questioned Tom, his soft, toneless voice drawling, his blank features seeming blanker than ever. "Sir?"

"I seem to remember," said Sir Jonas in gentle, musing voice, small, delicate hand tapping thoughtful brow, "yes, I seem to call to mind a knife. A small, narrow, black-hafted knife hath proved extreme deadly ere now ... eh, Tom?"

"Sir?" spoke Tom in murmurous question.

"You, I am very sure, my Thomas, also recall such furtive, deadly weapon?"

"Sir?" questioned Tom again but now in voice sunk to hoarse whisper.

"Should one o' these brethren haply survive, Tom, well ... who shall know the difference twixt thrust of sword or ... knife?"

"Who indeed, sir!"

"Why, then, my good, my faithful Thomas, thus much is understood betwixt us. Now look on this!" And from the breast of flowered waistcoat Sir Jonas drew a small, gold locket enriched by diamonds forming the two letters I and E.

"You've seen this ere now, Tom?"

"Indeed, sir, on the Lady Ianthe's neck—"

"Ah, that neck!" sighed Sir Jonas. "So round! So white! So infinitely adorable! 'Tis neck for—"

"She thinks yon trinket lost, sir, and grieves."

"Nay, I did but borrow it against some such occasion as this, and shall return it anon, so shall her grief become joy.... But now, and heed me well. You shall take now this locket and, upon given signal, shall knock upon the door, enter and laying this pretty toy upon the table, say: 'The Lady Ianthe sends this with her heart's love to'—now on which o' these brothers shall we bestow such priceless gift? How think ye, Tom?"

"Sir, I do not think, I only obey."

"Being constrained thereto by reason of remembered circumstances, eh, Tom, certain past activities best forgot—eh, my devoted Thomas?" smiled his small master, tapping softly on the arm of his chair with slim, delicate fingers, while his man Tom watched him with blinking, furtive eyes, a stealthy, persistent gaze that crept from those slender, delicately tapping fingers, up velvet coat sleeve, up and up, to pause at last upon a spot midway between neck and shoulder, focusing itself there until his master nodded and spoke:

"This locket shall go to Anthony, that wild, passionate youth, on fierce, hot-headed young Anthony we'll bestow it, Tom. As thus! Says you: 'My lady Ianthe Everard sends this token unto Mr. Anthony Dale and with it her heart's love—both should ha' come sooner but for a brother's lies and

treachery!" ... This should do their business, my Tom! This should set 'em at each other's throats, their steel a-twinkling! This should set spark to powder—" Sir Jonas ceased and glanced up sharply as knuckles rapped the stout oak, then the door opened and a servant appeared who announced:

"Mr. Julian Dale."

"Welcome, sir!" cried Sir Jonas, rising as Julian bowed upon the threshold; said he:

"Sir Jonas, your urgent message found me, and I am here to—"

"My dear Julian, I rejoice!" quoth Sir Jonas, hasting to greet him, both slim hands outstretched. "Sit down, pray! Here is wine of Oporto, Burgundy, sherris sack.... Thomas, fill the glasses and leave us."

"Well, Julian, how blows the wind?" inquired Sir Jonas so soon as they were alone. "How speeds thy wooing ... the incomparable Ianthe—ha?"

"Surely, sir," answered Julian, frowning at his wine glass, "'twas not to ask this that you writ me letter so importunate?"

"No, Julian. I confess 'twas on matter quite other, a truly—grave matter; faith, Julian, 'grave' is truly apt word for it."

"Well, sir?"

"Well, friend Julian, having known and esteemed your dead father, 'tis but natural I should interest myself in the welfare of his sons. In fine, dear Julian, I'd fain reconcile you and your twin brother."

"Oh, sir," sighed Julian wearily, "you but beat the wind."

"Nay, nay," argued Sir Jonas gently, "sure we may find some way, some method—"

"Impossible, sir!" exclaimed Julian, shaking comely head. "For indeed, were I willing, yet Anthony is too bitterly hostile, too fiercely vindictive—"

"Nay, but consider, my poor Julian, your brother is, by all accounts, your senior by three minutes, or is it two? Consequently he must ever take precedence of you; 'tis scarcely just—yet is this his fault? He also adores the bewitching creature you worship and, being less grave than yourself, indeed a very blithe, merry, jovial rattlebrain, he is more apt to catch Beauty's eye—yet is this his fault? Nay, for 'twas nature so made him—he of the sunshine, you of the shadow. Howbeit, Julian, I do believe, could you but meet, he would forgive you any—"

"Forgive?" cried Julian in quick wrath, "what hath he to forgive? 'Tis Anthony hath ever been the aggressor since we were boys—'tis I should do the forgiving...."

"Nay, Julian, consider! Have you not thwarted his dearest wish? Have you not come 'twixt him and his heart's desire?"

But for you he had won the bewitching Ianthe ere now, 'tis very like—"

"This he shall never do!" said Julian fiercely. "Ianthe is not for—such as he!"

"And yet," sighed Sir Jonas, "in my poor judgment, win her he surely will."

"Never!" cried Julian, raising a clenched hand, as if he registered a solemn oath. "Never, I swear!"

"Who shall prevent?" murmured Sir Jonas.

"Myself!" answered Julian, between white teeth. "Ianthe shall never—"

At this moment was a soft rapping, the door opened and the footman announced:

"Mr. Anthony Dale."

A jingle of spurs, a gleam of sky-blue and satin, a flourish of laces and a young, hearty voice loud in greeting:

"Sir Jonas, your obedient servant. I hope—ha, the devil!"

"No, no," smiled Sir Jonas, rising to salute the visitor, "no, no, Anthony, here's only your brother Julian—"

"Tush, sir, all's one!" said Anthony, his handsome face flushed, black brows scowling. "Julian and the devil—the devil and Julian, all's one! And as the devil I detest him and he me—we always have done and always shall—eh, brother Julian?"

"Nay but," cried Sir Jonas, seeing Julian sat mutely scornful, "be reasonable, my dear Anthony. 'Tis but natural that brothers should agree, twins love each other; be then at the least naturally agreeable together. Here is our Julian ready, I'll vow, and altogether willing to ... overlook all your past unkindnesses, to forgive you freely any and every—"

"He—forgive me?" roared Anthony, stamping in fury. "Forgive, d'ye say? Julian forgive me, with his cursed high, superior airs? Why, damme, sir, 'tis for me to forgive him—though I never shall of course! ... So, brother Julian, it's come to this, hey? You can't even hate honestly it seems, but must crawl behind my back to our neighbor here with mewling, hypocritical professions of—"

A third rapping at the door and entered to them the cadaverous Thomas who, bowing, crossed to the small table at Sir Jonas' elbow and, halting there, spoke in his toneless voice:

"My lady Ianthe Everard sends this token and with it her heart's love to Mr. Anthony Dale which should have come sooner but for a brother's lies and treachery." And he laid the locket upon the table; for a hushed moment no one spoke or moved.... Then Anthony caught up that precious jewel and

with it in clenched fist turned upon his brother, speechless still.

Thus stood they a long moment staring upon each other in a stunned silence, each so alike in form and feature but so utterly dissimilar in all else.

"So!" gasped Anthony at last, raising that clenched hand as though to smite. "Brother, you were ever a cold, scheming, traitorous cur and so I prove you at last—"

"Liar!" said Julian, softly.

"Ha, d'ye say so?" cried Anthony and, falling back a pace, flashed out his sword. "Draw—draw, Julian!" he panted. "Draw and defend yourself or, by Heaven, I skewer ye like the foul cur you are—"

"Wait, Anthony! Hold, man!" said Julian in shaken voice. "We must not fight, 'tis out o' nature ... we cannot fight, you and I—"

"Ay, but we can, and will—draw, I say!" and, speaking, Anthony struck his brother across the face. Slowly, unwillingly, Julian drew sword:

"Then ... if I must—" said he, "what is to do I'll not look on!" And with sudden sweep of his blade he struck the many-branched candlestick to the floor and trod out the lights....

... And in this sudden darkness a clink of steel on murderous steel, the stamp of a foot ... silence while sword

felt cautiously for sword and found it not.... So stood Julian utterly still, scarce breathing, eyes staring blindly on the thick darkness.... Came a rustle of stealthy movement at last and, lunging on the instant, Julian felt his point bury itself, plunging deep and, loosing the hateful weapon, heard a dreadful, choking gasp ... something fell heavily at his feet.... And now, knowing what he had done, horror seized him and he shrank from that awful, unseen thing, back and away until he was checked by the paneled wall. And then his flesh crept, for suddenly in that dreadful silence the dead, or dying, spoke: Anthony's voice, whispering, choked by agony of remorse:

"Julian ... oh, brother.... God forgive me!"

A hurry of feet at last—the door swung open and an old serving-man entered bearing lights, which he set down upon the table with shaking hand—lights that showed the brothers standing within a yard of each other. Pale, motionless, scarce breathing, they viewed each other with looks of remorseful horror, an awful dread that changed to dawning hope, to a great and wondering joy; with tremulous lips they questioned each other in broken whisper:

"Julian ... thou'rt not—hurt? Then ... 'twas not thee ... thank God—!"

"Anthony ... I thought ... Oh, Tony!" Suddenly, uttering an odd, uncertain laugh, Anthony pointed to a great, padded elbow chair, its high back transfixed by their two swords ... now from this the brothers stared upon each other with a new vision and reached forth eager, tremulous hands that met to

grip each other hard; and in this moment their old animosity, the hate and misunderstanding of all the years was swept clean away and forgotten.

"And yet," said Julian, looking anxiously into his brother's comely face, "I heard a cry ... oh, ghastly—like one death-smitten!"

"Faith, yes, Julian, I ... I thought 'twas ... thyself, dear old lad—"

"Sirs—oh, sirs—'tis here!" gasped a thin, fearful, quavering voice, "see—oh, see here!"

Now, looking where the old man's shaking finger pointed, they beheld something huddled half beneath the table, a sprawling, motionless, horrible thing that had been Sir Jonas Fosbroke.

"But how ... how..." gasped Julian, recoiling.

"This!" answered the old man and, parting the finery of dreadfully stained laces, showed them the small, black haft of a knife upstanding in the dead man's back.

"'Tis Tom's, sirs—Tom's little, black knife!" wailed the old man, wringing bony hands. "'Twas Tom did it—ay, he's done it at last! And he's away, sirs, slipped by me on the stairs as I came up ... he's done it at last, ay, ay—and now he be off and away, sirs—harkee where he rides!"

A clattering of hoofs from stableyard, hoofs that leaped to sudden, wild gallop, hoofs that throbbed a while upon the warm, stilly night, that died away—and were gone.

"Poor gentleman!" murmured Anthony, gazing down upon the dead man with strange, new compassion. "Come, Julian ... brother ... dear old lad, help me cover him up."

[The end of *The Man of Destiny* by Jeffery Farnol]